“We Are the Labour Party’s Secret Weapon”: An Ethnographic Exploration of Corbyn’s Momentum, 2015-2019

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of Liverpool Hope University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Katherine Jewell
School of Social Sciences
Liverpool Hope University

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DECLARATION:

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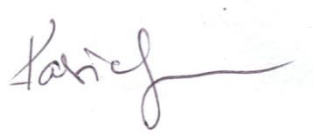

Name: Katherine Jewell

Date: 21 October 2023

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Abstract

Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the UK Labour Party in 2015 represented a time of exciting opportunity for many left-wing activists, manifesting in the rapid recruitment of many thousands of members and supporters to Momentum. Existing literature on Momentum tends to focus on its innovative digital campaign tactics (e.g. Dennis, 2020; Hotham, 2021), often written by individuals positioned as insiders, being members or supporters themselves (e.g. Bassett Yerrell, 2020; Maiguashca and Dean, 2019; Rhodes, 2019). In contrast, this study seeks to provide an ethnographic account of the experiences of grassroots Momentum activists from the perspective of a sympathetic outsider, steered by the 'foreshadowed problem' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) of difficulties arising from the close association between a movement organisation and a political party.

Alongside a rich ethnographic description of grassroots activist experiences based on interviews and participant observations, the research has provided the foundation for a critical examination of the group's movement credentials, an assessment of Momentum's practical role and function within the Labour Party under Corbyn's leadership, and some limited political analysis. It also contributes empirical evidence in support of the application of identity theory in the study of social movements, with particular links to the work of movement theorists Doug McAdam and David Snow (e.g. McAdam, 2003; Snow and McAdam, 2000). This thesis also suggests that identity sometimes provided a distorting filter that impacted members' narratives around intellectual concepts, and political and socioeconomic relationships. Additional findings include observations around the role of identity and modern class dynamics in shaping activist interaction with voters, drawn from Momentum activists' experiences canvassing the wider electorate. This examination has yielded insights relating to interactions between an 'in-group' and the third 'outsider' group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), that is, one that has either weak or no affiliation with the key aspects of identity that define the relative 'in-group' and 'out-group' under investigation.

Keywords: Momentum, UK Labour Party, identity, social movements, ethnography

Acknowledgements

Although ultimately held by an individual, a doctoral degree is never really the product of a single person's intellect, and it is impossible to acknowledge all the creative and supportive contributions to my work that have taken place over the course of years. I was extremely fortunate to self-select my supervisory team at the start of my project, and have benefitted immensely from the input and direction I received from my Director of Studies, Professor Michael Lavalette, and Supervisor, Dr Danny Rye. I especially value the patience they have shown in allowing me the space to come around to advice in my own time and in my own way.

In addition, through the course of editing my recent paper for *British Politics*, Dr Nick Randall provided me with insights and critique that have greatly increased the clarity of my thought and argument, considerably improving the quality of this thesis. I would also like to thank participants Ben, Alex and Robert for their enthusiastic and open interviews, their genuine interest in my research, and the many subsequent discussions we have had on Momentum, the Labour Party, and politics in general. Their contributions and influences have been invaluable.

However, it is the support of my family that has been most significant, particularly that of my husband, Dr Alistair Jewell, who inevitably took on the unofficial role of 'ghost' supervisor. In many ways, my research journey began during his PhD in 2013-16, and I am forever in his debt for his eternal patience, unwavering encouragement and sacrifice in letting this project dominate our lives for so long. My family - Alistair, along with our three sons, Felix, Maxi and Leo - have been so generous with their time, allowing me to pursue this lifelong dream without guilt or regret. Finally, I also owe a debt of gratitude to my parents for their enduring support of my education, particularly the hours of blood, sweat and tears my mother spent teaching me the art of writing. I hope you don't find too many grammatical errors and can forgive me for conforming to British conventions.

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List of Diagrams, Tables and Images

Abbreviations and Notes

AWL	Alliance for Workers' Liberty
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CLPD	Campaign for Labour Party Democracy
GE2015	UK General Election of 2015
GE2017	UK General Election of 2017
GE2019	UK General Election of 2019
GOTV	Get Out The Vote
ILP	Independent Labour Party
LOTO	Leader of the Opposition
M4C	Movement for Change
MP	Member of Parliament (UK)
NCC	National Constitutional Committee (Labour Party)
NEC	National Executive Committee (Labour Party)
NCG	National Coordinating Group (Momentum)
OMOV	one member one vote
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PPC	Potential Parliamentary Candidate
SWP	Socialist Workers Party
TU	Trade Union
TWT	The World Transformed

Online and other published written material, real-time written content and spoken material are all relied upon throughout this thesis. To distinguish, quotes from written material are presented with single quotation marks, real-time text chat with double quotation marks, and spoken quotes with both double quotation marks and italics.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Where it All Began

Euphoria. That is the only word to describe the entirely natural intoxication that I and millions of others floated upon down the streets of London in February 2003. The waves of connectedness, righteousness and *important-ness* formed one of the most profound sensations I have ever experienced, and I know how the intensity of these feelings impacted not only me, but a whole generation of activists and potential activists. I am sure I was not alone in thinking to myself, "*we could actually transform the world"*. Except we didn't.

My life in Britain began with 9/11; I had just booked my plane tickets to London, Gatwick a few days before the twin towers were hit, and travelled less than a month after the event. I did not know it at the time, but I was never to return permanently to the US, and my entire adult life can be traced back to that fateful time in history. Rejecting American culture and excessive consumerism, I embraced the British university experience and began learning about left-wing politics, something which I had never been properly exposed to before. Starting with the penetrating and almost rapturous baptism into activism during the Stop the War protests in my early 20s, I was slowly drawn into the trade union and anti-fascist movements, and at one time or another became involved with most issues and causes associated with left-wing politics, including Palestine, anti-nuclear and environmental campaigning. However, throughout all of it, I found myself searching for something, anything, that could recreate the feeling of Stop the War.

I am sure many activists felt the same, and the Stop the War protests have become an integral part of modern leftist cultural heritage; it joined the often generationally spaced events that seem to have become iconised as part of the cultural narrative cultivated within left-wing activist circles, such as the miners' strikes. Those of us who were there want to find it again, and activists who come after appear equally desperate to create their own version. However, somewhere along the way I became jaded and disillusioned with the apparent ineffectiveness of left activism. With hindsight, February 2003 no longer felt like a birth, but a deathblow. We were at our strongest, yet literally millions of us could not exercise enough power to make a difference in even just one area of policy. I watched the Occupy movement and others with tiredness and pessimism. The new wave of younger activists did not seem as affected by our defeat over the Iraq War; indeed, I concur with Michael

Chessum (2022, p.40) when he characterises millennials as ‘a generation without history.’ Yet despite the fresh and increasingly international nature of movement activism during the 2000s and 2010s, I was unable to believe movements that seemed so much smaller in scale in terms of overall numbers could succeed where Stop the War failed. Other mass movements such as the Arab Spring felt locked outside the British context.

In many ways, Corbyn’s election as Labour Leader symbolised a portal back in time. He was pivotal in creating the Stop the War movement, and he could do it again, this time with unprecedented political clout. I drafted my initial proposal for this project in the aftermath of the 2017 general election, having finally overcome my cynicism and allowed myself to hope that perhaps this time would be different. Thousands of other activists had already reached that point either during Corbyn’s 2015 leadership campaign or shortly after, which for many was the closest thing to Stop the War that had happened in their lifetimes. Even the name of Momentum’s progeny, The World Transformed, harks back to the heady optimism and empowerment some of us briefly experienced, and desperately wanted to revive. The sense of agency and anticipation of social progress that Corbyn’s leadership inspired in a generation of activists was communicated succinctly in Momentum’s most prominent slogan during the 2019 general election: grassroots activists were ‘Labour’s secret weapon’, capable of securing a Corbyn-led Labour government for the nation.

1.2 Positionality, Reflexivity and Research Approach

Beginning this thesis with a personal narrative was deliberate; ethnography is, at its heart, narrative in nature. Furthermore, as my dearest mentor wrote, ‘it is at the very least disingenuous to undertake a study and report upon other people without studying and reporting upon oneself and one’s role within the process’ (Jewell, 2016, p.22). I had a personal and an academic interest in the organisation, and my own perspective on Momentum and Corbyn led directly to the ethnographic nature of this research. For the most part, I was an active participant during observations, interacting with others and therefore influencing the course of events in at least a small way. Additionally, interviews were undertaken in a collaborative, conversational manner. I was not a scientist seeking to evaluate my subjects, but a co-equal seeking to understand them on a personal level. As such, I expect that in certain respects I have influenced some participants’ thinking in areas, in a similar way to which they have influenced mine. Acknowledging my involvement and

presence in the research space and the weight my own personal experiences and feelings have within the data is, therefore, essential.

In an attempt to control for this inevitable influence, I employed a number of tactics. Firstly, I was entirely open and honest with participants in regards to my personal position. During all interviews, and wherever possible and appropriate during observations, I clearly explained not only my position as researcher, but also my attitude towards Momentum. As hopeful as I was, I had resolved to avoid the disappointment of 2003 and to undertake my PhD in a primarily academic manner, without committing myself emotionally to Momentum until I had examined it thoroughly. It was essential to the integrity of the research that participants were aware that, although I was sympathetic and broadly supportive, I was not a member of Momentum and I would not be joining the organisation or Labour whilst my research was ongoing. I was open about my political views and encouraged participants to be open about theirs without judgement. By actively involving myself in dialogue with participants, we were all researchers in this sense, working together to find insight. Additionally, being clear and authentic in regards to the role I was playing in the social interactions in which I participated resulted in interactions that felt both natural and equally authentic. I can hope that my participants felt the same.

In addition to this, I practised near-constant critical reflexivity, testing my conclusions and assessments through dialogue with myself via my research diary, through conversations with my academic peers and supervisors, and also through ongoing discussions with participants outside of the interview and observation sessions. In particular, I sought to emulate the approach to ethnography described by Honer and Hitzer (2015), involving a critical analysis of my own experiences and feelings in order to compare them to the experiences expressed by participants. This manifested in two types of relationship between myself and participant data: some participants' experiences were very similar to my own and as such a mutually-reinforcing synergy was formed; in other cases, participants' experiences contrasted significantly with mine. In these instances, rigorous examinations of potential explanations for this were undertaken in order to arrive at the interpretations I have. Inevitably, ethnographic data analysis involves personal judgement and assessment; although I believe I have convincing arguments to support my analysis of the data, there is always room for dissenting opinions which I would welcome in the pursuit of expanding knowledge. A more complete presentation of my methodology and reflective practice can be found in Chapter 3.

Finally, I endeavoured to provide balance by ensuring that I engaged meaningfully with dissenting and opposing viewpoints. For example, alongside Nunns (2018) and Seymour (2017a), I also read Kogan (2019), to which I suspect Bassett Yerrell (2020, p. 45) may have been referring when he recounted Corbyn's lack of sympathy with what he considered an inaccurate portrayal of his leadership. I read visceral critiques of Momentum from the left (e.g. Chessum, 2018) as well as from the right (e.g. Ware, 2019), alongside and with equal weight to wholly supportive accounts (e.g. Klug, et al., 2016). I discussed my research and thoughts with friends, family and acquaintances who collectively represented the breadth of the political spectrum. This agnostic approach not only helped keep the research from becoming overly biased, it also directly contributed to some of the more insightful findings, as will be presented in due course.

1.3 Research Questions and Aims

The overriding motivation behind this research was a quest for understanding: I wanted to understand modern, British, left-wing activist culture through an examination of what it was like to be involved with Momentum. I felt that Momentum provided a desirable case study for this primarily because of its large membership base. Movements such as Extinction Rebellion, to name just one, are relatively small and exclusive groups, outside the experience of most of the population, including potential activists. Momentum, by contrast, was an organisation that not only had a very wide membership base, it was also accessible on a supporter level that required less commitment. Through this, it had the potential to reach and politicise thousands of people who otherwise might not be drawn into activism. I wanted a broader view, one that allowed space to examine the culture from a less committed perspective, which I hoped would provide the opportunity to develop more objective insight.

In terms of context, Momentum has always marketed itself as a movement organisation (Momentum, 2017a). Prior to this research, although I had participated in activism, I had not studied social movement theory in depth, and so my understanding of the concept of 'movement' was more instinctual, developed primarily through reference to the American civil rights movement. From this position, it was intriguing to consider the potential ramifications of a movement organisation becoming constitutionally linked with a political party that intrinsically formed part of The Establishment. My inquiry, then, was framed by this

‘foreshadowed problem’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The following research questions followed organically from this starting point:

- How closely does Momentum represent a social movement?
- What was it like for activists participating in Momentum-endorsed activities, considering the potential counterpoint between movement and political party?
- With particular reference to political engagement and democracy, what can an analysis of Momentum tell us about potential positive and negative consequences of social movements becoming closely intertwined with political parties?

To formalise these interests, I composed the following aim and objectives for the project:

Aim

To critically evaluate the relationship between Momentum, the British Labour Party and the wider UK electorate, through the lens of activists’ lived experiences.

Objectives

1. To describe and model Momentum’s development as an organisation during Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party.
2. To analyse Momentum’s social movement character and relationship with the Labour Party within the context of the British parliamentary system.
3. To develop a critical understanding of left-wing activist culture as based on the experiences of grassroots activists and supporters within Momentum.
4. To assess Momentum’s emerging legacy within the Labour Party and UK politics, with particular emphasis on the experiences of grassroots activists and widening political and democratic engagement.

As a true ethnography, the project first and foremost sought to describe and understand the culture within Momentum and the experiences a grassroots activist or supporter might have encountered during the research period. However, it was hoped that the investigation would give rise to opportunities for political analysis and grounded theorising; it is pleasing that this has been the case. Furthermore, in keeping with a classic approach to ethnography, this project’s ‘orientation is an exploratory one’, seeking to investigate a social phenomenon in order to lay the

groundwork for future projects (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). The research has certainly done this, and the numerous avenues for future inquiry uncovered through this project are identified throughout the thesis, and collated in Chapter 10.

1.4 Thesis Structure

As social movement and movement party theory was identified at the beginning of the project as a relevant foundation for inquiries, the thesis will begin with a review of this underpinning theory in Chapter 2. Alongside this is a discussion of social identity theory, the applicability of which arose during data analysis. The second part of the chapter will outline existing literature and research on Momentum, concluding with an assessment of Momentum's movement credentials and the case for this project's original contribution to knowledge. Chapter 3 will set out the research perspective and ethnographic methodology, as well as the data collection methods, the approach to data analysis and ethical considerations.

Chapters 4 through 9 comprise the main data, findings and analysis of this project, organised in a broadly chronological manner. Chapter 4 is composed of two parts: the first part will briefly outline the general political and social context surrounding Momentum and its genesis, including a presentation of the basic foundations of Momentum's and Corbyn's political ideology, other comparable social movements and movement parties, and Momentum's place within the process of movementisation within Labour. The second part of the chapter will progress into the findings of this research through an examination of Momentum as an organisation. The early development of Momentum, its constitutional evolution and organisational structure will be described and analysed.

Chapter 5 will focus on an analysis of Momentum's activities up to and including the 2017 general election (GE2017). Its undertakings during both of Corbyn's leadership elections will be presented, drawing from existing academic and grey literature as well as some interview data. There is a significant body of literature on Labour's and Momentum's performance during GE2017, so discussion of this period is primarily summary in nature, with specific examples from my data compared and contrasted with existing research and literature. Chapter 5 will conclude with a discussion of four main areas of controversy associated with Momentum's activities during the GE2017 campaign. Chapter 6 follows on with a similar analysis of Momentum's activities between the national elections, drawing more from primary data gathered through this project which began in spring 2018. Activity areas include political

campaigning outside and within the Labour Party, support for extra-Parliamentary action and causes, fundraising and political education programmes, particularly The World Transformed (TWT) as based on my participant observations from TWT2018 in Liverpool. A discussion of organisational challenges around accusations of antisemitism and problems with internal democracy during this period will conclude the chapter.

All semi-structured interviews were conducted during the period between elections, and Chapter 7 will present a thematic analysis of this data. The meaning of Momentum to the grassroots activists will be explored, alongside a discussion of each of the main themes from the interview data: antisemitism and Brexit, democracy, class and socialism. Chapters 8 and 9 conclude the findings and analysis with a discussion and analysis of Momentum's activities during the 2019 general election and its immediate aftermath. These chapters extend on previous analyses of Momentum's campaign tactics and use of technology, most of which draw from data relating the GE2017 campaign; Momentum's use of technology, online resources and tools expanded considerably on previous campaigns, and the entirety of my participant observations during the 2019 campaign were conducted online. Chapter 8 contains a presentation of my observations during GE2019, and Chapter 9 outlines Momentum's reaction to the election result, followed by comment on key aspects of their campaign, the role of Brexit and class and a brief outline of their legacy and trajectory post-Corbyn.

Chapter 10 will begin with a synthesis of this project's data, focusing on the role of identity in shaping activist experience and applying existing identity theory to this project's findings. Some hypotheses and initial grounded theorising will be presented, particularly around the interplay between an 'in-group' (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and a group that is comparatively unaffiliated as either 'in' or 'out', as based on the empirical case of Momentum and the wider electorate. The thesis will conclude with a discussion around the project's limitations and potential future trajectories for research, followed by brief reflections on the project.

Draft Chapter 2: Social Movements and Momentum

2.1 Introduction

Being a relatively new group, academic literature on Momentum specifically is limited, and critical analysis of the organisation is still in the early stages of development. This dearth of academic research on the group was even more stark when I embarked on this project in early 2018. However, in keeping with the ethnographic character of my research approach, the project began with initial observations about Momentum that could be explored more deeply through the research, with certain 'foreshadowed problems' in mind that could be examined, and refined, as the work progressed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

As explained above, this project started from a basis in social movement theory. I approached the research with a view to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences of grassroots activists within Momentum from their perspectives, and remained open-minded regarding information I expected to uncover. Nevertheless, I hoped that the data would provide an opportunity for grounded theorising, analysis beyond simple description of what it was like to be part of Momentum. The main 'foreshadowed problem' under investigation was related to the implications for activists' experience that might arise as a result of the interaction between a movement organisation and political party, particularly with such formal ties as Momentum and the Labour Party. A brief review of relevant social movement theory as well as the existing literature on Momentum are presented here to establish the context of this project and its intended contribution to the existing body of knowledge, both on Momentum and within a multi-disciplinary context.

2.2 Theoretical Context: Social Movements

2.2.1 What are social movements?

Growing out of the psychological field of classic collective behaviour theory (Buechler, 2000; Stryker, et al., 2000), academic study of social movement theory in its own right arguably began in earnest in the latter part of the 20th Century, with a focus on what were at the time termed 'new social movements' (Kitschelt, 1993). These societal phenomena represent collective mobilisation of individuals, groups and organisations outside of institutionalised political processes with various demands relating to intangible 'public goods' as opposed to economic motivations (Kitschelt, 1993; Kitschelt, 2006); these include recognisably iconic movements such as the civil rights, environmental and feminist movements. Movements during the

1970s and ‘80s were generally on the left of the political spectrum (Kitschelt, 1993) and informally constituted in nature, without official organisational structure, paid staff or collective resources (Diani, 1992; Tilly, 1978).

In general, movements arise when a critical mass of individuals or groups have common and specific demands in terms of societal or political change that are not effectively addressed through conventional channels, such as formal democratic structures or via elected representatives. There are many models which have been developed to describe movements and the interactions between movement actors and state or other institutional actors as they jostle for power and influence in pursuit of their goals (Tilly, 1978), but there is agreement amongst most theorists that movements are involved in social action that is inherently conflictual, focused around dissatisfaction with the status quo and utilisation of tactics that are often disruptive in nature. Many European theorists adopt a socio-structural perspective, focusing on areas such as conflict, social cleavages and political opportunity structures to explore why movements arise and develop in certain ways, and the effects they have on societies or culture (e.g. Melucci, 1984; Kriesi, et al., 1995). The impact of societal relations and categorisations, for example the developing prevalence of ‘new’ classes in collective action (Kriesi, 1989), and socio-political contexts are utilised to provide descriptions of and explanations for the function movements fulfil in a societal context. Touraine (1985) uses this approach to argue that social movements represent a type of collective action that necessarily takes place in a site of social conflict, in contrast with other collective behaviours like fashion trends or currents of opinion. The study of social movements differs from other areas of sociology through focus on actors in conflict, as opposed to structuro-Marxism for instance that is primarily concerned with conflict within systems. He catalogues different types of conflict that can provide context for the motivation for collective action in the form of movements, from pursuit of collective interests or construction of a collective identity, to the defence of existing status of privilege, to the extreme of pursuing an entirely new order through revolution.

Taking a different approach, some theorists focus on answering questions around *how* social movements build support and gain traction within societies. This more processual emphasis is generally favoured by many American theorists and has resulted in social movement research around two main areas: resource mobilisation and political process (Diani, 1992). Resource mobilisation theory argues that the success of social movements is less dependent on the relative strength of the

grievance than on the effectiveness of the members in mobilising resources and managing relationships with other actors, including the media (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). McCarthy and Zald (1977) suggest that, in fact, the foundation of a movement is not always the desire for social change itself, and that examining the organisational processes underpinning a movement is more important to movement research. They draw from economic theory and take a more business-oriented perspective, arguing that focusing on resource aggregation, the organisational structure necessary to mobilise money and labour, and the costs and rewards generated through involvement in the movement provides a basis for analysing movement organisations and their relations with other organisational actors. Other theorists take more interest in social movements' participation within political processes. For example, Tilly (1993) describes social movements as 'political performances' and focuses his work on examining the historical contexts and results of movements. His interest lies in understanding the societal conditions and power dynamics that constrain and shape social movements, and the ways in which movements take advantage of historical opportunities in order to effect significant social change (Tilly, 1978).

Diani (1992) proposes that a synthesis of these 'schools' can help generate a common definition of the concept of social movement, providing a useful foundation for ongoing theorising. Drawing from social psychology, resource mobilisation theory, political process analyses and the study of European new social movements, he suggests that there are four defining features of social movements:

1. networks of informal interaction
2. shared belief and solidarity
3. collective action on conflictual issues
4. action which occurs primarily outside the institutional sphere, or ordinary daily routine (Diani, 1992).

More recently, some authors such have argued rather than focusing on clear demarcations between social movements and other forms of conflictual collective action, the study of movements should be more closely integrated with other related disciplines, such as election studies (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010), or approached in a way that encompasses revolution, terrorism and other 'contentious collective action' more broadly (Tarrow, 2011, p. 7). Indeed, it appears a recent trend in the field of social movements studies is to explore theoretical crossovers and overlaps between the study of social movements and other related disciplines, or even the

potential value in a return to its roots in social psychology, as explored in more detail in Section 2.2.3.

2.2.2 Social Movements, Political Parties and Movement Parties

Social movements utilise a variety of strategies and tactics to exert pressure on politicians and governments, as well as other institutions, to recognise their demands for change within an institutional arena. In this respect, much of their activity relates directly or indirectly to the political sphere, and in most Western democracies this necessarily involves interactions with political parties. The prevalence of this has resulted in wide ranging research into the relationship between parties and movements, as well as the impact of movements on both European and American democratic processes. McAdam and Tarrow (2010) draw from American politics to outline six ways in which movements impact elections: influencing political campaigns through collective action, joining electoral coalitions, engaging in proactive or reactive electoral mobilisation, creating internal polarisation within parties, and influencing broader historical currents of public opinion which manifest in electoral trends over longer periods of time. Also writing in an American context, Schwarz (2010) looks more specifically at interactions between movements and political parties and draws from many historical examples to create three categories: 'Coordinated Interactions' (alliances and mergers), 'Invasive Strategies' (insurgency, displacement and co-optation) and 'Hostile Strategies' (disruption, discrediting and purges). Each of these approaches to party-movement interaction has a distinct result in terms of organisational impact and therefore a different strategic purpose and application, as well as characteristics along a spectrum of closeness and distance between the party and the movement (Schwartz, 2010).

Taking a more European perspective, Kitschelt (1993) argues that new social movements serve an important purpose in Western democracies in terms of providing an opportunity for direct democracy, outside of formalised electoral or party structures. As such, he suggests that they are less likely to form in countries where citizens have more opportunity to participate in policy-making, such as through frequent referenda, as a fundamental purpose of movements is to redress imbalance in the democratic agency of a populace. In a British context, Lent (2001) examines the relationship between social movement activists and the Labour Party during the 1980s. Tracing the activity of activists from movements around gender, sexuality, race, disability, peace and the environment, he found that links between these movements and local Labour councils developed, particularly on the left wing

of the party and in more left-leaning local authority areas. Similarly to the Labour Party under Corbyn, this period of time saw an influx of grassroots movement activists into the party membership and local constituency branches. However, activists were also sometimes appointed to paid positions within local government, occasionally even with funding from local authorities for movement activities. Interestingly, Lent assesses that overall these linkages were not beneficial for the movements as they served to co-opt activists into the mainstream, changing their priorities and values. Furthermore, many organisations came to rely too heavily on government funding and when funding was withdrawn they were forced to fold. Finally, when the political climate changed, positions held by activists were cut and their projects publically discredited. Indeed, there is some evidence from this project to suggest that a similar effect has taken place in the modern context for movement activists joining Labour through Momentum, which will be explored in more detail later in this paper.

Additionally, movement parties may be formed when some individuals or groups within a social movement move towards direct participation within formal democratic structures as parties in their own right. Often, this shift arises when activists perceive a material benefit, such as additional power or resources, that could be gained from working within the system, as opposed to outside where movements standardly operate (Kruszewska, 2016). Movement parties are formally registered entities, and field their own candidates in democratic elections and serve in governments alongside and in the same way as traditional parties. However, they are distinct from traditional political parties through a continued focus on the restricted single issues or small set of issues that were of interest to the predecessor movement, to the relative exclusion of other policy areas. They also often retain a movement-like lack of formal organisation, without rigid internal structures, paid professional staff or reserves of resources, sometimes without even formalised definitions of what constitutes membership of the party (Kitschelt, 2006). In addition to long-standing parties that grew out of more historical movements such as the labour or environmental movements, many European movement parties have arisen in recent decades, particularly grown out of anti-austerity movements that developed in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Notable recent examples of parties that have grown from anti-austerity movements in Europe include Podemos in Spain, the Five Star Movement in Italy, and SYRIZA in Greece (della Porta, et al., 2017).

European movement parties have enjoyed mixed results in terms of electoral and political success. Some older movement parties, for example the Green Party or Labour Party in the UK, have arguably transitioned into traditional political parties as seen by their formal party machinery and comprehensive policy remit. The UK system is acknowledged to be inherently more problematic for new parties to emerge compared to other European countries (e.g. Muldoon and Rye, 2020), but recent examples may include UKIP and the Brexit Party, whose policies remained more focused on the single issue of Britain's exit from the European Union. Unsurprisingly, these parties have declined in influence post-Brexit. Other European movement parties have enjoyed notable electoral success, resulting in variable and changing degrees of local and national power, from the dramatic rise and fall of SYRIZA (Gerbaudo, 2021) to the steadier progress of Podemos (della Porta, et al., 2017). Specific challenges for movement parties include maintaining a movement-like organisation in the face of pressures to professionalise, as well as dealing with sometimes extremely rapid growth in popularity and internal conflicts of ideology (Kruszewska, 2016).

Momentum has often been described by academics as either a movement organisation or a movement-hybrid. This will be discussed and assessed more fully below. One reason for this is its explicit links with both the UK Labour Party and extra-Parliamentary social movements networks. However, another basis for this categorisation is the frequent tendency to compare Momentum to European movement parties such as Podemos and SYRIZA (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2021; Perryman, 2017; Prentoulis and Thomassen, 2017), as well as Momentum's organisational links with these international comrades through invitations to participate in local political education and other events such as The World Transformed.

2.2.3 Identity Theory and Social Movements

Arguments over the value of social psychological theories to the study of social movements have continued for decades (e.g. McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Perhaps as a continuation of the initial rejection of the primarily psychological approaches that gave rise to social movement theory, applying identity theory to movements is generally considered to reside outside of the mainstream of modern social movement research (Stryker, et al., 2000). Nevertheless, there is both a notable history of recognition that identity represents an important facet in the understanding and study of movements (e.g. Touraine, 1985) and a body of literature supporting the in-depth application of theories around identity to the study of social movements.

Indeed, focusing on the role of identity in the formation and development of social movements potentially presents an alternative to the theoretical dichotomy between the structural and resource mobilisation approaches presented above. During the course of data collection identity emerged as a notable theme, both in terms of the organisational identity of Momentum and the individual concepts of identity held by the activists, and therefore it is discussed here to provide context for the forthcoming analysis.

Identity theory boasts a substantial base of literature, especially within the field of psychology, and relates to understanding identity and the way it is established and changed. A basic assumption is that individuals strive to cultivate an identity that is valued positively by others, and can move between social groups to manage their identities through their own performance within different social contexts as well as comparison with both 'in-group' and 'out-group' members (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). A person's identity can be conceptualised on different levels, with distinct and overlapping identities within the individual, social and collective spheres (Snow, 2001). Social identities are understood to be primarily related to the social roles a person occupies, e.g. mother, entrepreneur, etc. or other social categories one belongs to such as ethnic or national groups, and are therefore fundamentally multifaceted in nature with potentially changeable emphasis depending on the social context (Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019; Klandermans and de Weerd, 2000). Personal identities are formed from individuals' perceptions of themselves, which may or may not be publicly expressed, whereas collective identities represent a shared sense of 'we' based on common attributes, activities or beliefs. Collective identity implies at least a basic sense of solidarity between members, arising from a perception of shared agency or experience (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Klandermans and de Weerd, 2000; Snow, 2001). The significance and importance attributed to each aspect of these identities has been argued to form the rational basis of an individual's social interactions and group behaviour, including the membership of organisations and participation in social movements (Abrams and Hogg, 1990).

Social movement theorists have applied these ideas to the study of movements in different ways. Identity theory can assist with understanding people's motivation to mobilise over particular issues and the extent to which they are personally active in their contribution to a cause, as well as to help explain movement leaders' strategic choices and the cultural effects of movements (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Indeed, Melucci (1995) argues that the establishment of a coherent and resilient collective

identity is of primary importance for social movements. Gekas (2000) suggests that ideology and values are distinctly important in the formation of identity across all of the three levels, resulting in a fourth type, value identity. He argues that individuals are drawn to and stay with movements that reflect their value identities, thereby reinforcing a feeling of 'authenticity', and that social movements provide an important vehicle for moral clarity that is difficult to find in modern society (Gekas, 2000, p. 105). Kiecolt (2000) examines the processes by which identity changes, and argues that cognitive dissonance plays a pivotal role. She suggests that individuals act in ways to reduce cognitive dissonance between their identities, and that this can be either through changing their social roles, by leaving or joining relevant groups, or changing their personal identity to better match that of their social or collective identities. Furthermore, outside influences and social participation can promote gradual change or cementation of aspects of personal and social identity. For example, through participation in a movement, being an 'activist' can become a more and more dominant aspect of personal and social identity over time, even to the point where it ceases to be confined to a single issue and becomes easily transferable to other movements (Kiecolt, 2000).

Collective identity is intrinsically related to collective action, and it has been argued that the stronger the collective identity the more committed members are likely to be. One of the main factors influencing the collective identity of a group or movement relates to the extent that collective identity overlaps and reflects the personal and social identities of its members; their identities 'converge' with the collective identity of the movement and, therefore, the 'movement provides an avenue for the individual to act in accordance with his or her personal identity' (Snow and McAdam, 2000, p.47). Individuals may actively look for organisations to join which offer convergence, or alternatively movements might take steps to attract members either individually or via pre-existing networks in order to recruit large numbers of members quickly. Potential members who do not share a high enough degree of identity convergence with the movement may also be recruited, but work must be done to construct a compatible identity. This can be achieved through a variety of processes, such as amplifying, consolidating or extending congruent aspects of their identities, or even transforming existing identities entirely (Snow and McAdam, 2000). Snow and McAdam (2000, p. 63) relate this to the idea of identity salience, which describes the overlap between a personal identity and the organisation's collective identity: 'movements that frame their recruiting efforts around appeals to salient self-conceptions are more likely to attract adherents than those that do not.'

Personal interactions form a fundamental part of the recruitment process and a site for 'identity work' processes (Snow and McAdam, 2000), as well as the establishment of positive influence, that is, suggestion that participation in movement activities will raise the social esteem for the potential recruit (McAdam, 2003). Negative influences can hinder the recruitment process as well as inhibit the effectiveness and enthusiasm of members, for example when negative messages are received about the movement from respected sources, such as the media, friends or family. If an individual has reason to fear that being active in a movement will negatively impact their social identity, this clearly acts in opposition to recruitment attempts (McAdam, 2003). Understanding and managing these competing influences and individuals' anticipation of the potential effect of participation on their identities is therefore key to successfully managing the recruitment process. Looking at the link between collective and individual identity in this way also helps clarify the mechanism by which movements can make use of existing networks to block-recruit large numbers of members who share congruent identities, such as the way Momentum recruited so many members from the existing activist community through cultivation of a movement identity.

2.3 Existing Literature on Momentum

2.3.1 Search Methods

As other authors have noted (Rhodes, 2019), the common linguistic usage of the word 'momentum' can make conducting literature searches on Momentum problematic. Additionally, especially through the beginning stages of this project there was very little academic literature on Momentum due to the recent nature of the group's existence. Database searches yielded extremely few relevant results, and therefore the majority of initial literature searching took place using more organic methods, such as examining reference lists, along with periodically recurring database and other internet searches to look for newly published material as the project went on. Experimentation with keywords took place over time, and in November 2022 a more systematic database search was conducted to inform this discussion of the existing literature to include the most recent material available.

To attempt to maximise the relevance of results whilst ensuring potentially useful sources were not overlooked, 'Momentum' was searched alongside 'Labour Party' and 'UK'. Searches were performed using ProQuest, EBSCO, SAGE Publications, JSTOR and EThOS. Where necessary to keep results to a manageable number,

searches were limited to the political science or politics subject area (reflecting the group's inherently political nature), with the publication date from 2015 onwards, since any sources published before that date could not possibly relate to Momentum the organisation. However, despite these additional criteria, a large proportion of the search results were wildly irrelevant and easily disregarded. A standard process was adopted with each set of results, which included first examining the title and abstract (where available) to assess whether the article's content related to a) Momentum specifically, or b) to Corbyn or the UK Labour Party more generally during Corbyn's leadership. Where possible, the full text of articles were accessed and a further text search for "Momentum" was conducted to confirm whether the content actually related to Momentum the organisation and whether Momentum itself was the main subject under discussion. Sources that mentioned Momentum briefly in passing during the course of discussion of Corbyn or the Labour Party were noted, but only sources with significant discussion around or research on Momentum itself are included in this discussion of academic literature. The following table provides a summary of the results.

Table 1: Database Search Results, November 2022

Database	Additional Search Criteria	Total results returned	Brief Mention of Momentum	Significant Content on Momentum
SAGE Publications	Subject area, publication date	61	10	Muldoon and Rye (2020) Ward and Guglielmo (2021)
EBSCO (including Academic Search Complete)	none - keywords only	6	0	Prentoulis (2022) Muldoon and Rye (2020) Dennis (2019)
JSTOR	Subject area, publication date, articles and books only	689	8*	0*
ProQuest	Subject area, publication date	238	17	Maiguashca and Dean (2019)
EThOS	none - keywords only	1	0	Hotham (2021)

* Most of the full texts and all abstracts were unavailable, so identification was made using titles and the excerpts provided on the list of search results.

A number of the academic articles on Momentum itself that I had previously identified did not appear on any of the above searches, so a supplementary search using SpringerLink was undertaken and the following two additional relevant results were returned: Pickard (2018) and Rhodes (2019). This total of eight sources containing significant content on Momentum was considerably fewer than those that had been previously identified, and the database searches did not uncover any new titles. Therefore, the more extensive results from my ongoing literature searching have been taken as the basis for this discussion. The sources identified can be grouped into three categories, as shown in the table below.

Table 2: Literature on Momentum

Primary Research	Analysis	Discussion Based on Personal Experience
Bassett Yerrell (2020)*	Avril (2018)	Klug and Rees (2018)
Dean and Maiguashca (2018)	Bassett (2019)	Klug, et al (2016)
Dennis (2019)	Dennis and Sampaiao-Dias (2019)	Schneider (2020)
Hotham (2021)	Dommett and Temple (2018)	
Jones (2021)	Forrester (2021)	
Mackova, et al (2020)	Gerbaudo (2021)	
Mejias and Banaji (2020)	Maiguashca and Dean (2019)	
Rhodes (2019)*	Muldoon and Rye (2020)	
Ward and Guglielmo (2021)	Pickard (2018)	
	Prentoulis (2022)	
	Wolkenstein (2016)	

* Bassett Yerrell and Rhodes also draw from personal experience within their work.

These sources appear in a variety of forms, from book chapters and election analysis contributions to articles in both peer reviewed and non-peer-reviewed journals. The substantial body of grey literature on Momentum including academic blogs, news articles and articles from non-academic publications such as *The New Statesman* has informed this research, but is not considered as part of this literature discussion as it does not contribute to establishing gaps in the body of academic research or justifying this project's original contribution to knowledge. Similarly, non-academic books such as Chessum (2022) were also not included in this review.

2.3.2 Primary Research on Momentum

Existing primary research on Momentum is relatively wide-ranging for what remains a limited number of studies, although apart from Hotham's (2021) predominantly quantitative study of Momentum's use of Facebook authors generally rely on qualitative data from interviews, participant observations and document analysis. Research focus covers three main areas: digital organising and social media (four studies), political analysis (one study), and ethnographic research (three studies), as well as one which combines ethnography with political analysis.

A dominant theme in much of the literature on Momentum is its development of digital organising and innovative use of social media. Deployed in support of its focus on participatory democracy and 'people-powered' campaigning, this utilisation of digital tools to facilitate and augment activists' on-the-ground activity is often cited to support categorising Momentum as a movement, or movement-hybrid organisation (Dennis, 2019; Rhodes, 2019). Rhodes (2019) draws from personal experience as a Momentum member, conversations with other activists and analysis of mainstream media reporting to describe Momentum's digital campaigning during GE2017 and argue that its effectiveness prompted a tangible shift in the portrayal of Momentum in the national press. She references often-cited examples of higher profile online content such as the My Nearest Marginal tool to illustrate the reach and influence of the group's digital campaign and explain the positive change in media attitude over that period. Rhodes (2019, p. 172) also highlights the encouragement activists were given to 'personalize' their contributions to the campaign, whether online or in the course of face-to-face canvassing, and asserts that these aspects gave Labour's GE2017 campaign a 'movement-led' character.

Similarly, Dennis (2019) draws attention to Momentum's use of Facebook and other social media in their campaigning. He identifies distinct differences between the National Office, which predominantly used social media to issue instructions and requests for action to members, and the local groups, which more often used it as a tool to communicate with and facilitate collaboration between members at a local level. Local groups and individual members were given considerable latitude in terms of freedom to organise around ad hoc issues, and Dennis coined the term 'movement-led faction' to describe what he identifies as Momentum's hybrid nature based primarily on a contrast between the organisation's local movement characteristics and national faction-like nature. Hotham (2021) also notes an important element of individual autonomy, specifically in the development of social

media content and in its deployment as a campaigning tool. His analysis illuminates the often organic and individualised nature of Momentum's digital campaigning, and proposes that this supports characterising Momentum's contribution to GE2017 as a 'parallel' or 'satellite' campaign that complemented and augmented the more traditional activities undertaken by the Labour Party itself (Hotham, 2021). Hotham concurs with Dennis, citing both Dennis (2019) and work by Kavada (2019) on digital and movement parties in Europe, that Momentum has a movement character on the basis of its embrace of member-led and online methods of organising and campaigning.

Like Dennis and Hotham, Mackova, et al. (2020) observed Momentum's encouragement and support of individual enterprise and creativity, citing observations of National Office staff's experimentation with using dating app Tinder as an innovative campaign tactic during GE2017. Additionally, they found evidence of a direct connection between Momentum's online organising and traditional, in-person campaigning activities such as telephone or door-to-door canvassing. However, they go further to suggest that although Momentum utilised a significant breadth of online campaigning tools and strategies, this was almost always in support of promoting on-the-ground activities. Mackova, et al. argue, therefore, that at its heart the nature of Momentum's use of new media was a purely hybrid approach. For instance, they also refer to the My Nearest Marginal tool, but as an example of the intrinsic and direct relationship between online tools and offline activity in that the sole purpose of the tool was to facilitate and promote door-to-door canvassing in marginal seats. Overall, Mackova, et al. conclude that although Momentum's use of social media was often inventive and original in the context of party politics, the promotion of traditional forms of campaigning was central to the purpose and function of online content. Furthermore, although Momentum's digital presence was directed at garnering support amongst the younger population, its hybrid nature was also central to the cultivation of favourable treatment in the mainstream news media; as Rhodes, Mackova, et al. also observe a positive shift in the portrayal of Momentum in the national press over the duration of GE2017.

With a distinctly different focus, Ward and Guglielmo (2021) present a comparative analysis of emergent left politics in the UK and Italy. The authors draw from semi-structured interviews to construct a picture of Corbynism as expressed and understood by Momentum and its members, as it was felt Momentum offered 'the clearest insight into the nature of Corbynism' (Ward and Guglielmo, 2021, p. 691).

Ward and Guglielmo (2021, p. 681) coined the term ‘pop-socialism’ to highlight the interplay between the recent leftist political revival and its populist appeal to the ‘people’, which combine to create what they argue is a ‘renewal of conventional socialist politics’. Rather than being an entirely new form of left politics, pop-socialism represents a new approach used by the left to pursue the (re)introduction of socialist ideology into modern mainstream political discourse. The authors also emphasise the pivotal role of the ‘pop-leader’ in acting as a public figurehead. They refer to Dean’s (2017) concept of ‘politicizing fandom’ in describing their observations of the ‘movement-like’ following that was a key defining feature of Corbynism, for which Momentum was the primary driving organisation and source of supporters (Ward and Guglielmo, 2021, p. 690). However, far from being an actual ‘movement’ as such, Ward and Guglielmo argue that Momentum’s preoccupation with intra-party factional conflict and damaging overreliance on Corbyn as leader limited the scope of its wider societal influence and restricted its long-term prospects as a political force. A conclusion that can be drawn from Ward and Guglielmo’s analysis is that although it was useful for mobilising large numbers of supporters quickly, the celebrity treatment of Corbyn potentially detracted from the message of class-based, socialist politics within the mainstream and prevented Momentum from functioning as the movement many of its members desired it to be.

Surprisingly, four ethnographic studies of Momentum have also been undertaken: Dean and Maiguashca (2018), Mejias and Banaji (2020), Jones (2021) and Bassett Yerrell (2020). Although not set out as an explicitly ethnographic exploration, Dean and Maiguashca’s (2018, p.378) research into the ‘femin*ist*ization’ of left wing politics in the UK assesses the extent to which the beliefs, behaviour and culture of leftist organisations (including Momentum) embrace and embody feminist theory and principles, which arguably reflects core aspects common to ethnographies (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The authors’ work concludes that their ‘empirical mapping’ of leftist organisations demonstrates an increase in activists’ willingness to adopt a feminist standpoint, albeit one that is constrained by an uneven understanding of feminist theory and the ongoing existence of ‘gendered scripts’ even if more and more roles are being undertaken by women (Dean and Maiguashca, 2018, p.401). In a somewhat similar vein, Mejias and Banaji (2020, p.122) conducted an explicitly ethnographic study into Momentum and My Life My Say, focused on investigating ‘how equality, diversity and inclusivity policies and practices’ manifest within the organisations. The authors found evidence for ‘filter bubbles’ within Momentum, created through a restricted audience based on age, to

the relative exclusion of other diversity categories such as race and disability (Mejias and Banaji, 2020, p.153). Interestingly, Mejias and Banaji (2020, p.153) observed Momentum's staff as being 'mostly white' and that their online and offline networks '[did] not match rhetoric of widening participatory diversity'. However, they acknowledge Momentum's potential effectiveness in promoting youth engagement in politics and their 'deep commitment' to progressive social change, which encompasses diversity as a foundational aspect (Mejias and Banaji, 2020, p.152).

In contrast, Jones (2021) sets out to illuminate factional culture within the Labour Party's youth wing through the lens of young members' experiences of the 2016 Labour Youth Conference, which included internal elections for Young Labour positions. Again, although it is not explicitly presented as an ethnographic study, the study of culture is a traditional remit of ethnographers and Jones's use of interview data to construct a detailed description of the experience of this event from many different perspectives arguably seeks to facilitate an ethnographic understanding of the factional culture that manifested in this limited case study. Jones's (2021, n.p.) research is primarily descriptive in nature and paints a picture of intense and 'destructive' factionalism, drawing from the experiences of activists on both the left, represented by supporters of the Momentum 'slate', and right wing of the Party. However, she also draws parallels within Labour's history and argues that although the factional behaviour exhibited during the 2016 Labour Youth Conference has historic precedent within the culture of the Party, the strength of the exposure to such bitter factional conflict made the conference a formative experience which will remain 'in the minds of a generation of young Labour activists' who attended (Jones, 2021, n.p.).

A well-connected Momentum and Labour activist and former employee of MP Chris Williamson, Bassett Yerrell (2020) had access to a large number of influential actors within the organisation, and he based his ethnographic exploration and political analysis of Corbynism on many interviews and participant observations both at a national level and a local level through his own local Momentum branch in Lambeth and other sites, as well as through digital networks of activists. His thesis's main premise was the examination and analysis of the 'hegemonic or otherwise "official" … version of Corbynism', and its relationship to liberal democracy (Bassett Yerrell, 2020, p.44), with the main crux of his arguments centring around neoliberalism as both an important influence on and context for the emergence of Corbynism. Bassett Yerrell observes that Corbyn and many influential activists initially held ambitions to

build a social movement that could mobilise large numbers of people like the historic labour movement did. However, they failed in this goal, and, because of this failure, Corbynism was necessarily limited in operating within liberal democracy. On this basis, it was not extra-Parliamentary and therefore represents a political, rather than a social, movement. Furthermore, Bassett Yerrell (2020, p.6) suggests that rather than being populist in nature, which he argues is inherently illiberal in that it works in opposition to existing liberal institutions, Corbynism in fact 'both legitimated liberal institutions and proposed reforms that were meant to provide a renewed social and political basis for contemporary liberal democratic capitalism.'

In addition to and in partial support of his political analysis, Bassett Yerrell makes interesting observations regarding the nature and consequences of local action in Lambeth Momentum, as well as the branch in Derby associated with Chris Williamson, drawing from participant observations and interviews undertaken during the period from 2017 to 2019. With particular relevance to this project, Bassett Yerrell (2020, p.40) echoes Mejias and Banaji's observations regarding the relative lack of diversity within Momentum, in that the 'overwhelming majority' of participants were white British. He also relates a detailed account of the history and development of Momentum as an organisation, the sectarianism that arose and deepened within Momentum and Labour during the research period and the various activities undertaken by Momentum both on a national and local level. With Bassett Yerrell having openly admitted his own membership of Momentum throughout his data collection, his research arguably complements the data for my own project and will be discussed in more detail and used as a point of triangulation and comparison during the course of the forthcoming chapters.

2.3.3 Other Academic Literature on Momentum

Other literature on Momentum is similarly wide-ranging in scope. Like Jones, Pickard's (2018) chapter is primarily descriptive in nature, but sets out a wider portrait of Momentum with a focus on its engagement with young people. Pickard summarises some activities undertaken by Momentum during Corbyn's two leadership campaigns, as well as some public criticism of Momentum's organising within the Party, and observes constitutional changes the group put in place in early 2017. She posits that the resulting increase in organisational rigidity could push more movement-minded activists away from Labour, and that the group's focus on Corbyn could pose challenges when his leadership ends. Although covering only a portion of Momentum's history under Corbyn's leadership, Pickard provides a useful

descriptive summary of the group's relationship with Labour and its appeal to younger people. Similarly, Klug, et al. (2016) and Klug and Rees (2018) draw from their experiences as Momentum's National Coordinators to present descriptive accounts of Momentum's organisational nature and vision for the future of left politics. In both articles, they emphasise the importance of 'Big Organising', which was imported from Bernie Sanders's campaigns in the United States and relates to a strategy of 'empowering and trusting activists to play leadership roles' in the organisation (Klug, et al., 2016, p.40). This aspiration is consistent with researchers' observations of individual autonomy during campaigns (Avril, 2018; Dennis, 2019; Hotham, 2121; Mackova, et al., 2020; Rhodes, 2019).

Klug and Rees (2018) also share anecdotes and quotes from American and Canadian leftist organisers, and authors and politicians both from the UK and abroad to support suggestions that Momentum, Corbyn and Labour could promote a leftist agenda and modernise the way the Labour Party operates through collaboration and mutual learning with an emphasis on grassroots activists and international connections. Avril (2018) takes this further with an analysis of Momentum's role in 'movementisation' within the Labour Party. She outlines the modern trend of movementisation through experiments with community organising that began with Movement for Change and draws parallels with other less well known groups within Labour such as Saving Labour which supported Owen Smith during the 2016 leadership election. Additionally, she highlights Momentum's connections with other long-standing left wing groups within Labour including the CLPD and the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), its rivalry with Progress and its similarity to 'Democrat-supporting groups in the US' (Avril, 2018, p.259). Avril's findings (2018, p.267) echo Klug and Rees's belief that community organising and movementisation is key to Labour's building and maintaining 'strong links with civil society'. However, she also acknowledges the potential for negative electoral consequences arising from 'plac[ing] limitations on the autonomy of the leadership' through increased accountability to grassroots members.

In contrast, writing after Corbyn's departure as leader, Schneider (2020) draws from his experience as former Momentum National Coordinator and Corbyn's Head of Strategic Communication to offer an analysis and critique of the impact of Momentum and Corbynism on the Labour Party. With considerably less optimism than when he wrote with Klug and Rees (Klug, et al., 2016), Schneider argues that whilst Momentum made some gains in terms of increasing the number of left wing

candidates selected, it did not do enough to develop its grassroots political education programme. Schneider explicitly continues to characterise Momentum as a foundational actor in the 'Corbyn movement', even as he observes a significant gap between the potential of the movement and its actual track record of success. He builds on the hopeful goals set out with his colleagues in the early days of Momentum (Klug, et al., 2016), bringing these into the context of being relatively leaderless following the end of Corbyn's leadership by re-emphasising the aspiration for Momentum to act as a bridge between Labour and extra-Parliamentary left wing groups in support of the socialist cause (Schneider, 2020). Again, however, the accounts and observations in this chapter are primarily descriptive in nature, summarising and assessing Momentum's and Corbyn's impact and providing personal suggestions as to potential future trajectories.

Writing from a more formal academic perspective, Dommett and Temple (2017) join other authors in focusing on Momentum's contribution to innovations in digital organising, and the more peripheral role in campaigns through their arms-length promotion of social media content. Later cited by both Dennis and Hotham, Dommett and Temple (2017, p.190) describe Momentum's activities during GE2017 as a 'satellite campaign' to reflect not only its prolific use of novel social media content, but also 'databases, canvassing systems, online phone banks, and email lists' and paid advertising on social media to support the Labour campaign. They argue that these activities were unprecedented in that they went far beyond campaigning that the Party had direct control over, and posit that the relative success of this extension to traditional campaigning may inspire a longer-term trend. Muldoon and Rye (2020) build on the work of Dommett and Temple and Dennis, alongside other movement theorists, agreeing that Momentum operates both within and outside of Labour and going further to suggest that Momentum represents what they call a 'party-driven movement'. This term arguably emphasises the movement characteristics as the primary foundation of the organisation's identity, pointing to its 'specific movement-style of organising which is mostly digitally based' (Muldoon and Rye, 2020, p.494). Both articles suggest that Momentum, and other similar political groups worldwide, represent innovations to traditional campaigning that harness the energy of a tech-savvy, mostly younger activist base, and that this shift in tactics is not only effective but represents the emergence of a new type of political campaigning and/or hybrid type of organisation.

Prentoulis (2022, p.110) also constructs her analysis of Corbyn and Momentum around international comparators, but, writing after Corbyn's replacement as Labour Leader, asks why he was unsuccessful in Britain whilst 'left-populist movements elsewhere in Europe were thriving'. She argues that one reason for this was the lack of populist appeal enjoyed by anti-austerity movements and demonstrations like Occupy in the UK compared to European counterparts, and the consequent lack of reach in terms of public support for Corbyn and Momentum. Comparable to observations made by Mejias and Banaji, Prentoulis (2022, p.124) asserts that leftist movements prior to Momentum 'did not manage to extend beyond left, or activist, circles'. In contrast, the political right in the UK was much more successful in harnessing populist sentiment under the banner of Brexit. Prentoulis suggests that it was this opportunity for a right populist movement to take hold, which was not present elsewhere in Europe, that made the scale of the challenge for the Corbyn project too steep to overcome by reducing the scope for the populist left to construct a functional connection to the wider public outside of its small activist circles.

Writing before GE2019, Bassett (2019, p.777) argues that, despite rhetoric about representing the New Left, Corbyn's and Momentum's politics are 'deeply social democratic' in character rather than representing a strong socialist challenge to the status quo. Furthermore, drawing conclusions from Momentum's participation in national party politics, Bassett (2019, pp. 783) suggests that the social movement character has been 'relegat[ed]' in favour of 'pursu[ing] more typical parliamentary objectives'. This is not inconsistent with observations presented in Dennis (2019), although Bassett supports his arguments in this paper primarily through references to Momentum as a national organisation. Nevertheless, Bassett (2019) is one of the few authors to acknowledge the often deeply held leftist ideological beliefs regarding Momentum and Corbynism that many writers hold, and the potential impact this can have on scholarship in this area in terms of bias. On the other hand, Maiguashca and Dean (2019) draw from their previous empirical research on Momentum to offer a critique of what they believe is unfair treatment of Corbynism as a movement by British political scientists. They similarly argue that there is a tendency for ideology to impact on academics' examination of Corbyn and his supporters. However, instead, they suggest it is a more right-wing bias that undermines the integrity of the majority of existing literature and press coverage, and claim that accusations and assessments are made without sufficient evidence. For example, Maiguashca and Dean (2019, p.52) agree that Corbyn's politics are not as radical as often presented, which means that Corbynism and Momentum are often incorrectly characterised as

‘hard left’. Furthermore, they take issue with what they describe as a continuing ‘deep, uncritical attachment to the Westminster Model’ which they argue has encouraged a reluctance to acknowledge the complexity of Corbynism at the same time as dismissing it as ‘populist’ or ‘deluded’ (Maiguashca and Dean, 2019, p. 61).

Forrester (2021) draws from Bassett Yerrell (2020) and other authors on Corbynism to offer an assessment and critique of the left’s progress following Labour’s poor performance in GE2019, alongside suggestions around the future challenges facing the movement. Although she supports Bassett Yerrell’s characterisation of Corbynism as a political movement, Forrester (2021, p. 909) argues that Momentum itself ‘was largely an electoral campaigning organization’ and that it ‘came to resemble a campaigning NGO.’ Like many authors, Forrester highlights the central role of Momentum’s digital organising, but in the context of providing a vehicle for coordinating the myriad left-wing actors during Corbyn’s tenure as Labour Leader. She criticises activists for failing to adequately engage with theoretical questions around the nature and purpose of political parties and social movements within the UK, going so far as to say that ‘there was little attempt to cultivate a particular understanding of the purposes of political action among party members’ (Forrester, 2021, p.912). Forrester concludes that this lack of clear strategic planning restricted Momentum’s ability to serve as an umbrella organisation and broker between Labour and the wider movement left, and questions whether it can rectify this in the relatively hostile environment post-Corbyn.

Other authors also offer an assessment of Momentum’s efforts to promote both Corbyn and leftist ideology. Gerbaudo (2021) and Wolkenstein (2016) both comment on Momentum’s stated desire to improve the internal democracy of Labour to promote the influence of the left wing of the party and reconnect the Party with its working class base. Wolkenstein (2016) identifies conflicts between Momentum’s politics and large sections of the working class, foreshadowing many explanations that have been suggested for Labour’s defeat in 2019. He argues that democratising the Labour Party will not necessarily lead to reconnection with working class voters, who themselves are not a homogenous group, particularly if the comparatively radical Momentum secures power and influence over party policy. Gerbaudo (2021) is also concerned with Momentum and Corbyn’s efforts to increase intra-party democracy, and draws from comparisons with other leftist European parties alongside observations of their failure in attempts to transform Labour under Corbyn’s leadership. He suggests that in light of developments under Starmer, left-

wing activists will need to display ‘persistence bordering on stubbornness’ (Gerbaudo, 2021, p. 922), but this sentiment could arguably be extended to include ‘patience’ and ‘realism’ in terms of the scale of the challenge now ahead of them. Dennis and Sampaiao-Dias (2020), on the other hand, point to the ultimate ineffectiveness of Momentum’s activities during GE2019 and provide a short assessment of the group’s position in the immediate aftermath of the election campaign, suggesting that Momentum would benefit from honest reflection around their methods and the reputational consequences this had in the national press. However, like Gerbaudo and Wolkenstein, they touch on the political differences between members and the electorate, citing Brexit as a significant site of potential conflict if MPs court Leave voters against the wishes of the Labour grassroots.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

2.4.1 Synthesis and Discussion

There are some common themes that emerge from the empirical studies which are supported in the other academic literature on Momentum. Most obvious is the emphasis on digital organising and innovation, which authors agree has been both electorally effective and useful in attracting enthusiastic supporters who tend to be younger in age. More relevant to the context of this research, however, is the tendency of most authors to take Momentum’s ‘movement’ nature for granted, and it is worth examining this in more detail.

Undoubtedly, the primary source for this is an often uncritical acceptance by some authors of Momentum’s own self-identification. Momentum has cultivated an image of social movementism and utilised this as an important tactic in the recruitment and mobilisation of members. For example, at the time of writing Momentum was still encouraging activists to ‘Be Part of the Movement’ at the top of their internet homepage (Momentum, 2021a, n.p.). Journalists, biographers, politicians and academics personally associated with Momentum and Corbynism have actively supported this narrative over the course of years resulting in it being an intrinsic part of Momentum's organisational identity and public reputation. Furthermore, characterising it as a movement rather than a traditional party political organisation arguably at the same time complements right-wing criticisms of Momentum as being radical and ‘hard left’, as noted by Maiguashca and Dean (2019); therefore this identity is further reinforced by its critics. There is some logic to taking Momentum’s self-categorisation as a starting point for analysis; indeed, considering the dominance of identity-based politics within mainstream discourse, it is not hard to

understand the tendency for authors to accept self-identification as sufficient evidence in itself. Furthermore, there is a social constructionist argument to support a position that gives primacy to activists' *belief* in Momentum as a movement, in that this represents their reality and therefore must form the foundational basis of any analysis. There is clearly important value in exploring Momentum on its own terms, as a movement, which is why this project has taken social movement theory as a starting point for theoretical context.

A second source of this assumption around Momentum's nature has stemmed from the way the academic research and literature on the group has developed over time. In terms of the chronology of events this process has been secondary to that of Momentum's self-identification which can be traced back to Corbyn's first leadership election. However, certain academic authors can be identified as central to the cementation of this narrative as well as provide a picture of the mechanism by which the characterisation of Momentum as a movement or movement-hybrid has come to dominate the evolving literature base. In addition to Momentum's self-categorisation, another significant contributing factor is its connections to other recent European leftist groups, such as Podemos, SYRIZA and the Five Star Movement which are recognised as fully-fledged movement parties (e.g. della Porta et al., 2017; Kavada, 2019). Of particular significance is Gerbaudo's (2019, p. 188) chapter on 'platform parties' or 'digital parties', which argues that the Five Star Movement and Podemos have pioneered a new form of organisation and political philosophy that is by design 'coherent with the nature of a digital society'. In the same volume, Kavada (2019) responds to Gerbaudo, taking his observations of the Five Star Movement and Podemos further to argue that these organisations are in fact also movement parties. Dennis's (2019) oft-cited work potentially represents a pivotal moment, as it appears to be the earliest empirical study that attempts to offer a theoretical basis for ascribing a movement identity to Momentum. Dennis (2019) cites the work by Gerbaudo (2019) and Kavada (2019) to substantiate his assessment of the local branches of Momentum as having significant similarities with these European movement parties, and therefore underpin his assessment of Momentum as a 'movement faction'.

Dennis (2019) draws on social movement literature (e.g. Kitschelt, 2006) to support an agreement with Kavada and builds on her argument that these European organisations represent examples of movement parties. Dennis (2019) appears to add to Kavada's basis for this characterisation through emphasis on Gerbaudo's

description of digital parties, combining the two chapters to conclude that the embrace of digital tools and use of social media are also intrinsic and defining features of modern movement parties. Dennis goes on to argue that because Momentum shares this focus on digital campaigning, and because it draws members from extra-Parliamentary movements, it shares a movement identity similar to the European movement parties discussed by Gerbaudo and Kavada. On the face of it, and for the purposes of Dennis's research, this assessment is functional given his qualification of Momentum's movement party character through the label 'movement faction'. Furthermore, Momentum's general association with these international movements provides correlational support for categorising them similarly. Dennis (2019) argues that Momentum's use of Facebook is an important vehicle for democracy amongst grassroots supporters, and that conceptualising Momentum as a 'movement faction' could assist with future analysis of the impact of digital organising on politics and political parties. His work has been regularly cited by other authors on Momentum, such as Hotham (2021) and Muldoon and Rye (2020), who accept and build from his foundational assessment of Momentum as a movement-hybrid organisation. Although, some authors such as Avril (2018) reference the existence of an academic debate over the Momentum's movement credentials, the narrative of Momentum-as-movement, or Momentum-as-movement-hybrid, has in this way been established both through grey literature and academic inquiry, and it remains the dominant trend in terms of categorising the organisation (e.g. Joseph, et al., 2023).

There are other authors who question the social movement credentials of Corbynism, such as Bassett Yerrell (2020), Ward and Guglielmo (2021) and Thompson (2016), and arguably, therefore, Momentum as well by association. In addition, Forrester (2021) explicitly discounts Momentum's movement credentials. I have also argued previously that although there is significance in the belief activists have that Momentum is a movement organisation, there is also an academic imperative to critically examine this belief against the backdrop of the nature and function of Momentum within the larger societal context. The characterisation of the group as a movement is in dissonance with many aspects of its organisation, such as its rigid hierarchical national structure, the existence of a membership fee, and its base of paid employees. Furthermore, recruiting grassroots members from extra-Parliamentary movements does not counteract the explicit constitutional commitment to the Labour Party, the primacy given to activities in pursuit of Labour's electoral success, and the relative absence of any specifically-defined

movement goals (Jewell, 2023). Putting aside the personal beliefs of committed members, it appears that Momentum's function is well within the scope of traditional party activism; the basis, therefore, for a categorisation as a movement seems to be confined to the celebrity treatment of Corbyn and his movement-like following (Chessum, 2022; Jewell, 2023; Ward and Guglielmo, 2021). Understanding the contradictions and potential cognitive dissonance this creates, and how this is dealt with by individual grassroots activists, emerged as a significant line of enquiry in this research, relating directly to the foreshadowed problem of the relationship between Momentum and the Labour Party.

2.4.2 Contribution to the Literature

Existing ethnographic studies on Momentum are materially different from this project in a number of important ways. Firstly, only two studies, Bassett Yerrell (2020) and Mejias and Banaji (2020), explicitly define themselves as ethnographies. Bassett Yerrell's research will be addressed in more detail below; however, with its narrow focus on diversity-related issues, the context and content of Mejias and Banaji's study is substantially different from this project. Jones (2021) is, like this project, concerned with a more general political culture within Momentum and Labour; however, my investigations are both larger in scope and more explicit in methodological approach than Jones, as well as drawing from a wider range of data collection methods. Furthermore, siting the investigation of Momentum within the context of social movement theory represents another dimension to the analysis of the group that is not present in existing ethnographies. Most of the empirical research and analyses of Momentum include at least some examination of the group's relationship with the Labour Party, reflecting similarities with this project's initial and main interest. However, this project has specifically and critically examined Momentum's claim to be a movement organisation more explicitly and in more depth than previous studies (e.g. Dennis, 2019; Muldoon and Rye, 2020; Ward and Guglielmo, 2020), relating that analysis directly to the empirical data.

Much nearer to this research is Bassett Yerrell's (2020) thesis, and the timescale for his data collection also overlapped considerably with the research period for this project. Although methodologically similar, Bassett Yerrell conducts his research as a clear insider, with explicitly expressed personal commitment to Momentum and what he considers to be the wider Corbynism movement. This is in contrast to the relationship to Momentum that I cultivated, which was one of relative detachment as a sympathetic outsider and potential recruit. Interestingly, although Bassett Yerrell

(2020, p.37) claims his insider status and deeply immersive ethnographic approach gave him 'far greater access than any other academic researcher on the contemporary Labour Party,' the content and focus of his thesis appears to be primarily historical description and political analysis rather than a true ethnographic exploration. Indeed, with his stated overall goal of conceptualising the 'official' version of Corbynism, it is also uncertain why ethnography represents the most appropriate approach for his research questions.

Furthermore, there does not seem to be any identifiable benefit gained in exchange for the potential loss of objectivity as a result of his insider status. For example, Bassett Yerrell makes detailed observations of the events surrounding changes to Momentum's constitution between November 2016 and early 2017 based on his relatively exclusive access to high level actors within Momentum and the Labour Party. However, my investigations as an outsider, as based entirely on publicly available documents, are not inconsistent with his findings; indeed, for example, his account of the controversial constitutional changes that took place in the winter of 2016-17 arguably does not offer any additional insight as compared to my account of events (see Chapter 4). This and other points of comparison will be discussed in more detail in the forthcoming chapters, and as mentioned above, Bassett Yerrell's research is an invaluable source of data for this project in its own right. Furthermore, the large majority of currently existing research on Momentum relies primarily on observations and other data relating to GE2017. This research extends considerably on previous studies by providing a grassroots account of GE2019 (see Chapters 8 and 9).

As touched on above, one of the key themes of this research includes empirical evidence relating to theories around the role of identity in member recruitment and retention. Additionally, the data provides opportunity for developing hypotheses around the unforeseen consequences of developing a strong collective identity, particularly in the context of political parties, as well as the interactions between an 'in-group' and larger groups of potential supporters or members for whom the identity salience is very low. Quite separate to the arguments against Momentum's characterisation as a movement organisation, the context for their societal role extends explicitly into the realm of party politics and national democracy, providing another arena for the application of identity theory supported by empirical data from this research. In addition to the findings arising from investigation aimed at extending the existing literature in a social movement context, there are a number of

themes which have arisen out of the data that provide additional opportunity for contribution to the body of research in various discipline areas.

Specifically, one area that appears to be underexplored within the literature and research on identity and social movements is the relationship between movements and individuals or groups with strongly non-congruent identities, particularly in terms of in-group/out-group relations where the comparator group does not share enough of a definable collective identity to qualify as an out-group as conceptualised in existing theoretical discussions, for example general populations. In terms of the context of this research, Momentum could be considered the 'in-group' and, as political rivals, the Conservatives or even the relative right of the Labour party 'out-groups'. However, a large proportion of Momentum's activity relates to interactions with the wider electorate, the large majority of which could be seen as effectively being 'no-group' in relation to Momentum, a position that does not appear to be considered in depth within the literature on identity theory and social movements. More generally, it could conceivably impact on the success of an organisation or movement if large sections of the population or the relevant decision-makers develop hostile attitudes towards the in-group on the basis of incompatible aspects of its identity, but without providing sufficient basis for the cohesion of an identifiable 'out-group' set in opposition. This project has generated recent empirical data relevant to a number of theories around social movements, identity and recruitment, as well as the basis for hypotheses around the impact of incompatible identities and potential avenues for future study around the role of identity in relation to both social movements and political parties, which will be presented and examined in more detail in Chapter 10.

In keeping with the ethnographic nature of this research, the focus and research questions were allowed to freely evolve over the course of data collection and analysis. However, as can be seen from the discussion above, it both fits within and extends the existing body of research on Momentum itself, as well as extending the literature and offering specific lines for future inquiry in a number of different fields, including providing empirical evidence in support of developing and extending theory around social movements, political parties, modern UK class dynamics, and identity theory. The specific contributions in these areas will be expounded upon, throughout the course of Chapters 5-10. However, first the methodology of this project will be presented, followed by a discussion of Momentum's historical development under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Perspectives and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In undertaking this project, I have adopted an attitude towards the research that reflects Weber's (1964, p. 29) definition of sociology as a 'science that seeks to interpret social action and thereby provides a causal explanation for its sequencing and effects.' I consider my research fundamentally cross-disciplinary in nature, in that it draws from both social psychology and political sociology, each of which is a hybrid subject in its own right (Miller, 1982). However, combining a number of related disciplines arguably increases the complexity of the basis for the research, and therefore I seek to provide 'coherence for [my] cross-disciplinary efforts' through utilising an 'overarching thought mode [which is] more holistic in intent' (Miller, 1982, p.11). This holistic approach to knowledge generation forms the foundational premise of my research practice, from which the more formal aspects of the project design naturally evolved.

3.2 Theoretical Perspective and Methodology

3.2.1 Epistemology and Ontology

Particularly when studying societal phenomena such as culture and social behaviour, the objects of study are dependent on perspective and constructed meaning. Correspondingly, this project is governed by a social constructionist framework, reflecting a belief that our understanding of societal processes is dependent on our own linguistic constructions, relative worldview and life experiences (Crotty, 1998). Completely overcoming the problem of relativity and cultural bias in definitions and concepts is, despite our best efforts, an unattainable goal, and consequently our linguistic constructions will never be truly objective in the way they describe both the world and human experiences.

However, Critical Realism (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2010) best describes my ontological standpoint and helps to address some philosophical difficulties with social constructionism and interpretivism with which I continue to struggle. Critical realism posits that although there is an entirely constructed social world that is dependent on human thought, action and language for its existence there is also a 'real' world that exists separate from this (Fairclough, 2005). Critical realism seeks to move beyond both positivist realism and interpretivism to offer a practical platform to study social phenomena as independent of any 'particular mind' (i.e. they are 'real') but not independent of 'human minds' (i.e. they are accepted to be linguistically,

culturally or socially constructed) (Gorski, 2013, p. 666). Put another way, I believe that although individuals may conceptualise a social phenomenon differently, and that those conceptions are forever limited by our human nature, there is a multi-faceted truth independent of individual perspectives, that is both real and inherently worthy of study. We can meaningfully strive to improve our understanding of reality, even if it is ultimately beyond our capacity to comprehend it fully.

Finally, Bhaskar himself has an indirect, but personal, connection to Momentum, through his marriage to Hilary Wainwright (Graeber, 2014), an author and researcher who publicly supported Momentum and the Corbyn project (e.g. Wainwright, 2015). His philosophical work has influenced Momentum activists (Bassett Yerrell, 2020), and as such it contributes to the ethnographic examination of Momentum to undertake my investigation in a way that is in synergy with the general worldview held by prominent members.

3.2.2 Theoretical Perspective and Methodology

Although I take inspiration from many theoretical perspectives, the philosophical approach that has had the most influence on this project is that of phenomenology. As Katz and Csordas (2003, pp.284-5) observe, 'phenomenology is a natural perspective for ethnographic research that would probe beneath the locally warranted definitions of a local culture to grasp the active foundations of its everyday reconstruction.' In other words, it provides a perspective congruent with a belief that it is necessary to understand a culture in order to more effectively set it aside and uncover critique or potentially hidden meanings or implications. A distinction is sometimes made between phenomenology as a methodology and as a theoretical perspective (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). In the case of this project, it clearly functions as an overarching philosophical approach, underpinning my ethnographic exploration of Momentum through the eyes of grassroots activists. Furthermore, potential for overlap between phenomenology and grounded theory has been observed, as Wimpenny and Gass (2000) have argued, which is in turn often associated with ethnographic methods (Crotty, 1998). In this way, my theoretical perspective and methodology are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

There is a rich tradition of phenomenological approaches to ethnography, within both sociology and anthropology. In the context of this research, Momentum itself represented an organisation that, at the time and on the face of it, I would have

naturally wished to be part of on the basis of my political and social beliefs and priorities, as well as my own personal background of life experiences. However, I specifically wanted to test these initial perceptions, and the phenomenological practice of 'bracketing' naturally complemented and facilitated this goal (Crotty, 1998). This approach provided a theoretical vehicle for me to challenge my understanding of this culture at the same time as setting my previous conceptions aside in favour of looking at it with fresh eyes.

Similar to the cross-disciplinary position of this research, I have also drawn from a number of different traditions within the field of ethnography. In the first instance, by focusing my investigations on the experiences of grassroots activists, life-world-analytical ethnography best reflects this in that it 'aims to investigate the subjective perspectives - the life-worlds - of other people' (Honer and Hitzler, 2015, p.544). As Honer and Hitzler (pp.548-9) explain, 'in contrast to the phenomenological description of *one's own* [sic] lived experience,' exploration of other people's life-worlds requires a researcher to undergo 'a (temporary) shift in perspective'. However, having previously been immersed in left-wing political culture through the anti-Iraq war movement and trade unionism, I was already familiar with many aspects of the culture that Momentum members operated within. This allowed me to operate both as a 'life-world ethnographer', and also as a 'focused ethnographer' in that I did not need to immerse myself as fully in the culture I was studying because I already possessed prior experience of this. Once the relevance of this prior experience was established through interaction with participants, I was able to gain an understanding of the specific aspects associated with involvement with Momentum in a relatively short period of time (vom Lehn, 2019).

Additionally, key aspects of this research relate to promoting alternative narratives and ideas as well as power relationships, and as such my approach is also influenced by critical ethnography. As Thomas (1993, p.4) explains,

> *conventional ethnography* refers to the tradition of cultural description and analysis that displays meanings by interpreting meanings ... [whereas] *critical ethnography* refers to the reflective process of choosing between conceptual alternatives and making value-laden judgements of meaning and method to challenge research, policy and other forms of human activity.

This approach further compliments the phenomenological aspect of the project by allowing space for challenging the perspectives of interview participants and observational subjects, particularly in relation to certain contradictions that have been uncovered through the course of the research, for example the dissonance between activists' advocacy of democratic principles as compared to the relative lack of internal democracy within Momentum nationally. Indeed, according to Polit and Hungler (cited in Wimpenny and Gass, 2000, p.1487), 'the subjective judgement of the researcher is valuable in phenomenologically based research.' Furthermore, this attitude 'offers a way to ground social critique in lived experience' whilst remaining separate from the subject of study in order to gain fresh perspective, as well as lending itself naturally both to the political nature of the research subject and the status of Momentum as a relatively fringe organisation within the political landscape (Adkins & Gunzenhauser, 1999, p.61).

Although influenced by a number of different ethnographic approaches, the research outlook most akin to my own position is described by Honer and Hitzer (2015, p.556): it 'is characterized by trust in the fact that, ultimately, the researcher himself is his own best instrument, both during data collection and data analysis.' Specifically, through 'observant participation' in the field, the researcher strives to experience the same social phenomena as the participants, and therefore, through critical reflexivity during data analysis, the experiences of the researcher can be considered to both approximate and complement the experiences of the subject(s) of study. A similar attitude towards the researcher's relationship to the data and data analysis is arguably also advocated by other ethnographers (e.g. Foley, 2002). As a result, Honer and Hitzer (2015, p.556) advocate practising the tradition of 'existential sociology' in the field, whilst drawing from 'interpretive sociology' during the subsequent desk-based theoretical analysis. In the context of this research, to many participants I represented a potential supporter and activist, eliciting several attempts to recruit me both to Labour and to Momentum. Critical examination and analysis of these experiences alongside that of data from active Momentum members arguably adds a valuable dimension to the research, particularly in light of the fact that activists were ultimately unable to convince me to commit myself to their organisation. Personal reflection and exploration of the reasons for this led to observations regarding the role of identity and culture in decisions regarding group participation and voting behaviour, in turn leading to theoretical examination of these issues within the literature review and empirical analysis. The focus on reflexivity as a fundamental and central part of research process brings the link between

ethnography and phenomenology full circle, as Honer and Hitzer (2015, p.555) eloquently express:

> The interpretation of data on *one's own lived experience* (i.e. the lived experience of the researcher himself) calls for a *phenomenological* description. The main purpose of the phenomenological description of one's own experiential data is to relate one's own subjective views … as a researcher to other viewpoints present within and outside the field and to reflect on them until such time as they become self-evident as actually experienced in-sights [sic].

I embarked on this ethnographic journey with Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007, p.159) advice, that 'it is almost always a mistake to try to make a whole ethnography conform to just one theoretical framework,' at the forefront of my mind. As such, I avoided delving too deeply into formal ethnographic theory until later on in the project, preferring to let the research develop organically. However, through the course of reading, writing and practice of reflexivity over the course of years, certain theorists' work have emerged as relevant and applicable to both my approach and findings, particularly Bourdieu. This will be explored further in Chapter 10, although a comprehensive application of his theories to my data will of necessity form part of potential future work.

3.3 Research Design, Research Questions, Aim and Objectives

I have sought to understand and analyse Momentum as a social organisation within UK politics, particularly the relationship between Momentum and the Labour Party, but also, to a lesser extent, the wider right-left political divide and these groups' place within the national political discourse. From the outset, my intention was to approach the research from an ethnographic perspective. Data collection would increase my familiarity with and understanding of Momentum as an organisation, both from the perspective of a potential recruit and that of a grassroots supporter, without preconceived notions around exactly what sort of knowledge this would uncover. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.20) observe, it is a 'fact that ethnographic research cannot be programmed', and in this vein I initiated the research process with an initial assumption that '*everything* [sic] is of interest, and that one simply cannot know beforehand what can be classified in the course of the investigation as *not* of (any further) interest and therefore disregarded' (Honer and Hitzler, 2015, p.554). Nevertheless, my aspiration was that analysis of the data would result not only in useful descriptions of experience as a Momentum activist,

but also an opportunity for grounded theorising and contributing to the development of learning points for future social or political action. In the words of Burdick (1995, p. 362), 'we need a vision that allows ethnographic analyses of social movements to be useful to movement organizers themselves.'

Although the research was approached in an open-ended way, my initial attraction to Momentum as an object of study grew from certain identifiable areas of interest, which served as points of departure for the project. As an experienced community activist and former trade union officer with avid interest in local and national politics, it seemed to me that Momentum represented an intriguing mix of activism and party politics. The idea of any organisation believing itself to be a social movement becoming so closely allied to an institution like the Labour Party, which is firmly entrenched in the status quo, seemed to carry with it inherent potential for conflicting agendas and priorities. In this way, the general focus of my investigations centred around the nature of Momentum as a social movement, drawing from movement theory, and the consequent impact on member experience which was anticipated to be distinctly different from the movement activism many recruits to Momentum would have experienced prior to joining. This 'foreshadowed problem' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) served as the main focal point for my investigations and remained a unifying influence throughout the project. Formalising this foreshadowed problem into a set of research questions yielded the following general lines of inquiry:

- How closely does Momentum represent a social movement?
- What was it like for activists participating in Momentum-endorsed activities, considering the potential counterpoint between movement and political party?
- With particular reference to political engagement and democracy, what can an analysis of Momentum tell us about potential positive and negative consequences of social movements becoming closely intertwined with political parties?

As the project progressed and my understanding of and familiarity with Momentum as an organisation grew, the inquiry gravitated towards an exploration of Momentum's collective identity and organisational nature, how this affected both activists' individual experiences of the group and the perception of Momentum both within and outside of the Labour Party, and how these factors impacted on

Momentum's public reputation and relationship with other groups. The following aim and objectives grew organically out of a synthesis between my initial research questions and the preliminary findings from early analysis undertaken during the course of data collection:

Aim

To critically evaluate the relationship between Momentum, the British Labour Party and the wider UK electorate, through the lens of activists' lived experiences.

Objectives

1. To describe and model Momentum's development as an organisation during Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.
2. To analyse Momentum's social movement character and relationship with the Labour Party within the context of the British parliamentary system.
3. To develop a critical understanding of left-wing activist culture as based on the experiences of grassroots activists and supporters within Momentum.
4. To assess Momentum's emerging legacy within the Labour Party and UK politics, with particular emphasis on the experiences of grassroots activists and widening political and democratic engagement.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Introduction

Three different sets of data were collected as part of this project: 1) semi-structured interviews with Momentum and Labour Party members (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009); 2) participant observations at both local and national events linked to Momentum (Spradley, 1980); and 3) documentary evidence in the form of website and social media content, emails, and meeting minutes, as well as relevant books and articles published by authors who publicly associated themselves with Momentum. Collecting data from a wide variety of sources also supports triangulation which improves the reliability and validity of the research findings, as does comparison with data generated from other contemporary research. These data collection methods represent a standard approach to ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Through necessity, a defined time period was set for the scope of the project which in turn governed the period of data collection in the field. This period began with Corbyn's first leadership campaign in 2015, when the foundations for Momentum were first established, and ended with Corbyn's announcement that

he would step down as leader following GE2019. Documentary data in the form of relevant publications and contemporary news articles, as well as minutes, blogs and other accounts from Momentum activists were primarily relied upon to represent the period from 2015 until the start of this PhD study, although triangulation with other academic research and interview data was possible in many areas. Following ethical approval in spring 2018, fieldwork in the form of participant observations and interviews commenced, which continued until the end of the defined research period, and active gathering of documentary data continued until early 2020.

3.4.2 Selecting Settings and Cases

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 32), define a setting as 'a named context in which phenomena occur that might be studied from any number of different angles; a case is those phenomena seen from one particular angle.' As is frequently the case in ethnographic studies, selecting the site(s) or setting(s) for the research requires balancing research goals with pragmatic practical considerations. Sometimes, risks must be taken on investigating settings involving making a calculated guess that it will result in relevant data; other times additional settings may be included to supplement or follow emerging lines of inquiry partway into the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

In this project, selecting settings was relatively straightforward. Choosing to focus on grassroots activist experiences meant that access to local branches would be required. I am reliant on public transport without access to a large enough budget to fund long distance travel or overnight accommodation, so it was necessary to prioritise branches in Merseyside and the wider North West region, close to my home in Liverpool. One particular branch was especially interested in contributing to the project, and as a result I was invited to a number of local events. This branch effectively self-selected as the main setting for my local participant observations. Unlike other researchers on Momentum, such as Bassett Yerrell (2020), I did not have a priori connections and networks within the organisation or the Labour Party. However, the strength of this position is that my research provides a unique perspective compared to existing research and also retains a degree of objectivity and reflective scepticism that is arguably lost when deeply immersed in a setting, as well as making the phenomenological process of bracketing more straightforward and achievable. As discussed previously, however, I was already familiar with wider left-wing activist culture which provided an important foundation for the research.

Other settings were accessed to provide a broader view of what grassroots Momentum members might experience during the course of their involvement with the organisation, in aid of the 'life-world' aspect of the project (Honer and Hitzer, 2015), and I attended different large public events supported and endorsed by Momentum such as rallies and The World Transformed conference. Fortuitously, GE2019 was called during my data collection period, and I seized the opportunity to participate in many of Momentum's online campaign events, providing an insight both into what activities members were being asked to undertake and certain aspects of the culture within the National Office which organised and hosted these events. Selection of settings was allowed to develop organically over the project, at the same time as following a general strategy aimed at fulfilling my research goals.

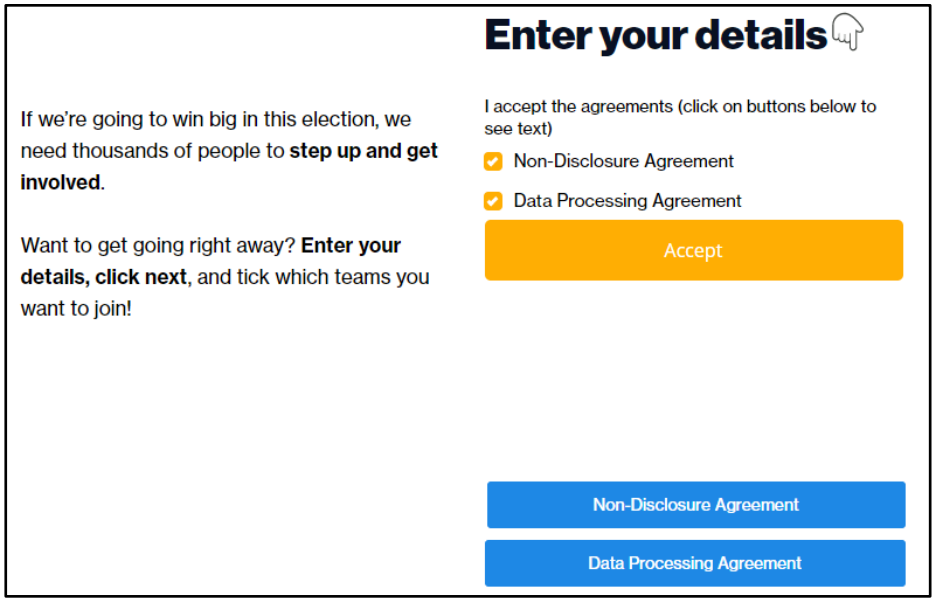
3.4.3 Access and Field Relations

Negotiating access to settings is one of the first hurdles to overcome in ethnographic data collection. The primary anticipated challenge for this research related to my decision not to become a full member of Momentum, which put me in what could have been a significantly different position than insider researchers such as Bassett Yerrell (2020) or Rhodes (2019). However, as elaborated on below, at no point did this present a barrier to participation in any of the events I selected for observation. To negotiate access for interviews and participant observations, a dual-track approach was taken in the first instance. An initial list of three individuals known to myself and my supervisory team were contacted and invited to participate as interviewees. At the same time, exploratory emails were sent to the general email addresses for local Momentum branches introducing my research and inquiring whether there were any members that might be interested in contributing to the project. Through networking that took place during the recruitment of interviewees, rapport with one particular local branch was cultivated, resulting in invitations to locally organised activities. Some participants were particularly interested in my project, and additional email exchanges took place, resulting in two-way knowledge and information sharing as well as discussion of current events and theory. In this way, relationships with local Momentum branches and activists were maintained throughout data collection.

Attendance at rallies and The World Transformed did not pose the same challenges as accessing local Momentum events. These events were in principle open to anyone, with access requirements ranging from purchasing a ticket, to registering interest using an email address, to simply turning up to a public venue on the day.

As a registered supporter, I was in regular receipt of emails informing me of upcoming events that were officially endorsed and promoted by Momentum as an organisation. The final type of participant observations took place during GE2019 and involved being part of Momentum's online campaign activities, which I was invited to by email. Surprisingly, there was no membership requirement to attend conference calls or volunteer with online campaign tasks, and organisers freely admitted their overriding interest was in generating large numbers of volunteers and that the risk of "*spies*" infiltrating their activities was a price they were willing to pay (fieldnotes, 15 November 2019). The only formal requirement, relating to actually volunteering on Momentum's Research Team, was electronically signing an agreement to abide by General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and a Non-Disclosure Agreement:

Image 1: Screenshot of Electronic Agreements



The Non-Disclosure Agreement related to confidential information, trade secrets, names of employees, details of strategy and other plans, and other standard content. Through anonymisation and considering the fact that the election campaign was concluded years ago, I am comfortable that I have not breached this agreement. Again, I was invited to all these events and activities despite not being a full member of either Momentum or the Labour Party, without any vetting or other process, and therefore consider them to be essentially public events; in theory, anyone could have participated simply by registering their email address and signing the agreements. In fact, the organising calls that I attended during GE2019 were explicitly described as 'public' by Momentum itself (Momentum, 2019b, p. 4).

Additionally, many of The World Transformed events and election campaign calls were recorded by the organisers and subsequently posted on YouTube or other public forum.

3.4.4 Interviews

Interviews took place between August 2018 and October 2019. Participant recruitment began with approaching a small number of individuals known to myself and my supervisory team. Other participants were recruited using a combination of self-selection and snowball sampling methods, beginning with exploratory emails to the generic emails for local Momentum branches; this approach can be especially useful for addressing potential barriers in terms of access (Seale and Filmer, 1998), which I faced through my decision not to become a full and active member of Momentum. All positive responses were pursued, and several participants identified others they believed would be interested in participating. In summer 2021, follow-up emails were sent to the participants inviting them to briefly share their experiences of the GE2019 campaign and to confirm whether they were still active members of Momentum or the Labour Party. Altogether, twelve initial interviews took place, and there is approximately 10.5 hours of audio interview data and over 100,000 words of transcription and notes. A table of pseudonyms, interview dates and participant biographies are in the Appendix.

The interviews were loosely structured to ensure that participants remained generally on topic, but were not unduly restricted in covering topics they personally considered to be relevant and important. Consistent guide questions were prepared based on the research aims and political debates relevant at the time of data collection, and were referred to at each interview to ensure that each participant was given opportunity to contribute on each topic. Effort was made to ensure that the interviews were both dialogic and open in nature (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). However, in pursuit of the sort of experiential data as discussed by Honer and Hitzler (2015), in practice the interviews were treated in some ways almost as a ‘deep hanging out’ with the participants and this meant the format of the interviews was often more akin to informal conversations between activists (Boswell, et al., 2019, p. 58).

3.4.5 Participant Observations

Alongside the interviews, participant observations (Spradley, 1980) were also conducted over the course of approximately 18 months, between spring 2018 and

winter 2019, including a local political education event, The World Transformed 2018 (Liverpool), a grassroots video recording session in preparation for 2019 general election campaigning, two rallies in Liverpool and many online observations of Momentum's activity during and immediately following the General Election campaign in Nov-Dec 2019. These latter observations consisted mainly of internet conference calls conducted by Momentum and the Labour Party using Zoom, alongside volunteering I undertook through Momentum's online research team. Screenshots, audio recordings, observation notes, email notifications and chat box content were collected during this time. A table detailing the events attended and activities undertaken can be found in the Appendix.

3.4.6 Documentary Data

Throughout the period of data collection I was also a registered subscriber to email communications from both Momentum and the Labour Party and have retained these emails as data as well as various publications from Momentum, National Coordinating Group minutes and other publicly available documents. This material has been used to support and triangulate the analysis of the primary interview and observation data, but also represents a valuable resource for future study and analysis in its own right. A summary of the documentary material collected is provided in the Appendix. A decision was made to exclude Facebook, Twitter and other social media content, primarily because of my qualitative focus. Furthermore, as a non-user of social media I lack knowledge and experience of the online social media culture, and subscribing to and participating within these platforms also represented an intrusive and unwanted change in my personal lifestyle. The large volume of data this project has generated without the inclusion of social media also helps justify this decision, and specific research around Momentum's use of social media during the research period could form the basis for future research.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

As the project involved both participant observations and interviews with activists, ethical approval for Research with Human Participants was sought and received from Liverpool Hope University in spring 2018. There were not considered to be any particular issues around power relations, as I was not a full member of any of the local Momentum groups and as such the groups held power over my access to events. Individuals were not subject to any undue pressure to participate resulting from either prior work-related or personal relationships with the researcher.

Initial interview participants were self-selecting via volunteering through relevant organisational contact(s). Subsequent interview participants were approached either individually through contacts made in the course of observations and other data collection, via facilitation from local Momentum groups or on recommendation from other participants, and were provided with full information on the research project before the interview to inform decisions regarding their participation. Participants were asked to complete a consent form prior to data collection, including ensuring they were aware of their right to withdraw at any time. Interview participants were informed of the intended process of anonymisation to protect identity. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to protect anonymity and are used throughout this paper. Additionally, other potentially identifying information, such as precise locations of local branches and names of other local activists, has been omitted.

For observations, it was not feasible to provide advanced notice of planned observation of locally organised events to every participant due to open attendance arrangements. Nor was it practical to attain signed consent forms without undue interference in the activities being undertaken. With permission from the local Momentum organisers of the events, in these cases I made myself and my research known and ensured that participants felt comfortable asking for more information, or for me to leave if they did not wish to be observed. In all cases, activists were content to allow me to participate in the events and make general and anonymous observations. Other participant observations were undertaken at very large group events, such as The World Transformed, rallies or internet conference calls, where it was entirely impossible to make my presence as a researcher known in order to obtain consent. As described above, participation in these events was at best very loosely restricted; therefore they were considered essentially public events, but care was taken to ensure observations were general in nature and entirely anonymised except where referring to public speakers such as at TWT.

3.6 Data Analysis

This project can be broadly considered as qualitative research; the large majority of the discussion and analysis relies on qualitative data, with quantitative elements utilised occasionally to support and extend the analysis. Reflecting traditions within the field of ethnography, data analysis was not viewed as an isolated activity, but rather an ongoing and iterative process (e.g. Spradley, 1980), beginning even before the first interviews and observations (Walsh, 1998). For instance, a general analysis of current themes on a societal level, which contributed to the broader

context for Momentum's operation, informed choices regarding interview guide questions. Throughout data collection, information was examined for dominant themes and coded accordingly, with these themes and codes refined periodically as the data set grew. I immersed myself in the interview transcripts, aided greatly by the decision to transcribe the audio recordings myself, which forced me to consider them slowly over time, on a word-for-word basis, with an opportunity to refine my perception of the delivery and context of the content. As the focus for this project was the experiences of grassroots activists, significant weight was given to what the interviewees considered important, even when this deviated from the anticipated issues identified before data collection commenced (see Chapter 7). In terms of actual process, the following standard three-part approach was utilised (Attride-Stirling, 2001):

1. Reduction or breakdown of text, involving coding the material and identifying themes;
2. Exploration of the text, involving describing and exploring relationships between the themes; and
3. Interpreting patterns, involving linking data to existing theory and returning to the original research questions to provide answers grounded in the data.

The nature of ethnographic research is such that rich and sometimes vast sets of data are generated, and these data are sited in contexts that are influenced by potential bias arising from different perspectives. The main strategy for dealing with the issues of reliability and validity for this project was through the process of triangulation (Walsh, 1998), that is, 'checking [the] inferences drawn from one set of data sources by collecting data from others' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.183). Data from interviews, participant observations, and documentary data such as emails, websites, etc. were compared and contrasted, and tested for contradictions. Written content from high profile personalities who publicly supported Momentum, such as journalist Owen Jones and author Hilary Wainwright, was also treated as data in the sense that it offered insight into the culture and worldview of the organisation and its members on a wider level. Equally, research on groups from different sides of the political spectrum, particularly that by Winlow, et al. (2017) and Payne (2021), was compared to activists' accounts of encounters and experiences whilst doorstep canvassing. These data, and data from other research on Momentum, especially Bassett Yerrell (2020), were used as points of comparison to aid in building a picture of Momentum from multiple perspectives, and to establish

both the reliability of this project's interview and observational data and the validity of the findings.

However, as explained above, the dominant guiding principle throughout data analysis was one of reflexivity. In practice, this meant occupying a dual role as an ethnographer, acting as both a 'native' in the field and a reflective researcher during constant ongoing data analysis taking place both between and following interviews and participant observations. Through this dual role and conscientious practice of critical reflexivity, I have attempted to emulate Honer and Hitzler's (2015, p. 556) aim to develop an 'understanding, at least approximately, [of] the (inside) view of normal participants in sociocultural events and [make] it understandable to (nonparticipant) others.'

3.7 Concluding Remarks

A significant amount of time and energy was spent in considering the data reflexively in order to attempt to address the potential for bias in my perspective and interpretation of the data. As part of the triangulation described above, a process more akin to 'reflexive triangulation' (Walsh, 1998, p. 231) was used to move towards establishing plausibility in my interpretation of the data, which in turn contributes to establishing confidence in my findings. For instance, some conclusions and observations I make in my analysis have arisen from the exercise of sociological imagination (Wright Mills, 1959), drawing from my experience of being part of a family with a strong traditional working class background and prior employment working with disadvantaged families in East Lancashire. In essence, in addition to triangulating my data with other contemporary sources and directly related data sets, I have also attempted to assess my data in the context of general observations of society as gathered throughout my life, ensuring that at every stage I have reflexively tested the applicability and congruence of my current findings in wider contexts. Indeed, this is deeply related to Honer and Hitzler's concept of 'observant participation' and the aim of producing both 'observation data *and* data on lived experience' (2015, p. 552); that is, 'the data of the researcher's own experience in the field … make[s] a special contribution to the interpretive description and descriptive understanding of the life-worlds of other people' (p. 553). However, throughout this research I was conscious of my belief that although we may increase our understanding of societal phenomena and human social behaviour through research, it is a process of inching ever closer to an ultimately unattainable 'truth'. In Walsh's (1998, p.232) words, I hold the 'view that reality can

be taken as independent of the claims researchers make about it.' Through remaining both sympathetic to and sceptical of Momentum throughout this research, I have attempted to uncover a picture of the organisation and the experiences of its activists that it is hoped may prove useful in both assessing the legacy and impact of Momentum and informing or analysing future attempts at political change.

Chapter 4: The Development of Momentum

4.1 Introduction

As will be elaborated on below, Momentum itself grew from the campaign *Jeremy for Leader,* established by Labour veteran Jon Lansman to support Jeremy Corbyn's bid for the Labour leadership in summer 2015. Although there are other, more historically long-standing groups of left-leaning Labour members and politicians, Momentum represents a significant development due to its appeal to so many individuals previously unaffiliated with Labour and, correspondingly, its unprecedented large membership and supporter base. This, along with links to the Leader's Office through Corbyn, supported the swift rise of its relative influence within the party. Momentum attracted activists from across the political left, including from the UK Green Party, social movements like Stop the War and Occupy amongst others, as well as from Marxist and socialist groups like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty (AWL), and many others who were unfamiliar with politics but inspired by the prospect of change that Corbyn represented. These activists were eventually brought into the Labour Party fold, and Momentum established itself as an organised collective, primarily functioning to support Corbyn's leadership (Jewell, 2023).

As Labour activist and author, Margaret Stewart (1974, p.8), observed, 'the trouble about writing about contemporary events is to know when to stop.' However, when a general election was called earlier than expected in 2019, it was decided that, irrespective of Corbyn's personal position, this would represent a natural endpoint for the project. When the result was announced along with the resignation of Corbyn as Labour leader the basis of this decision was strengthened. Therefore, the discussion of Momentum pre-2018 is primarily drawn from primary, secondary and grey literature on Momentum, whereas 2018 to early 2020 is additionally supported by my own empirical data. However, a significant portion of the literature relied upon is written either by Momentum activists, members, affiliated politicians or other academics and journalists who deliberately and publicly associated themselves with the organisation during the period under study. Therefore, I have treated material produced by these Momentum-connected authors as data in its own right, in that it contributes directly to the understanding of Momentum through the eyes of its members and supporters.

This chapter will begin with an overview of the political and social context influencing the establishment and development of Momentum before moving on to a broadly chronological outline of Momentum's organisational evolution under Corbyn's leadership. An examination of Momentum's organisational nature will be presented, including its internal structures and general politics, as well as its relationship to other Labour Party groups. Momentum's function and purpose during Corbyn's leadership will be discussed, particularly during the period from spring 2018 until Corbyn's resignation as leader which was covered by the project's empirical data. The primary purpose of this chapter will be to establish a more structural understanding of Momentum and its position within the wider political and social landscape, providing important context and foundation for the forthcoming analysis.

4.2 Political and Social Context

4.2.1 Introduction

Although historical context is important to understanding the present, my background is not in history as a discipline, and there are many existing accounts of the history of the Labour Party. Murray (2022), for example, offers a particularly useful explanation of where Corbyn and Corbynism fit within the wider historical context of British politics and Labour. As such, this section will briefly touch on the few specific aspects of political and social context that relate directly to this research and data. First a general outline of the influence of Bennism, the wider Labour Left and other recent social movements will be presented, followed by short discussions around the trend of movementisation within Labour and Corbynism to provide a general picture of the political and social backdrop for the development of Momentum as an organisation.

4.2.2 Bennism, the Labour Left and Social Movements

A prominent figure on the Labour Left and within the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD), Tony Benn is widely regarded as Corbyn's ideological predecessor (e.g. Bennister, et al., 2017), and Corbyn's admiration and support of Benn's politics is well established. For example, one ally reportedly suggested that 'Jeremy won't do anything that he doesn't think Tony would have done' (Eaton, 2018, n.p.). Corbyn's own politics were in many ways shaped by Benn's influence, especially through his support of and involvement in the CLPD and Benn's organising on the Labour Left during his early career in the 1980s and '90s (Eaton, 2018; Nunns, 2018; Pogrund and Maguire, 2020; Wainwright, 2019). In particular, Benn's political ideology was characterised by a strong anti-elitist sentiment, a belief

in the value of active cooperation with extra-Parliamentary movements, and a driving motivation for the rebalancing of wealth and power within the UK (Hannah, 2018; Wainwright, 2014). This is in turn embraced by many Momentum members, who publicly and explicitly support the legacy of Benn's politics (fieldnotes, 18 March 2018). Benn was also a keen proponent of popular democracy, fighting for reforms within the Labour Party, and was deeply committed to socialist principles, workers' rights and promoting political education (Wainwright, 2014). Corbyn's close collaboration with Benn continued into the 21st century, with both becoming heavily involved with the Stop the War Coalition, which they and others co-founded following the 9/11 attacks, until Benn's death in 2014 (Kogan, 2019). Corbyn's leadership is regularly framed in comparison with Benn's unsuccessful bid for deputy leadership in 1981 (e.g. Wainwright, 2018b).

The landscape of the political left wing in the UK during the early 2000s, immediately preceding the establishment of Momentum, was arguably shaped in large part through a counterpoint with Blair's leadership and New Labour agenda alongside globally significant events, resulting in a number of high profile but ultimately unsuccessful movements. Left-wing activists both within and outside Labour viewed New Labour with, at the least, extreme suspicion and often virulent hostility, many believing it to be a crudely disguised continuation of neoliberal Thatcherism, as expressed by many speakers and fellow attendees at the events I observed. They see a clear movement away from nationalisation under Blair, as evidenced through the revisions to Clause Four and the controversial Private Finance Initiative (PFI) programme that saw many public buildings like hospitals and schools move from public to private ownership. This privatisation drive represented for many a decisive break with the socialist traditions they believed Labour possessed. The internal factional organisation, Progress (later Progressive Britain) was established under Blair to support his leadership and the general ethos of New Labour, and Momentum members identified this group as a key rival as it promoted what members perceived as the Party's move away from socialism and more left-leaning politics (e.g. Grace, Padraig, Robert, Simon). As a result of this perception, many left-wing activists reported leaving Labour during Blair's leadership. The legacy of Thatcherism and the shift in discourse under New Labour is multifaceted and has been examined in detail by many authors and academics. However, in terms of the relevance to Momentum activists, many members with a longer history on the Labour Left felt they spent the period from the 1990s until Corbyn's dramatic rise to Leader of the Labour Party in the 'wilderness' (e.g. Eaton, 2016) or "*desert*"

(Robert). For members with this perception, it is therefore unsurprising the importance placed on it being "*ok to talk about socialism again*" under Corbyn's leadership (Emma). Murray (2020, p. 169), a senior member of Corbyn's advisory team, echoes the belief common amongst Momentum members that 'essentially almost the whole PLP' was politically situated to the right of Corbyn, which is often extended to suggest that the majority of the PLP is on the relative right of the party. Additionally, I have observed that more experienced members often took on a role instructing newer or younger members in Labour history from their perspective, and in this way, regardless of the veracity of their claims, these perspectives have formed the dominant narratives within the networks that informed this project. Investigating the relationship between these perceptions and more rigorous historical accounts of the Labour Party's history could form the basis for future research.

The first notable movement in the UK post-2000 centred around the Stop the War Coalition, co-founded by Corbyn and other prominent leftist figures, as mentioned above, in support of protest against the proposed invasion of Iraq (Stop the War Coalition, 2023a). Indeed, Blair's committed support of the United States' military action in the Middle East and stubborn refusal to bow to public pressure over the issue represented a watershed moment for many on the Labour Left (e.g. Dan, Emma, Robert), even if Corbyn himself remained loyal to the Party. Organisers claimed a crowd of up to 2 million people gathered in London in 2003 to protest the imminent American invasion of Iraq and Britain's support of it, but activists were unable to influence UK government policy. Following this, Stop the War has continued to organise amongst the left, moving on to other causes such as Palestinian rights, dissent over the bombing of Syria in 2013, opposition to the Saudi invasion of Yemen, and other issues around international peace (Stop the War Coalition, 2023a). For many contemporary left wing activists, myself included, this was the first formative foray into the arena of politics and protest. Although Corbyn stepped down as its chair at the Stop the War Annual Conference in September 2015 shortly after becoming Labour Leader (Stop the War Coalition, 2023b), his reputation amongst left wing circles through this iconic organisation undoubtedly attracted support during his leadership elections.

The Conservative-Liberal coalition government's austerity programme in response to the 2008 financial crash provided impetus for the next notable series of movements on the British left wing. Amongst the most prominent was the Occupy

movement; although it began in the United States as Occupy Wall Street, the movement arose out of the international context of the Spanish *indignados* and the Arab Spring, and had iterations in many different cities across the globe including London (Bates, et al., 2016; Halvorsen, 2012). The movement's tactics centred around peaceful, but physical, occupation of significant sites relating to the global financial system, calling for an alternative to globalisation and a shift of the balance of power away from the global elite, 'the 1%', back to ordinary citizens, 'the 99%' (Bates, et al., 2016). Grassroots Occupy activists were exposed to an increased utilisation of social media as an organising tool, and direct forms of action beyond that of the traditional street protest marches that were favoured by the Stop the War movement previously. Some have argued the anti-austerity movement had 'found a home' in Momentum and Labour under Corbyn (e.g. Darling, 2023, n.p.) and there are some striking similarities in rhetoric, such as reference to 'the 1 per cent' (e.g. Schneider, 2016, p.15). However, although many members may have been recruited to Momentum from anti-austerity groups, the collective identity expressed at Momentum events and through its communications moved far beyond a single-issue movement.

Elsewhere in Europe, anti-austerity movements gained far greater traction than in the UK, and some developed into movement parties in their own right, securing elected positions particularly in countries such as Spain (Podemos) and Greece (SYRIZA) (Prentoulis and Thomassen, 2017) as part of the wider strategy to achieve their movement goals (Kruszewska, 2016). Left- wing activists in the UK took keen interest in these parties and cultivated links with European movement parties, nationally through The World Transformed conference and locally through invitations to European comrades to speak at political education events (e.g. Olivia; The World Transformed, 2018). Experience, strategy and tactics were shared, resulting in many similarities in activity, particularly around the use of digital tools and technology (e.g. Deseriis, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2019). Despite often remaining on the political fringes, collectively these parties and movements are also generally considered 'populist' in nature (Dyer-Witheford, 2020). In addition to comrades within Europe, activists also cultivated links with American campaigners who shared experience gained through Bernie Sanders's two highly publicised but unsuccessful bids to become the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 2016 and 2020 (Klug and Rees, 2018), inviting prominent activists to speak at training and other events both locally and nationally (Bassett Yerrell, 2020). As a result of their shared context, networks and tactics, Momentum is regularly discussed in comparison to

these international movements and movement parties, and as argued in the previous chapter, this has supported descriptions as a movement party or movement-hybrid in its own right.

4.2.3 Movementisation within Labour

Apart from Clause Four and the issue of nationalisation as a policy position within Labour, another main point of contention between the left and right of the Party centred around the relationship between Labour and social movements. Despite the party's roots in the trade union and workers' rights movements, it has frequently been presented as the traditional purview of the left wing of Labour to promote engagement with extra-Parliamentary movements (e.g. Lent, 2001). This was a key tenet in Bennism, and forms an important influence in Corbyn's politics as well. However, the recent trend towards movementisation as a tactic to connect with the electorate began before Corbyn and Momentum, with Movement for Change (M4C) which was established by David Miliband during his ultimately unsuccessful leadership contest in 2010 (Scott and Wills, 2017). This trend is inextricably linked to the practice of community organising, with community organising providing the primary vehicle for movementisation.

Although the politics of M4C were New Labour in character, its function, focus and programme of activity bears many similarities with Momentum. Indeed, other authors have noted common ground between the different factions within Labour, so in some ways it is not surprising that certain tendencies should appear on different sides of the intra-Party debate. For instance, Pike (2017) argues that in fact the recent shift towards movementisation that began with M4C and continued with Momentum could represent an opportunity for increased cooperation between factions through a push for doctrinal renewal and a reconnection with both the grassroots and wider electorate. Despite its foundation in the Blairite wing of the Party, M4C also recognised the potential value of outside movements and campaigns as a response to 'declining levels of membership, participation and electoral support' in the wake of Labour's GE2010 defeat (Scott and Wills, 2017, p. 123). Interestingly, like Momentum, M4C drew from events in the United States, in their case Barack Obama's utilisation of his community organising background during his first presidential campaign providing inspiration (Scott and Wills, 2017). Indeed, M4C also apparently struggled with similar questions around the relative value of extra-Party organising versus pursuing change and reform from the inside, and conducted voter-engagement experiments using '121' meetings (Scott, 2015, p.

118) which were in character remarkably similar to Momentum's practice of 'deep canvassing' (Ben; Alex) or 'persuasive conversations' (Klug and Rees, 2018, p. 56; see Chapter 5). Other authors have also noted points of comparison between these organisations, including the use of cutting edge technological tools and general approach to organising (Avril, 2018). Indeed, apart from Momentum's public commitment to socialist principles, the primary point of contrast between the two organisations appears to be the relative lack of media profile enjoyed by M4C; this is likely largely due to its founder, David Miliband's, unsuccessful bid for the Labour leadership, consequently lower overall membership and activity levels and Labour's subsequent poor performance at GE2015, after which M4C was disbanded (Scott and Wills, 2017).

There is also a wider context of appealing to the electorate through reference to social movements. As shown through the appeal of UKIP as a mainstream political vanguard of the anti-EU movement (Ford and Goodwin, 2014), it is not limited to the left wing or to Labour, and there are countless examples of movement-related language being used across the historical and political spectrum. During Tony Blair's first speech as Labour Leader in 1994, he painted a picture of the Party as a 'living movement' (Blair, 1994, n.p.). In 2005, Shadow Education Secretary David Cameron talked of forming a 'national movement' that should be 'relevant and inspiring' to young people (Cameron, 2005, n.p.), and later, as Conservative Party Leader, he invited the Liberal Democrats to join his 'national movement' (Wheeler, 2009, n.p.). Progress (2018, n.p.) describe themselves as a 'movement of centre-left Labour Party members and supporters', and even Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson appealed to the public to get their covid booster jabs by calling for people to 'join the movement' (Boyd, 2022, n.p.). In this respect, Momentum arguably represents a direct historical continuation from pre-existing trends within the Party, and indeed rhetorical tendencies within UK politics more generally, rather than the evolutionary leap it is sometimes considered to be. However, the recent trend of movementisation within Labour remains important context for the development of Momentum, and complements the deeply held belief in the role of extra-Parliamentary organising that Corbyn and Momentum promoted within the Party.

4.2.4 Jeremy Corbyn and 'Corbynism'

In the context of all of this Jeremy Corbyn built and grew his Parliamentary career; he was first elected in 1983, and, despite his loss of the Labour whip in 2020, was continuing to serve as MP for Islington North at the time of writing. As central to

Momentum's genesis, his politics, personality and professional practice have significantly influenced the group and its public reputation. In terms of research and authorship, Corbyn and Corbynism are much more widely discussed topics than Momentum itself, and there is already a notable body of work covering these areas; therefore, this section will summarise some of the main points relevant to understanding Corbyn's practical influence on Momentum as an organisation, offering a brief analysis of what 'Corbynism' actually is according to activists and academics. However, Momentum has repeatedly been held up as a key manifestation of Corbynism, and research observations and interviews with Momentum members have been used as primary underpinning for academic analyses of Corbynism itself (e.g. Bassett Yerrell, 2020; Maiguashca and Dean, 2019).

As will be elaborated on below, Momentum was established by Jon Lansman to support Corbyn's first leadership campaign in 2015. At a basic level, Corbyn's politics, and those of his close allies, were fundamentally influenced by Bennism and the CLPD, although Corbyn was also personally active in support of other international causes in addition to his involvement with Stop the War. This chimed with many grassroots activists and directly contributed to the recruitment of members to Momentum from left wing movements in the UK, although the difference in perspective between movement activists and supporters from within Labour formed the basis of internal factional conflict within Momentum (see Section 4.3.3). Despite his remaining in the Labour Party throughout Blair's premiership, Corbyn is regularly praised for his integrity and commitment to principles in opposing the Iraq War and voting against the government repeatedly during this period over issues important to left wing grassroots activists (e.g. fieldnotes, 26 July 2019). Momentum was initially established with the sole purpose of supporting Corbyn's leadership, and as such he was always personally central to the organisation's goals; this theme will return many times in this thesis. However, this relationship also manifested in a close two-way link between the Leader of the Opposition (LOTO) office and Momentum's National Office (see Sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2 below), and consequently contributed to the higher profile of Momentum in the news media. As one activist put it, Momentum "*exists to be the spokesman [sic] of the Leader's Office. [We] would not want to contradict*" (Catherine).

As a result of his position as Labour Leader, Corbyn's personal profile rose considerably, both politically and within the media. However, arguably, the contrast

between his personal politics and the dominant ideology within the PLP helped give rise to a desire to define, understand and study 'Corbynism'. Some authors occasionally appear to treat 'Corbyn' and 'Corbynism' synonymously (e.g. Gilbert, 2017; Perryman, 2017), or seem to view Corbynism simply as the political support of Corbyn as Labour Leader as opposed to an ideology in itself (e.g. Seymour, 2017a). Others display a tendency to personify the concept of Corbynism. For example, Gilbert (2017, p. 52) suggests Corbynism has 'to decide what it wants'; Burton-Cartledge (2017, p. 175) recommends that 'Corbynism must exercise an informed vigilance over its limitations as a class project'; and Bassett Yerrell (2020, p.30) observes 'differences … between what the Corbyn movement intended to do, or what the Corbyn movement said it did, and what it did in practice.' This in itself could provide the basis for an interesting discourse analysis. Bolton and Pitts (2018a, 2018b) offer a lengthy, critical appraisal of Corbynism, comparing it to the political philosophy of Blue Labour. They argue that many fundamental tenets of these schools of thought overlap, and consequently neither hold the key to uniting the Party. However, prominent figures within Blue Labour disagree with their assessment and further argue Corbynism is not coherent enough to analyse in its own right (Rutherford and Glasman, 2019).

Other writers have provided more concise definitions of what Corbynism is, and it is worth presenting some of them here to illustrate the breadth of understandings around the concept:

> 'Corbynism is best understood as the name for a period of left unity … Corbynism sutured together unlikely allies on the fragmented left within the Labour Party' (Forrester, 2021, p. 904).

> 'Corbynism … was woven together from many disparate strands. … Corbyn provided [a] focus.' However, 'Corbynism itself was an unstable coalition of older political activists and younger supporters radicalised by student, anti-austerity, climate and tax justice movements' (Jones, 2020).

> 'Corbynism is the promise of a Nordic welfare state in a neoliberal economy' (Mason, 2017, p. xii).

> 'Corbynism invokes a politics aimed at redistributing wealth, at lessening inequalities' (Littler, 2017, p. 202)

> ‘Corbynism is a movement’ (Blackburn, 2018, n.p.).
>
> Corbynism is ‘the movement to support Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party between 2015 and 2020’ (Gilbert, 2021, p. 879).

Some describe Corbynism through the invocation of the work of Labour activist Stuart Hall, arguing that ‘Corbynism is a political movement comparable to the sense in which [Hall] famously diagnosed Thatcherism’ (Bassett Yerrell, 2020, p.6; see also Perryman, 2017, p.31). Burton-Cartledge (2017, pp.174-5) appears to suggest that Corbynism is essentially ‘Corbyn’s message’, and that by extension ‘Corbynism itself is internationalist and opposed to nationalism and racism;’ he goes on to claim that ‘Corbynism is therefore a dialogue, a great feedback loop that draws from the thoughts and talent of all to remould and remake the social.’

This tendency to ascribe all of one’s political and ethical aspirations to Corbynism is echoed by activists, who often seem to pour all of their political beliefs and desires into what it means to follow Corbyn, and therefore be part of Momentum. Indeed, as a former member of Momentum’s original National Committee commented, ‘Momentum was more of an idea than anything. This meant that the organisation quickly became all things to all people’ (Shanly, 2020, n.p.). However, when pressed as to what the purpose of Momentum is, many participants responded with simple statements such as “*to achieve a socialist Labour government [led] by Jeremy Corbyn*” (Padraig; see also Chapter 7). Equally, the internationalism central to Corbyn’s politics and personal activism was shared by most participants, and this perspective permeated all of the events that were observed as part of this project. Klug and Rees (2018, p. 50), former Momentum National Coordinators, wrote of the centrality of ‘an international approach’ to organising. The importance of internationalism to Momentum members will be revisited in subsequent chapters, in relation to activists’ interactions with the electorate, Momentum’s national reputation amongst voters and links to explanations for the Labour’s poor performance in GE2019.

4.3 Corbyn’s Momentum

4.3.1 Introduction

In its own words, Momentum is a ‘grassroots organisation that evolved out of Jeremy Corbyn’s 2015 Labour Leadership campaign’ (Momentum, 2017a, n.p.) and as such, although Momentum is legally separate from the Labour Party, this has

meant that it never operated in isolation from the Labour Party, or indeed from Corbyn until his departure as leader in 2020. For some, Corbyn's centrality to their activism has persisted even beyond his loss of the Labour whip in late 2020 (Elgot, 2020). The character, identity and function of Momentum within the UK political landscape is still evolving, but at a basic level Momentum's existence as an organisation is inextricably linked to Corbyn, specifically in regards to his position as Labour Leader. This link manifested in different ways over the course of the development of both Momentum and Corbyn's leadership, not least in references to Momentum as Corbyn's 'private army' (Wilby, 2016, n.p.) or 'praetorian guard' (Ward and Guglielmo, 2021, p.2). My observations during this research also supports this possessive relationship between Corbyn and Momentum (Jewell, 2023). Many accounts of Corbyn's biography, leadership campaigns and service as Labour Leader are available, and as such a brief summary of relevant history will be provided here, with a focus on content relevant to understanding Momentum as an organisation that has not already been presented in detail elsewhere in the literature.

4.3.2 Corbyn's Leadership Campaigns

There are many detailed and informative accounts of Corbyn's two leadership campaigns in 2015 and 2016 (e.g. see Bassett Yerrell, 2020; Gilbert, 2016; Hannah, 2018; Jones, 2020; Kogan, 2019; Nunns, 2018; Seymour, 2017). However, key aspects relating to Momentum during the early days of Corbyn's leadership are worth recounting here to aid in establishing important context for the group's origins and development.

Even in the midst of Corbyn's 2015 leadership campaign, although perhaps not until victory seemed possible, thought was given to how all the hard work that was being done might be further utilised in the future, mostly in respect of the vast amounts of membership and supporter data that was being collected. Jon Lansman, who 'entered politics as Tony Benn's backroom fixer' (Bush, 2016, p.9), particularly seemed to have had significant foresight in taking steps during the campaign to ensure that data would remain available following the contest through setting up a formal company in order to comply with data protection legislation (Nunns, 2018). The data included details of all new members and registered supporters, and was owned by Lansman himself as the sole director of the new company (Companies House, 2023a); regardless of the outcome of the election, this data was intended to be a significant new asset for the Labour Left following the leadership contest

(Seymour, 2017b). A separate company was established at the same time with directors including veteran of Labour's left wing, Christine Shawcroft, and Simon Fletcher, a key figure and strategist in Corbyn's leadership campaign. It was this second company that eventually became the umbrella organisation which took in all the disparate local campaign groups that had previously operated under the banner *Jeremy for Leader* (Klug, et al., 2016), the precursor to Momentum. The first company still retains ownership of all the valuable data, with, at the time of writing, Lansman remaining the only director and apparently unwilling to share control over this powerful resource (Companies House, 2023a). Lansman has been reported to have had different but related visions for Momentum. According to Bassett (2019, p.3), Lansman

> had from the outset of Corbyn's leadership campaign sought to build an organisation that would help the Labour left win internal party elections and push for constitutional rule changes that would move the party's centre of power away from its MPs and towards its affiliated trade unions and membership.

That is, he wanted an extended and more powerful version of the CLPD. He, Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell were long-standing members of the CLPD, which, as explained in Section 4.2.2, was founded on the principle of democratising Labour primarily through the process of requiring open candidate selections for each election (Kogan, 2019). Later, he indicated his vision for Momentum had become a desire for it to be a 'left-wing Progress' (Ghadiali, 2018, n.p.), to mirror the internal factional organisation set up to support both Blair's leadership and the New Labour agenda (Rodgers, 2021a). It was this type of longer term legacy within Labour that Lansman had in mind when he took the formal action of registering what was at the time a largely speculative organisation with Companies House in July 2015 (Seymour, 2017b). However, Lansman's forward planning and pre-conceived intentions for this new organisation's role within the Party proved to be at odds with the vision of some activists who helped establish it (Seymour, 2017b); this underlying conflict would eventually come to a head, but from the beginning it appears it was Lansman who held the legal power over Momentum.

Corbyn's success in securing the leadership in September 2015 made it clear there was potentially a longer term future for these new activists within Labour. Momentum was formally established in October 2015, providing both official status and relative influence within the Party. Whereas previously Corbyn's supporters had

been truly ‘grassroots’ in that they were independent groups of activists with only minimal and patchy official oversight, the group now began to establish internal systems, policies and democratic structures to support its status. Emma Rees, Adam Klug and James Schneider were jointly appointed as Momentum’s first National Coordinators in autumn 2015 (Seymour, 2017b), alongside a strategic National Committee and a smaller Steering Committee responsible for day-to-day decision-making. This was an important step in terms of harnessing the ‘momentum’ of Corbyn’s leadership campaign in a form that could effectively utilise that energy and activism within the party political context, but it also necessitated a degree of compromise between the nimble unregulated operations of small local groups and the more bureaucratic processes needed to run a national organisation. As a result, Momentum began to take on a form that was a very different type of organisation compared to other contemporary activist groups like Citizens UK and 38 Degrees, not least because of its inherent party political association which other groups appeared to avoid.

Although the circumstances around Corbyn’s second leadership campaign in 2016 were both politically significant and materially different to his first, this did not seem to have impacted on Momentum’s strategy or tactics during the contest. Interviewee accounts suggest that, although its organisers and activists may have been more practised and experienced, Momentum undertook very similar activities compared to the first campaign, with the emphasis remaining on phone-banking. This is supported by Bassett Yerrell’s (2020) observations of Momentum during this period, and a detailed account of Momentum’s role in the contest and its links to an internal debate around the structure of the organisation can be found in his thesis. In respect of developing an understanding of activists’ lived experiences, however, the data from this research suggests that whilst this period in Momentum’s development may have deepened enthusiasm amongst members, it was not specifically memorable in hindsight amongst grassroots members who did not have direct involvement with Momentum’s National Office or Westminster.

4.3.3 The ‘Lansman Coup’ and Consolidation of Momentum

After celebrations for Corbyn’s second leadership victory died down, the tensions that had been stored up within the leadership of Momentum resurfaced. Momentum had conducted its first campaign as a formal organisation and as such there was a need for it to fully embed democratic structures and processes, with this arguably taking place much later than it should have done. Broadly speaking, there were two

factions within the group with opposing ideas for the way they wanted Momentum structured, and consequently opposing ideas around the function and nature of the organisation (Chessum, 2018). In the words of Michael Chessum, former Treasurer of Momentum, 'the six months running up to the [2016] coup was unpleasant' with 'toxic' power struggles between members of the leadership (Chessum, 2018, n.p.), and these conflicts resumed as soon as the 2016 leadership campaign was completed.

Momentum's first national conference was planned for February 2017 at which delegates from the membership were to debate and formalise its democratic structures. However, by autumn 2016, there were ongoing 'concerns about the governance of the organisation' as the National Committee had not met since May 2016 (Pope, 2016a). Even more pressingly, the members of the Steering Committee had only been elected on a temporary basis, with their appointments technically expiring in August 2016 (Labour Party Marxists, 2016). These problems represented serious democratic failings within the organisation that needed to be rectified as a matter of priority if the organisation was going to retain its legitimacy and legal status. Lansman appeared very aware of this (Labour Party Socialist Network, 2017), but some other members of Momentum's leadership seemed not to prioritise the situation as highly as having a proper and full debate over the role and nature of the organisation. A crucial part of this disagreement also related to confusion over which of the two committees held democratic supremacy: many argued that common sense dictated that the National Committee was the higher body as it was responsible for voting members onto the Steering Committee. However, in practice, the Steering Committee was taking important decisions in isolation, and this democratic contradiction was one of the main items set to be clarified and agreed at the February conference (Pope, 2016a).

An Emergency Meeting of the Steering Committee was called by Lansman at short notice at the end of October 2016, resulting in two of his key opponents, Jackie Walker and Matt Wrack of the Fire Brigades Union, being unable to attend. This meeting voted to cancel a National Committee Meeting planned for 5 November at which details for the conference were to be decided (Labour Party Marxists, 2016). There are no public minutes for this meeting, but some members claim the conference itself may also have been cancelled at this point in favour of Lansman's preferred online voting system for members to decide issues (Chessum, 2018); Bassett Yerrell's (2020) research supports this account. It was also around this time

that local Momentum branches were first prevented from sending direct email communications to their members, with all official email correspondence required to be routed via Momentum's central office (Labour Party Marxists, 2016). According to Grace, this remained the case at her branch at least until 2018. Crucially, however, Lansman seems to have enjoyed the support of many individual members who were attracted by the idea of direct democracy in the form of one-member-one-vote (OMOV) polls to decide organisational issues. More experienced community activists and Labour Party members preferred traditional democratic structures such as delegate systems, but these seemed antiquated and elitist to many newer grassroots members, including interviewee Ben (see also Bassett Yerrell, 2020, p.96).

Details of the events and chronology during November and December 2016 remain unclear, and are undocumented in terms of official and public minutes, but pro-conference members of the National Committee did succeed in arranging a meeting on 3 December and the decision to cancel the February conference was overturned by a narrow majority (Bassett Yerrell, 2020). However, in what appears to be a parallel action, Lansman enlisted Corbyn aid in emailing Momentum members in December 2016 (Momentum, 2017b) to launch an online consultation over the democratic structure they wanted Momentum to adopt, reportedly with a personal endorsement for OMOV (Chessum, 2018). This consultation included six questions on: the level of members' personal involvement in Momentum, priorities for Momentum as an organisation, national office support for local branches, decision-making processes, and how representatives should be elected, as well as an invitation to share other ideas or suggestions (Momentum, 2017c). Just over 8,000 members responded, around 40% of Momentum's full members at the time. The response choices for the two key questions on democracy both included only three options: decisions taken by delegates, by all members through OMOV, or 'other'. On both counts, respondents overwhelmingly supported OMOV, with approximately 80% choosing this option on each question (Momentum, 2017c).

The culmination of what many members called the 'Lansman coup' (e.g. various fieldnotes; King, 2020; Workers Power, 2020, n.p.) or the 'coup d'email' (e.g. BBC Politics, 2017; Bassett Yerrell, 2020, p.91) came on 10 January 2017, with an email from Lansman to the Steering Committee, presenting the survey results along with a new constitution that had already been drafted to reflect the consultation. Following legal advice, the constitution was to be immediately adopted in order to establish

Momentum's official basis, but would be confirmed at the conference in February as planned (Labour Party Socialist Network, 2017). In addition to other changes, the National and Steering Committees were replaced by a single National Coordinating Group (NCG), which remained in place throughout this project and beyond. It seems clear that there were serious reasons why Momentum needed to implement a new constitution urgently to retain its standing as an organisation. However, especially with the short consultation taking place over the Christmas period and the personal endorsement from Corbyn for Lansman's preferred outcome, it is clear why other members resented what they saw as an undemocratic process (Jewell, 2023).

According to Chessum (2018), there was a feeling of resignation amongst those who had opposed Lansman. He recalls that,

> by now, the atmosphere in the organisation had become so unpleasant and toxic that many activists accepted the imposition of the new constitution, even if they opposed both its contents and the means by which it had been introduced. Some activists briefly considered a legal challenge, but quickly understood that it would be expensive and destructive. Attempts to set up a new organisation without the resources or data that Momentum had were always bound to fail. [...] Some left Momentum or drifted off (Chessum, 2018, n.p.).

These internal power struggles might seem inconsequential to those outside of Momentum; indeed several interview participants expressed a lack of knowledge and interest. However, this conflict exemplifies the real and practical problems that Momentum had to overcome to gain legitimacy and tangible influence within the political system. Unfortunately, in Momentum's case, it seems that local grassroots members have ultimately lost out, as at the time of their interviews only one of my participants recalled a specific instance when they had been invited to participate in the electronic OMOV system since it had been established through the new 2017 constitution (Ben). This seems to have been typical for many members; in June 2019, Momentum ran another consultation on its internal democratic arrangements and potential revisions to its constitution. In its summary report, Momentum admitted significant numbers communicated a 'demand for more extensive online engagement' in line with what had been promised in 2017 (Momentum email 'Your feedback on democratising Momentum', dated 21 June 2019). For better or worse, the power-holders, decision-makers and the public face of Momentum seem to have been firmly established with the new NCG and staff based in the National Office in

London. A full account of these events is also presented by Bassett Yerrell (2020), based on research with high profile members and politicians conducted in parallel with my project. Interestingly, as noted in Chapter 2, his insider status does not seem to have provided any additional insights that I was unable to uncover through my independent investigation of the grey literature from this period.

Another contested aspect of the 2017 constitution was the requirement for full Momentum members to hold concurrent membership with Labour. For many this was not problematic as they were either already Labour members or content to join. However, for some this posed a significant issue because they were members of proscribed organisations or had been suspended from the Labour Party, such as former National Committee member Jackie Walker who was suspended for alleged antisemitism in 2016 (BBC News, 2016). Bassett Yerrell (2020, p. 92) suggests the requirement for concurrent membership was driven by a desire to avoid 'policing' its own members in the context of antisemitism. However, it was arguably key to legitimising Momentum within the Labour Party, and it also represented a direct rebuttal to accusations of entryism, Trotskyism and links to Militant that had continued to be levelled at the organisation (Pickard, 2018; Seymour, 2017b). Additionally, this change was helpful in avoiding future problems such as some members being denied a vote during Corbyn's second leadership election in 2016 (Bassett Yerrell, 2020). As full Labour members, Momentum members could also run for internal positions within the Labour Party, and by successfully managing the risk of Momentum itself becoming a proscribed organisation, they could publicly advertise their Momentum membership to garner support during campaigns (Jewell, 2023).

Some members were concerned about the new constitution and perceived a lack of democracy, arguing that a OMOV system would concentrate power nationally where crucial decisions over what questions are actually put out for vote would take place. In opposition to the changes, a splinter group called Grassroots Momentum was briefly established (Seymour, 2017b). Simon and Robert recalled this group represented members who wanted Momentum to retain a purer social movement character through a reduction of central control, and for the organisation to remain distinct from Labour and its bureaucratic processes. It has been argued that this conflict between Labour-focussed and movement-oriented members persisted and in fact formed the foundation for the disastrous results of GE2019 (Ward and Guglielmo, 2021). However, with hindsight it is difficult to imagine a scenario that

would have allowed Momentum to wield such influence within the Labour Party without these changes taking place. This research suggests that the dissonance in function and agenda between party and movement represents a fundamental challenge for social movements in becoming too closely associated with a political party not grown directly from the movement itself.

4.3.4 Momentum's Politics and Purpose

As argued above, Momentum's politics and purpose were deeply connected to Corbyn's leadership and personal ideology. Indeed, the only clearly articulated aim for Momentum communicated by interviewees was to support Corbyn's leadership and achieve a Corbyn-led Labour government (see Chapter 7). Beyond this, however, there are a number of insights that can be gleaned from academic and grey literature relating to policy issues supported by Momentum and its general aspirations as an organisation. As with Corbynism, representations of Momentum's core purpose were sometimes changeable depending on the author's perspective. An attempt will be made to present a balanced picture of the main themes identified regarding Momentum's goals and purpose as an organisation, which are interlocking and have significant overlap in places.

One theme is the promotion of participatory democracy, both within Labour and in the UK more widely, manifesting in different ways. Firstly, increasing the Party's accountability to the grassroots is was a goal related to the CLPD's strategy of pursuing automatic reselection processes within Labour, a policy that Momentum actively supported (e.g. Siddique, 2018). Momentum promoted a petition supporting open selections, which it invited supporters to sign via email. Despite the watered down proposals that were eventually adopted, this research uncovered evidence of Momentum's activity relating to mobilising members to trigger reselection processes on a CLP level in advance of the 2018 local council elections (see Chapters 6 and 7). Interestingly, two years prior to this Schneider (2016, p. 15), a founding National Coordinator for Momentum, wrote, 'some MPs worry that Momentum will deselect them. We will not.' This, therefore, suggests either that Momentum's position on this issue changed over time, or that there was a different approach to reselection at local council level as compared to Parliamentary constituency level. Alternatively, this could also represent an area where local groups were allowed latitude to operate in ways that ran counter to the official policy position developed at Momentum's National Office.

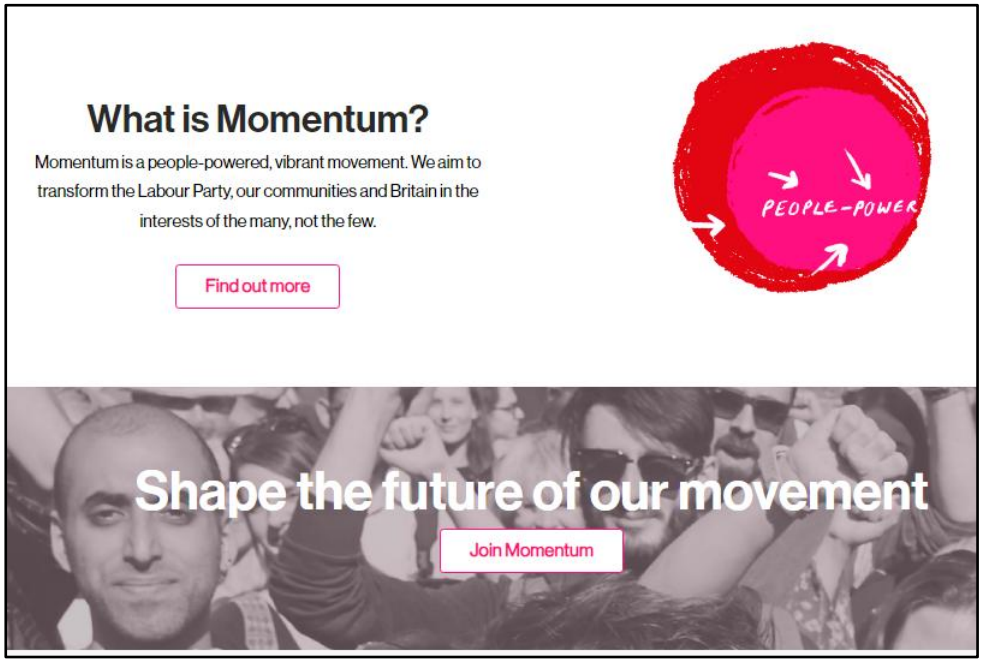
Additionally, strengthened democracy can be seen as a tactic pursuant of more 'horizontal' systems (Seymour, 2017b). For some this manifested in a hope that increasing participatory democracy would provide a vehicle to regaining connection to Labour's 'social base', that is, its traditional working class supporters, with Momentum providing a conduit for this group to utilise power within the political system (Wolkenstein, 2016). Success in this endeavour was hampered by lack of clarity around the concept of working class, resulting in activists, politicians and the general public holding a variety of different and often mutually exclusive conceptions of this socioeconomic group (Jewell, 2023; Wolkenstein, 2016); this theme will be revisited throughout the thesis. Others took a more Labour-focussed view, seeing democracy as a way to strengthen the link between the party leadership and grassroots members through Momentum's unique placement where it enjoyed links with both LOTO and trade union leadership at the same time as local activists (Seymour, 2017b). Schneider (2016, p.15), suggests that key goals of Momentum were: 'to strengthen democratic, popular social forces in Britain, to grow Labour, to help it win and reconnect it with its radical roots. In short, Momentum organises to shift power away from the 1 per cent.' It is unlikely a coincidence that Schneider's language echoes that used by Occupy activists, and the direct connection between improving democracy and reclaiming power from the elite is a perspective mirrored by many grassroots activists, both in relation to the Party and in the context of the wider UK political system. It is clear how viewing democracy in this way leads directly to active support of movementisation within Labour.

The movementisation of Labour started before Momentum and was interlinked with efforts to promote community organising, as discussed above, and community organising often was treated interchangeably with involvement in and support of campaigns and community action on local issues. Again, in practice, community organising and movementisation were also often treated interchangeably. This tendency to conflate terms leads to some intellectual confusion, and activists frequently failed to make clear distinctions between their understandings of social movements, issue-based campaigning or protest, and community organising (e.g. Olivia). This, again, could provide the basis for an interesting discourse analysis. However, as Schneider (2016, p. 15) writes, Momentum activists wanted 'to change Labour's culture and practices, making it more participatory and campaign-oriented', and this sentiment eventually resulted in the establishment of the Community Organising Unit during GE2019, which Corbyn reportedly saw as 'a new army of paid officials to turn Labour into a national social movement' (Pogrund and Maguire,

2020, p. 38). The close links between Momentum, Corbyn's leadership team and the Unit can be directly illustrated by tracing the career of Beth Foster-Ogg, who began as John McDonnell's secretary, then Lansman's PA during the 2016 leadership contest (Kogan, 2019), then became Momentum's Training Officer (Judah, 2018), and then joined the Community Organising Unit (Labour Party Community Organising Unit, 2020).

Some activists acknowledged this approach could require creating a social movement from 'scratch' (e.g. see Bassett Yerrell, 2020, p.102). However, for the most part I observed a largely tacit assumption that either the movement would organically result from Momentum's general activity, or, alternatively, that the anti-austerity movement had found a 'home' in Project Corbyn and it was this that provided the basis for calling it a 'movement' (e.g. Nunns, 2018). This second understanding seems to have been contained within circles connected to Momentum's National Office, with the first coming across much more strongly from individual grassroots activists during my observations and interviews. Certainly, none of my participants mentioned any explicitly anti-austerity movement goals at all during the course of conversations about the characterisation of Momentum as a movement, and there are many instances of directly calling for Momentum to be a social movement, or claiming that it already is one. Momentum explicitly self-identifies as a movement on their homepage:

Image 2: What is Momentum?



(Momentum, 2021a, n.p.)

Klug, et al. (2016, p. 39) suggest that the surge in Labour membership Momentum spearheaded represented an opportunity for Labour 'to return to its radical heritage and become a social movement *as well as* [original emphasis] a campaigning machine.' Schneider (2016, p. 15) insists that 'we're not just selling a product; it's a movement.' The idea of 'big organising' imported from American left-wing activists and having an 'internationalist approach' was also directly related to the idea of being a social movement (Klug and Rees, 2018, p. 50), possibly akin to the Occupy movement. For many members, founding National Coordinators included, wanting to be part of a social movement seems to be directly related to a desire to change systems, and in this way is interlocked with the support for democratic reforms discussed above. Some authors, therefore, appear to see the movementisation trend as a modern application of Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* (1972), as Dawson (2016, n.p.) explains:

> One vision, from Corbyn and his supporters, sees Labour as both parliamentary party and movement in which power rests with the members seeking to enact radical change. It would be crass to see this, as many of Corbyn's opponents do, as a social movement beyond parliament, not interested in government but it is a view that in a party of campaigning, protesting and winning power, policies should not be compromised for the sake of parliamentary convenience/due to corporate pressure. As Hilary Wainwright has put it, a party with parliamentary representation but not one committed to parliamentarism.

Indeed, Chessum (2022, p.129) explicitly invokes the legacy of Miliband in his account of the development of Corbynism. Other authors, as discussed previously, are critical of these claims to be a movement, or even part of a bigger social movement. John Rees (2019, p.47), another co-founder of Stop the War, offers a particularly scathing critique, from a more radically left-leaning perspective, observing that

> Momentum's concentration is on 'internal lobbying'; its core activity can be characterised as phone-bank politics. That's fair enough in terms of electing preferred candidates in internal party elections. But it is essentially passive politics. Momentum certainly supports protests, but its own substantial mobilising capability has not been thrown into building them … It is not the politics of active, mass mobilisation.

Again, this assessment is consistent with my experience during participant observations and data, as well as the discussion in Chapter 2.

In addition to the clear practical corollaries with the European movement parties grown out of anti-austerity movements described above, the anti-elitist perspective of these movements is frequently conceptualised by activists alongside class and socialism. Goals around building links with the working class and promoting socialist policies are often, in turn, framed through reference to the trade union movement or more general desires for social justice and reduction of inequality. During discussions with grassroots activists, these distinct conceptual topics were frequently conflated. Additionally, these themes were routinely set against what were considered to be antithetical political ideas such as Thatcherism, the Conservative Party, Blairism or neoliberalism, among others, which were also often used almost synonymously during discourse. As one Momentum member wrote during a discussion of the role of media literacy in the pursuit of left wing 'Corbynista' politics, '*absolutely fuck neoliberalism* [original emphasis]' (McDougall, 2016, p. 20). Support for these ideas manifested in many ways, and has been referred to frequently as 'a new kind of politics' (e.g. Bush, 2016, p.9; Klug, et al., 2016, p. 36; Wainwright, 2018a, title).

Although composed after Corbyn's departure as Labour Leader, Momentum's (2021f) strategy document, *Socialist Organising in a New Era* represents a continuation of the group's approach and general politics under Corbyn's leadership and, arguably, a formal codification of the above conceptual themes. Indeed, throughout the document, Momentum members' belief in the interconnectedness between working class interests, inequality, trade unionism and socialism is clearly demonstrated. The solidification of this ideological position appears to have developed over time from the more embryonic vision presented in Momentum's early days, although it remains entirely consistent as well as being broadly reflective of the different backgrounds Momentum members experienced prior to joining the organisation (Klug, et al., 2016). However, in *Socialist Organising*, the primacy of trade union activism is explicitly emphasised, for example when the authors discuss working with a wide range of allies to enact social change, 'first and foremost trade unions building working class power' (Momentum, 2021f, p.7). Additionally, this quote also directly connects trade unionism to the working class, a sentiment shared by grassroots activists, such as Padraig and Catherine who were union activists and remained so following becoming Momentum members.

Despite the importance placed by Momentum leadership on trade unions as a vehicle for connecting to the working class, questions remain whether this is truly reflective of current British society. Indeed, Klug and Rees's (2016) observations of poverty in Birmingham, and other contemporary depictions of what it means to be part of the modern 'working class', appear to diverge sharply from the current culture within the major Labour-affiliated trade unions generally, which I experienced as a former UNISON branch secretary, and indeed within Momentum itself, which I observed during this project. As Lansman observed (see Section 4.2.2, above) the general representativeness of trade unions remains uncertain, particularly in terms of the present-day low membership and the vast swathes of non-unionised, low-paid and insecure workforces in the UK. The problematic relationship between trade unions, Labour and the modern 'working class' is discussed further in Chapter 9. However, despite these side objectives and general political outlook, Momentum's primary overriding purpose during the research period was to support Corbyn's leadership, and their practical activities were overwhelmingly dedicated to this aim. As Owen Jones (2020, p. 56) put it, 'when Tony Blair had won the Labour leadership back in 1994, his supporters founded "Progress", an organization dedicated to promoting his agenda within the party. Corbyn needed one too.' The empirical data from this research supports Jones's succinct summary of Momentum's purpose, and in that respect the above themes could be seen as representative of aspects of Corbyn's agenda rather than organisational objectives in themselves.

4.4 Momentum's Structure

4.4.1 Overview and National Office

As mentioned previously, at the highest level Momentum has always been underpinned by two separate Companies Limited by Guarantee that were established by Lansman on 24 July 2015: Jeremy Corbyn Campaign 2015 (Supporters) Ltd and Jeremy Corbyn Campaign 2015 (Services) Ltd. Both companies subsequently changed names, and as of 2023 were known as Momentum Information Ltd and Momentum Campaign (Services) Ltd, respectively (Companies House, 2023a, 2023b). The 'Supporters', later 'Information', company retained ownership of all member and supporter data, including names, email addresses and other personal information, and, at the time of writing, Lansman had always remained the sole director of this company (Companies House, 2023a). The 'Services' side was responsible for the day-to-day running of the organisation and initially had two directors: Lansman, who functioned as 'director of operations' for

Corbyn's 2015 campaign, and Simon Fletcher, who was Corbyn's named campaign manager (Nunns, 2018, p. 113) and would later work in LOTO as Corbyn's chief of staff (Jones, 2020). Directorship of Momentum Campaign (Services) Ltd underwent several changes between 2015-2020, although overall directors were generally recruited from the National Coordinating Group, affiliated trade union leadership, or through political networks within the left wing of the Labour Party.

In terms of day-to-day practice, this legal arrangement was generally relevant only in relation to the processing and sharing of member data, with decision-making and operational functions undertaken through Momentum's own internal bureaucratic structures. As discussed above, Momentum's constitution document which sets out its structure and organisation was revised in 2017 (Bassett Yerrell, 2020), and again in 2021 as part of a 'refounding' exercise (Rodgers, 2021b). Momentum's National Coordinating Group (NGC), in place since 2017, is comprised of members elected to represent each of its geographical regions, as well as representatives from affiliated groups and elected Labour 'public office holders' (Momentum, 2022).

Whilst strategic direction and high-level decision making was overseen by the NCG, Momentum also employed a National Coordinator responsible for operational activities. Initially the post was held jointly by Adam Klug, Emma Rees, and James Schneider from 2015 until Schneider left the Momentum office to serve as Corbyn's Head of Strategic Communication following the leadership election of 2016 (Jones, 2020; Payne, et al., 2019). Klug and Rees resigned separately over the few months following the GE2017, and were eventually replaced by Laura Parker, who moved to the role from service as Corbyn's private secretary (Parker, 2022). Following Parker's resignation after GE2019, Labour Party staffer and The World Transformed organiser, Andrew Dolan took up the role, which had been renamed to Political Coordinator and revised to become more administrative and less public-facing (Rodgers, 2020a). During Corbyn's leadership, Momentum's National Coordinators often appeared in print or interviews (e.g. Klug and Rees, 2018; Klug, et al., 2016; Parker, 2019), and were also responsible for the management of the staff base at Momentum's London-based National Office which had grown to at least 21 paid employees by 2018 (Momentum Campaign (Services) Ltd, 2019). Indeed, whilst Laura Parker and James Schneider are two well-documented examples of traffic between Momentum National Office and LOTO, a wider trend of movement of staff between these offices has been observed, as is movement of Momentum staff into other projects within the Labour Party, such as the Labour's Digital Team and the

Community Organising Unit Corbyn established before GE2019 (Forde, 2022; Labour Party Community Organising Unit, 2020; Loucaides, 2019).

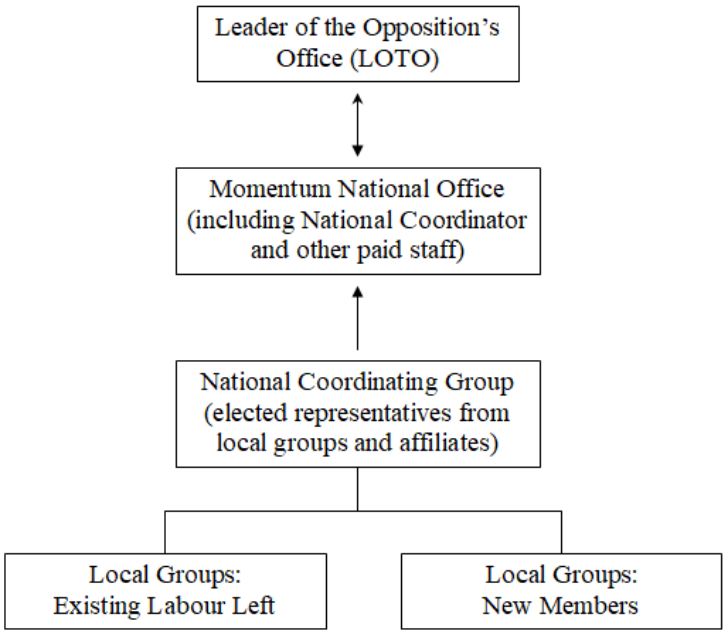
4.4.2 Local Branches

Where Momentum's National Office represented a more rigidly structured organisation, with paid management and staff alongside closer links to the political machine of the Labour Party, local branches had a different character. Although all the local branches covered by my data mirrored standard Labour and trade union groups' structure through elected local officers (such as chair, secretary, diversity officer, etc.) and regular meetings and AGMs, in general the operation was less formal in nature. Local members had considerable latitude and independence in terms of setting their own agendas and programmes of activity. This differentiation in ways of working was stark, and manifested in both a particularly different culture and a different level of public exposure between the National Office and local groups. Local members had access to the NCG through regional representatives and could also access informational and practical resources put out by Momentum, which were particularly promoted during election periods. However, although local groups had relative autonomy in their activities, at least for the duration of data collection they were required to go through the National Office every time they wished to group email their members, as mentioned above. As former data manager for her local group, Grace recalled how she was required to submit email drafts to the National Office for approval before they would be sent to members, often involving a lengthy delay. As a result of this arduous communications process, some local branches, like Ben's, relied more on local Whatsapp groups or other social media for organising active members whilst official Momentum-branded group emails were reserved generally for more formal communications such as invitations to officially organised or endorsed events. As a registered supporter throughout the duration of data collection, I received over ten times as many emails from Momentum nationally as compared to the local Liverpool branch to which I was nominally assigned (see Chapter 6 and Appendix).

There were also identifiable differences between local Momentum groups, which are attributable to the character of the local membership. Based on the four Momentum branches represented by the interview participants in this study, there were two observable archetypes: branches where Momentum represented an overlay on top of active leftist groups within the local Labour membership, and those which were established in areas where there was little or no pre-existing leftist organisation with

predominantly of members who were new to the Labour Party. Consistent with this observation, Bassett Yerrell (2020) described different local characters between his own local Momentum branch in Lambeth and the Derby branch he observed during the course of his employment with MP Chris Williamson; further examination of local variation between Momentum branches could form the basis of future research. However, based on my data, the relationship between these elements of Momentum's structure have been represented in the diagram below:

Diagram 1: Momentum's Functional Structure under Corbyn, 2017-2020



Jewell, 2023, n.p.

The two local Momentum branches which grew in areas where there were already established networks of left-wing Labour members were characterised by more traditional Labour structures and ways of working, and are represented primarily through interview data. In these groups, Momentum meetings were often used as an additional forum for discussion rather than pursuing a materially different agenda or programme of work as compared to local left-wing activity before joining Momentum. Indeed, although these pre-existing left wing activists may have been emboldened and supported by both Momentum and Corbyn's leadership, they did not seem to have changed their established ways of working in any significant way. As Robert explained,

> *an awful lot of people in the [local] Labour Party who are on the left, they joined Momentum because it showed a lot of promise, but they've been doing much the same stuff even if it weren't for Momentum. [...] Sometimes we still meet as Momentum, but it needn't be Momentum because it's just the same people and we would meet as Labour Left even if there weren't a Momentum organisation. [...] The same bunch of people are now attacking the left [in our local area], but they don't attack us in the name of Momentum. [...] You know, it probably means even less to the right wing in Labour than it does to the left wing in Labour. I mean, they don't say 'it's Momentum people'. They might say 'it's Corbyn-supporting thugs', but they don't really mention Lansman, or Momentum, when they make these attacks* (Robert).

Robert and his Momentum group were in the minority locally, with their CLPs generally more centrist in character. However, Mark also made observations about Momentum failing to usher in significant change within Labour Party in his predominantly left-leaning local branch, even if they did experience an initial influx of members:

> *When Corbyn first was elected there was a surge of new members like there were in many places. And a lot of young people came in. I think a lot of people had high hopes of change. Um, I think since then some of them have been disappointed. [...] Now, the numbers are not as great as they were in the constituency. At one time there were huge meetings. It's gone down a bit, but they're still better attended than they used to be, definitely* (Mark).

As can be seen, there was an apparent lack of material change for both the Momentum branch with greater influence locally as part of a more left-wing council, and the other which was in a minority position across its local CLPs. Furthermore, data from Bassett Yerrell's (2020, p.90) interviews with local members of Lambeth Momentum support this side of my dual-typology of local branches, in that it was predominated by experienced activists who continued to work in a traditional manner that resulted in 'younger activists in Lambeth [losing] interest.'

In contrast, the other two local Momentum branches I observed were dominated by activists who had recently joined the Labour Party and who were often not as attached to traditional Party structures and mechanisms. A much different local picture emerged in these branches, particularly around the relationship between Labour factions locally and the tactics used by Momentum activists. Momentum in these areas adopted a more aggressive and proactive stance in relation to factional

conflict, particularly during trigger ballots and selection processes. The rivalry sometimes appeared to have been linked to the relative newness of the challenge for members without experience of factional conflict within the Party. Many newer activists displayed high levels of energy for actively participating in internal competition and made effective use of member data to mobilise large numbers of local Momentum members. In Olivia's area, for example, Momentum was the driving force behind a group of several, mostly younger, left-wing activists who successfully organised local trigger ballots to challenge sitting Labour councillors for selection in advance of the local elections in May 2019, resulting in a number of them gaining seats on their local council (see also Chapters 6 and 7). The dedication to factional conflict within Labour was also observed by Momentum activists participating in Young Labour events, as described by Simon during his interview as well as by Jones (2021) in her account. This contrasting culture is also reflected in Bassett Yerrell's (2020, p.97) observations of the local Momentum branch in Derby, which drew in many activists that were entirely new to Labour and embraced new ways of working through emulation of strategies and tactics imported from the campaigns for Bernie Sanders in the United States, as encouraged by Corbyn-supporting MP Chris Williamson.

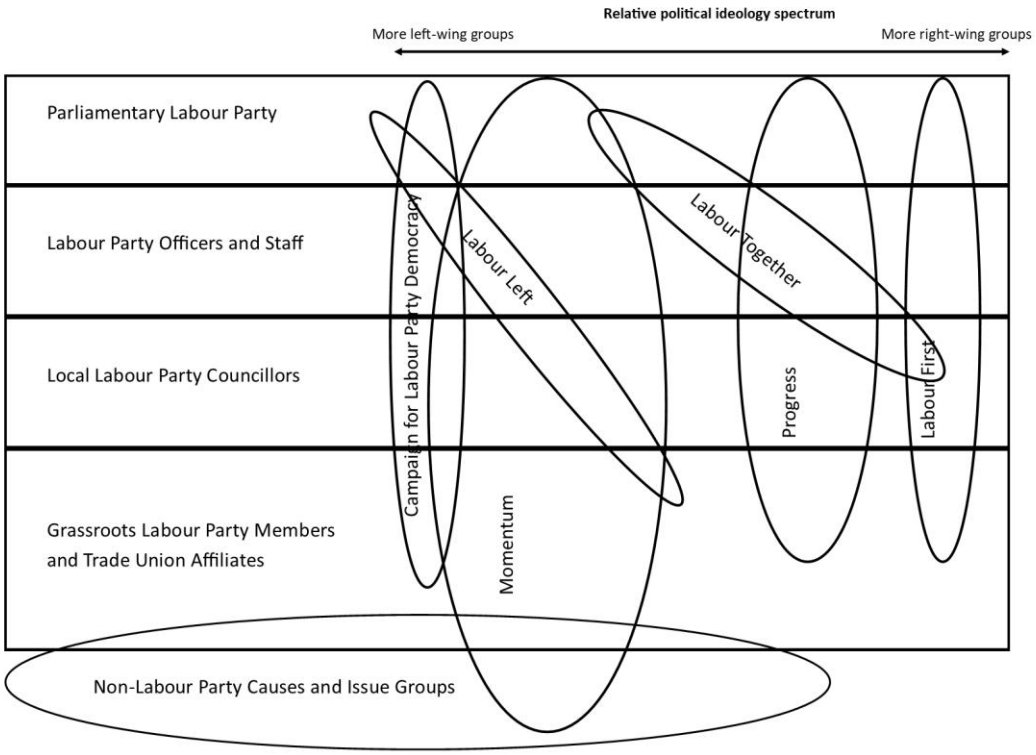
Further differences between these two types of local Momentum branches also appear in relation to the use of technology and social media. Younger, more tech-savvy members preferred these tools both to facilitate communication within their local groups and to drive their election campaigning, and Momentum was frequently at the forefront of emerging technology to assist with organising. For example, Whatsapp was frequently promoted by Momentum staff during GE2019 election events, and younger members of Momentum's National team also hosted many online Zoom meetings to coordinate with volunteers across the country, and even internationally, well before online conferencing calls entered the mainstream during coronavirus lockdowns. The use of new and sometimes unfamiliar technology could present a source of difficulty, and represented a clear divergence in culture between traditional, often older Labour Party members and the newer, usually younger generation of members who were recruited during and after Corbyn's leadership campaigns (see Chapter 8). This tech-savvy approach was much more prevalent in Momentum branches dominated by new recruits to the Labour Party. Momentum's use of social media and digital organising has been examined by several academic research projects (e.g. Dennis, 2019; Hotham, 2020) and highlighted as a notable feature of Momentum's unique style of campaigning. However, from the data

collected in this project, it is clear that some sections of Momentum's membership were not as comfortable with these tools, and it is suggested that local branches dominated by longstanding members of the Labour Left may not have adopted these strategies as enthusiastically or as prominently (e.g. fieldnotes, 1 November 2019; Simon and Robert; Bassett Yerrell, 2020).

4.5 Concluding Remarks: Momentum's Place within the Labour Party

As discussed in Chapter 2, although Momentum has been ascribed with social movement characteristics, in practice it did not function as a movement. Rather, in many ways it is more akin to internal factional organisations like Progress and Labour First. This similarity has been noted by other authors even if the movement characteristics remain emphasised (e.g. Dennis, 2020). The overlap and general relationship between some of the different sections of the Labour Party is represented below:

Diagram 2: Diagrammatic Representation of Momentum within the Labour Party



Jewell, 2023, n.p.

Indeed, as noted above, Momentum's function was explicitly conceived by some in its leadership to be similar to Progress, and there are several ways in which all three of these factional organisations are similar. Importantly, although great emphasis is

placed on Momentum's innovative use of technology, the other groups did not avoid social media, digital platforms and other technology. Momentum may have used more cutting edge tools (such as Zoom during the GE2019, see Chapter 8) and been more vocal with their promotion of technology as an organising tool, but both Progress and Labour First used a similar system to Momentum's for direct emails to members and supporters, which I received regularly during data collection for this project. These communications included many and varied political and topical messages, but also promoted other content and digital tools such as podcasts or the use of Whatsapp (e.g. Conor Pope, Progress, 2019). This can be compared to local Momentum groups utilising Whatsapp and the promotion of podcasts by prominent members such as Owen Jones (e.g. The Organiser, 2019). All three groups also regularly promoted their own policy interests through conference motions and appeals to local CLPs to support them (e.g. Neame, 2022a), and ran their own preferred 'slates' for internal party elections (e.g. Rodgers, 2018a; Rodgers, 2018b). Finally, it is common for members of all three factional groups to occasionally engage in writing articles for publications such as newspapers, magazines, such as the New Statesman, and LabourList to promote their policy positions or offer political commentary on current issues or events (e.g. Labour First: Akehurst, 2019; Momentum: Foster-Ogg, 2018; Progress: Yeowell, 2019).

However, there are also points of contrast between Momentum and other internal Labour Party groups. Momentum boasted a much larger membership and supporter base, in turn linked to the nature and scope of its on-the-ground activities. This primarily resulted in Momentum's ability to mobilise activists, both during Corbyn's leadership campaigns, the two general elections under his leadership and local council elections throughout the UK. Although Progress and Labour First also supported like-minded candidates with their election campaigns and sent email communications encouraging supporters to participate in election activities (Nathan Burns, Labour First, 2019; Nathan Yeowell, Progress, 2019), Momentum's efforts around campaigning was unprecedented both in terms of organisation and prominent use of digital tools, but also in terms of the numbers of activists deployed in activities such as door-to-door canvassing. Momentum also encouraged deviation from the official strategy in terms of priority seats, with significant numbers of members targeting more marginal seats in an attempt to run a much more aggressive rather than defensive campaign in GE2017, such as that promoted by the My Nearest Marginal Tool (see Chapter 5). However, as experienced by Ben, at times there was still some resistance to this from official Momentum representatives

and staff at the regional offices; in trying to organise canvassing in marginal Bolton West, he felt he "*was fighting against … the regional Labour Party and I was fighting that regional Momentum organiser as well*." In GE2019, this approach was repeated and expanded, albeit with notable changes to the online tool (see Chapter 8). Momentum members have also been mobilised to trigger re-selection processes for local council seats, and to support Momentum members in the subsequent competition and vote for selection (see Chapters 6 and 7). Again, although Progress and Labour First may also campaign for preferred candidates, it is notable that Momentum branches were able to mobilise enough members to successfully trigger selection processes.

Another difference with other factional groups is the way publicising candidates' Momentum membership was used as a campaign tactic, beyond that of producing slates. It is likely that many members of both Progress and Labour First publicly acknowledged their association with these groups, with their membership common knowledge to Labour members within certain circles, and this may influence internal votes through individual members voting on the basis of their support for a particular faction. However, Momentum arguably took this further, with candidates reaching out directly to local Momentum members using their membership database, and deliberately and explicitly using their Momentum credentials as a foundational reason to support them. For example, as elaborated on in Chapter 7, Olivia challenged a local councillor for her seat in a selection process for the local elections in 2018. Momentum members were mobilised to trigger the reselection process, and then all of them in the local constituency were directly canvassed by Olivia during her campaign for selection, resulting in a large number of them attending the CLP vote to support her. After she was successfully selected, Momentum members participated in her election campaign which resulted in her gaining a seat on her local council. According to Olivia, she knew of other Momentum members elsewhere who had similar experiences and undertook similar activities, also resulting in election success at local level in 2018. The main crux of her campaign messages centred around Momentum membership and support of Corbyn, and membership of Momentum appears to be the main motivating factor for volunteers and local members to support her selection and campaign. From my observations in Liverpool, there was evidence that some members of Momentum ran for local council that year and their membership was advertised sufficiently for it to become common knowledge locally (e.g. Thorp, 2018). Investigation into other areas to assess whether this was common elsewhere could form the basis of future

research, although as discussed in Chapter 6, enough Momentum councillors were elected to support the existence of a national Local Councillors Network.

Finally, often presented as evidence of Momentum's movement credentials is its promotion and endorsement of outside campaigns. Although there is some evidence of local involvement in local campaigns, most of the movement promotion took place nationally (see Chapter 6). However, contrast between Progress, Labour First and Momentum in this area may be attributed to a difference in scale. For instance, emails received from both Progress and Labour First during this project's data collection period promoted the Remain campaign, encouraging recipients to attend protests and take other action; this arguably has parallels with Momentum's promotion of extra-parliamentary campaigns. Momentum nationally and locally might support more, and more varied campaigns, but it seems inaccurate to claim that the other groups avoid this entirely. It might also be argued that public attention has also been deliberately drawn to Momentum's focus on extra-parliamentary campaigns, which could have contributed to a perception that this is fundamentally different from the other groups' activity. More detailed empirical evidence relating to Momentum's general programme of activity is presented in the following Chapters.

Chapter 5: Momentum's Activities 2015-2017

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focussed on what Momentum *is* organisationally. This chapter moves on to explore what Momentum and its members actually *did* during the few years Jeremy Corbyn was Leader of the Labour Party. Chapters 5-9 represent the main data and findings from this research and will progress in a broadly chronological order. This chapter will cover Momentum's activity during the period from Corbyn's first leadership campaign up to and including GE2017, with Chapter 6 focussing on the period between that election and the start of GE2019. Interviews were conducted during 2018-19, so interview data and analysis is presented in Chapter 7, whilst Chapters 8 and 9 will explore GE2019, primarily based on my participant observations of Momentum's online campaign. As discussed above, at times activity differed between the National Office and local Momentum branches, and where relevant appropriate distinctions will be made. Details of Momentum's activity are taken from a variety of sources including grey literature such as news articles and blogs, the numerous Corbyn biographies, interview and participant observation data from this project, and emails and other electronic material produced by Momentum.

5.2 Corbyn's 2015 and 2016 Leadership Elections

In the summer of 2015, during Corbyn's first campaign for Labour Leader, Momentum had yet to be formally established, and activists were loosely organised under the banner of the *Jeremy For Leader* campaign (Klug, et al., 2016). Nunns (2018, p. 139) details the 2015 'Corbyn movement' as involving mainly phone canvassing of Labour members to vote for Corbyn, primarily through phone banks with some individual action. There were also some leafleting activities to encourage people to pay £3 to join as registered supporters, who were for the first time allowed a vote in the leadership contest (Nunns, 2018). Supporting this drive was an enthusiastic and wide-ranging social media campaign, a significant proportion of which was at best only loosely controlled by Corbyn's team. According to Seymour's (2017a, p. 22) account of Corbyn's campaign, in addition to the centrally-controlled social media accounts, there were also 'semi-official accounts' that ran content beyond the official campaign messages. Furthermore, individual supporters were entirely uncontrollable in terms of their own private accounts, and many exhibited extraordinary enterprise and creativity in their online campaigning for Corbyn (Kogan, 2019; Mejias and Banaji, 2020; Seymour, 2017a), establishing a culture of

online organising activity that persisted through both leadership campaigns, GE2017 and GE2019.

Several participants recalled getting involved in party politics for the first time during the 2015 leadership election, and others re-joined Labour either to vote for Corbyn or shortly following his campaign success. Those who were involved with the *Jeremy For Leader* campaign recalled the excitement of participating in phone bank activities, rallies and attending the associated social events with other Corbyn supporters. For example, Nunns (2018, p. 206) quotes one Corbyn supporter who described the atmosphere at a rally as akin to "a religious revival meeting" with "a sense of euphoria." Grace echoed this sentiment, and related an early experience of the campaign, having been invited to one of the first phone banking events in London and going to a nearby pub afterwards. She found it "*very exciting*" and "*really interesting*" to meet and socialise with well-known characters such as political authors Owen Jones and Ellie Mae O'Hagan. As Grace put it, "*everybody who was anybody* [on the left] *was there*" to support Corbyn at these events, and the public endorsement from leftist celebrity personalities aided Corbyn in recruiting dedicated grassroots members to the campaign. The combination of heady excitement and celebrity proved intoxicating to many people who joined Corbyn's campaign.

Some media personalities that supported Corbyn in 2015 became permanent fixtures within Momentum under his leadership. Owen Jones wrote five pro-Corbyn articles during that summer (Nunns, 2018), and regularly supported Momentum and participated in Momentum events over the following years, including social media content and canvassing activities. Jones was such a regular fixture, that when I told one fellow attendee at The World Transformed (TWT) in 2018 that I was queuing to see Owen Jones, he responded, "*oh, too much Owen Jones*!" Bassett and Mills (2021, p. 234) also identified Jones as a significant 'movement actor' in their analysis of Corbyn's Twitter networks. From my own observations of Jones's support of Momentum and Corbyn, including YouTube videos, articles, TWT appearances and participation in campaign events during GE2019, Jones displayed consistently high levels of energy, enthusiasm and commitment to the Corbyn project. Involved from the beginning, Jones was to continue to actively support Momentum and the Corbyn project throughout Corbyn's leadership through his role as a journalist, but also was a key contributor to Momentum's digital and on-the-ground activities, as discussed further below. As Ward and Guglielmo (2021, p. 14) observe, 'the importance of social media means that celebrity culture and political

leadership are likely to remain in proximity to each other.' Interestingly, however, following Labour's defeat in GE2019 Jones (2020) published a book offering significant criticism of Corbyn's leadership style and political strategy. Tracing Jones's involvement with Momentum and the Corbyn project in more detail could form the basis for further study.

For many grassroots activists, friendships and networks formed during the first leadership campaign would form foundations for the eventual establishment of their local Momentum branches and support their further development as activists. After Corbyn's victory, local groups were approached by senior Labour figures and representatives from Corbyn's team and invited to join Momentum as it was being established in autumn 2015. For example, Ben recalled a personal visit from Jon Lansman and James Schneider to one of their first local meetings following the leadership campaign to encourage them to become a recognised Momentum branch. Grace also recounted the official process her branch had to go through to become part of Momentum, which her local group left very late compared to others in the surrounding areas. There was a requirement to have representatives from each CLP covered by their branch as well as certain officer positions filled by a deadline in order to participate in a regional meeting with other Momentum branches. She remembered that the officers were appointed by a small core group of activists at short notice to meet the deadline and eventually ratified later at an AGM meeting. For many, like Grace and her local group, the bureaucracy involved with becoming an established organisation was unfamiliar; it is fundamentally at odds with the more organic character of many social movements, and is argued to have contributed to the internal conflict within Momentum that came to a head with the 'Lansman coup' described in Chapter 4. Grace, Catherine, Olivia and others who cooperated to establish their Momentum branch continued their activist network, and several of them were eventually successful in becoming selected as Labour candidates and then elected to their local council in 2018 and 2019.

With several months to complete these processes nationally and locally, Momentum was more established as an organisation by the time Corbyn faced his vote of no confidence and second leadership election in the summer of 2016. As a result, although many of the activities undertaken during his second campaign were similar to the first campaign, such as digital campaigning and phone banking, these were generally more coordinated than previously. However, there was an additional aspect of protest at the 'chicken coup' and the way the 2016 leadership contest had

come about which manifested in an opportunity for mass rallies and demonstrations (e.g. Kogan, 2019). As Olivia recalled,

> *I mean Jeremy had to go through two leadership elections, and the second one mobilised us as Momentum even more, because it was like, we actually know why we have to do this. This opposition, this criticism from, to him, from within his own party, um and we can't just like disperse and like sit back and relax because now he's leader. And after that second leadership contest [...] there was some questions from people in Momentum, like well we've got Jeremy Corbyn elected now, what really is our direction? and [in] the second leadership contest we found that we have to be something that runs alongside the party because there is always going to be that opposition of people wanting to move the party away from the left wing, like, roots that we thought it was set up for*.

Another key difference with this contest was the new rules that disallowed many newer Labour supporters from voting, which was widely interpreted as disadvantageous to Corbyn. It was established during an NEC meeting concerning the leadership timetable and other issues such as whether Corbyn would automatically be included on the ballot. Although Corbyn would be included on the ballot, the NEC established a retrospective cut off date requiring six months as a supporter to be eligible to vote, along with a short 2-day window during the contest for those who might have been disenfranchised to purchase supporter status at an increased cost of £25 (LabourList, 2016). Momentum was involved in promoting support for a legal challenge by five Labour members over this requirement; the High Court of Justice initially ruled that the retrospective freeze on voting eligibility amounted to breach of contract by the NEC because the members were not made aware of the restriction when they joined (Evangelou v. McNicol, 2016). However, that decision was overturned at the Court of Appeal, resulting in the members being liable for both their and Labour's legal fees. A crowdfunding drive for £100,000 to cover these costs eventually raised over £96,000 before it ended (CrowdJustice, 2016). Despite the legal setback, the short window for application and the increased cost of securing voting rights, over 180,000 people reportedly became supporters during the contest (Elgot, 2016). Overall, however, unlike the first leadership campaign, Olivia was the only participant to share specific recollections of Momentum activities from either the second leadership contest or the period between the leadership elections beyond from recollections of the establishment of their local groups.

5.3 The 2017 General Election (GE2017)

5.3.1 Introduction

When Theresa May announced her surprise decision to call a general election early in 2017, Momentum was still recovering from the 'Lansman coup'. According to McGregor (2017, p. 17), the group 'was wracked with division, and obsessed with the infighting in the Labour Party; seemingly moribund.' With his Momentum allies in apparent disarray, Corbyn was also faced with a political landscape still coloured by the vote of no confidence the previous summer. As Rustin (2017, p. 10) recalled, despite the repeated confirmation of grassroots support through the two leadership elections, Corbyn was pointedly asked in an interview why people should 'be expected to vote for Jeremy Corbyn if 172 of his MPs said they had no confidence in him?' Indeed, as Harrop (2017, p. 396) commented after the election, many voters supported Labour '*despite* Jeremy Corbyn, as well as [the] many who voted *because* of Jeremy Corbyn.' However, there were signs that the Momentum was starting to pull itself together: the first official National Coordinating Group meeting in March 2017 reported that 'it was a positive and productive day with discussions focused on how to best support Momentum's members and groups to build the movement that will elect a transformative, socialist Labour government' (National Coordinating Group, 2017a, p. 6). Momentum's activists certainly came to life during the GE2017 campaign, and it has been widely acknowledged that they played a significant role in the surprising increase in Parliamentary seats for Labour (e.g. Muldoon and Rye, 2020; Pickard, 2017; Rhodes, 2019). Authors have described Momentum's involvement as a 'parallel' (Dorey, 2017, p. 315) or 'satellite' (Hotham, 2121, p. 292) campaign, and this 'parallel' nature is primarily framed in relation to Momentum's largely arms-length digital campaigning, and the even less regulated content generated and disseminated via social media by individual supporters (Mackova, et al., 2020; Nunns, 2018).

5.3.2 Canvassing Strategy and Tactics

Another key aspect of Momentum's parallel campaign was the considerable latitude afforded members in prioritising marginal seats rather than official Labour Party targets, closely connected to motivations behind the My Nearest Marginal tool (discussed further below). Grace recalls that, in her branch, a decision was made to support Margaret Greenwood's campaign in Wirral West:

> *so we had a meeting. What had happened was [two other activists] had gone over there and they came back and said, 'They're telling us that it's a winnable seat.' She*

> *only had something like a 30 vote majority, something ridiculously small, like if the train was cancelled she would have lost it, it was like that... ridiculous. So they were saying it can be won. They just needed people. And it's just like that - oh, we've got people. So we had a meeting and we had a decision that we would actually decide what our targets were, not what the Labour Party had decided.*

In Ben's CLP, Momentum members also found themselves acting in opposition to the Labour Party. In GE2017, they assessed that Bolton West was a key marginal seat that could be won through extra canvassing efforts, but were turned away by Labour's regional office when they offered to help in the area. Encouraged by Momentum's supportive attitude towards member initiative, Ben was undeterred by opposition from the Labour Party as well as Momentum's own regional organiser. He contacted the Parliamentary candidate directly and organised several trips to Bolton West for his local Momentum members to help canvass. Bolton West's Labour candidate saw a reduction in the margin to only 900 votes, and Ben claimed that with higher priority for funding and campaigning the seat could have been won. Similar accounts of Momentum members expending significant time and energy in areas de-prioritised in the official Labour campaign strategy abound, and this was undoubtedly fuelled in large part through the My Nearest Marginal initiative (Rees, 2017). This approach also reflects the more optimistic campaign preferred by Corbyn and his allies as compared to the wider Labour Party, and the conflict this created during GE2017 has been well documented (e.g. Forde, 2022). However, other research has suggested that Ben's repeated trips to assist in Bolton West may have been unusual: Temple's (2023, p. 10) analysis of Twitter accounts suggest that many trips to marginals by Momentum activists were 'one-off campaign days'. He also highlights comments from non-Momentum activists suggesting that the group's efforts 'had little to do with the result[s], or even jeopardised [them]' (Temple, 2023, p. 10). Investigation into whether Momentum activists were sometimes directed to safe seats, such as Owen Jones appears to suggest (Temple, 2023), would add an interesting dimension to analyses of Momentum's GE2017 campaign and the efficacy of the My Nearest Marginal tool.

A further difference in Momentum's campaign approach was the encouragement for activists to initiate in-depth conversations with voters during canvassing. This tactic was modelled after techniques employed by Bernie Sanders's supporters in the United States, referred to as 'persuasive conversations' (Klug and Rees, 2018), 'persuasion canvassing' (Nunns, 2018, p. 341), or 'deep canvassing' (Alex and

Ben). The Sanders campaign in turn had borrowed deep canvassing from American same-sex marriage campaigners, Leadership Lab (Murphy, 2018), and other gay rights groups have referred to the approach as 'value-based conversations' (Freedom to Marry, 2016, n.p.). Through an iterative process of refining scripts for canvassers based on experiences during campaigns across the United States, the focus was narrowed to emphasising shared values such as love and family to engage with voters and scripts were eventually discarded altogether. Canvassers were instructed to gauge whether the voter was: supportive, in which case they were encouraged and thanked in a short conversation; undecided or persuadable, in which case a longer persuasive conversation was initiated; or hostile, in which case the voter was not engaged in any conversation and the canvasser moved on. According to Freedom to Marry, the tactic was highly effective in persuading voters to take a more supportive view of same-sex marriage, although the technique was resource- and time-intensive to deliver (Freedom to Marry, 2016).

According to Momentum (2023a, n.p.), 'Momentum and organisers from Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign held over 40 trainings nationwide – giving 3,000 activists the skills to canvass more effectively.' Elsewhere, Momentum (2021b) claimed that almost 4,000 volunteers had been trained in persuasive conversations during GE2017. The purpose of this tactic was to develop connections with the public to attract support from non-voters or non-Labour voters beyond 'get-out-the-vote' (GOTV), the approach utilised by veteran Labour canvassers which prioritises recording confirmed Labour voters through short doorstep canvassing dialogues. Volunteers were encouraged to be cognisant of their own 'personal story', identity and how this relates to their political motivations (Momentum, n.d., p.2). The aim was to use these personal stories to foster rapport with potential voters and engage in respectful discussion that progressively drilled down to identify the political issues most important to them. Relevant Labour policy could then be introduced to address those concerns, and arguments presented why Labour is better placed than other parties to operate in voters' interests.

However, Momentum's persuasive canvassing tactics may have had mixed success; as Ben recalled, "*in Bolton West in the General Election [2017] we increased Labour's vote by 4,000 but we also increased the Conservative vote by 4,000. I don't think that's a coincidence*." Not all Momentum members practised persuasive canvassing. For instance, before this project began, I participated in a canvassing event for the Margaret Greenwood campaign that

Grace recalled. Although there was a large group of around 50 volunteers and some may have been Momentum members, there was no mention of persuasive conversations, and instructions were to conduct standard GOTV canvassing. However, based on observations and interviews it appears that those who did use the tactic displayed one of two contrasting attitudes. Some members appeared to take an approach as though they were trying to sell the Labour Party on the doorstep. For example, one activist suggested that "*once you understand why they* [the voters] *think what they think, then you can construct an argument… why they're wrong*" (fieldnotes, 18 March 2018). Many volunteers who adopted this attitude voiced frustration with voters' views and admitted difficulty maintaining respect for their positions on a variety of issues, especially immigration. Conversely, other activists, including Ben and Alex, took the exercise as an opportunity to genuinely deepen their understanding of voters, viewing persuasive canvassing as "*a two-way process*" (fieldnotes, 18 March 2018). As Alex put it, "*you know, I want to have a conversation with the right wing person. I want to find out what they think. I want to find out how they tick.*"

Ben and Alex both felt participation in deep canvassing increased their empathy with what other activists considered objectionable opinions on immigration and Brexit. This then led them to challenge other activists' intolerance and disparagement of the socially conservative views held by some voters. They reported that this was met with hostility or even anger (see Chapter 7). Interestingly, many issues raised by the voters Ben and Alex encountered during their experiences conducting persuasive conversations led them to predict some of the explanations offered for Labour's GE2019 defeat (see Chapter 9). Some of the practical considerations associated with this tactic, not least the additional time required, could be examined more specifically in future research. Additionally, as touched on below, this tactic did not appear to have been promoted as heavily by Momentum during GE2019, and there is scope for an investigation as to its deployment during Corbyn's second general election as Labour Leader.

Although not an expert in sales or business, many of the tactics and advice in Momentum's Activist Handbook struck me as remarkably similar to those given in the context of persuasive sales, and this arguably reflects the influence of American

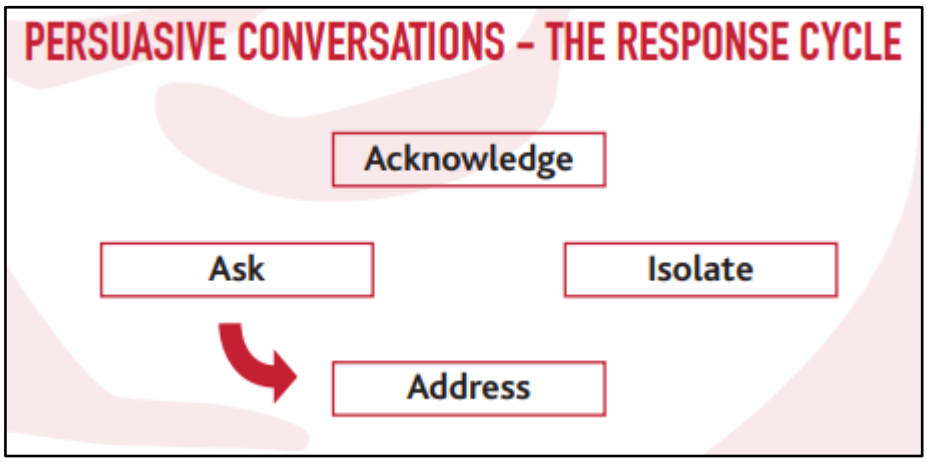
consumer culture in the approach. 'Solution selling', for example, is a well-established technique aimed at facilitating the sales process particularly for 'products or services [that are] hard to describe [or are] intangible' (Bosworth, 1994, back cover), which could easily describe the sale of political ideology. Similarities in advice appear in Momentum's (n.d.) *Activist Handbook*, and selected examples can be found below:

Table 3: Solution Selling and Momentum Canvassing

Solution Selling Advice (Bosworth, 1994)	Momentum Advice (Momentum, n.d.)
'people buy from people' (p.xx)	'make clear you're a member of the local community. You aren't a robot or an outsider conducting a poll' (p.5)
'diagnose before you prescribe' (p.xxii)	find 'the issue that matters to this person most so we can focus the conversation and use our best talking points to address this person's concern' (p.4)
'A salesperson's "conceptual" territory is filled with buyers who have latent needs or "pains" for his products or services', for which they can provide a solution (p.4)	'once you have isolated a voter's key issue, you can then introduction policy points and statistics that clearly address the voter's concern' (p.4)

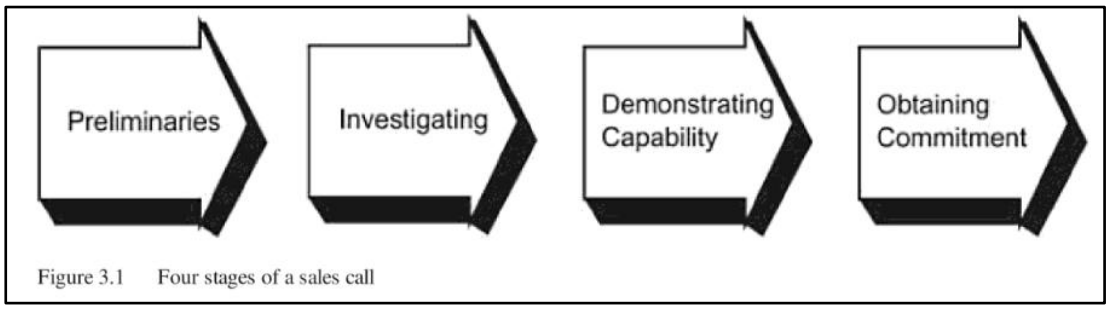
Further similarities can be found with SPIN®-selling (Rackham, 1995), particularly the cycles used to illustrate the process, as can be seen from the images below.

Image 3: Momentum's Persuasive Conversation Cycle



Momentum, n.d., p. 3

Image 4: SPIN®-Selling: Four stages of a sales call



Rackham, 1995, p.17

Especially notable is the way both cycles require the user to 'close the deal' by either 'obtaining commitment' (Rackham, 1994, p.17) or asking for the vote, as Momentum (n.d., p.4) does: 'Ask - you don't get anything you don't ask for. After addressing the person's concern, ask for support.' A more detailed comparison between Momentum's canvassing tactics and sales techniques could form the basis for future research.

5.3.3 Digital Campaigning

Momentum's digital activity during GE2017 built on systems that had been honed during Corbyn's two leadership campaigns, and the utilisation of members' online and social media networks represented a continuation of that established culture of digital organising. Overall, Momentum's Facebook content was aimed at 'energis[ing] certain elements of the electorate, engag[ing] with more radical information topics and engender[ing] virtual member participation' rather than pushing Labour's main policy positions and campaign messages (Hotham, 2021, p. 313). Momentum's communications were also more participatory in nature than content posted on Labour's or Corbyn's pages, with regular encouragement to follow links, share content or get involved offline. Through its organic approach and with the loosely controlled contributions of individual members, the group's satellite campaigning succeeded in tailoring online content, 'using different pages with different approaches to reach different audiences, thus presenting different faces of the same political party to the public' (Hotham, 2021, p.296). In contrast to official messaging, Momentum and its supporters regularly utilised humour, inventing 'new slang terms and in-jokes' designed to engage with potential voters and foster a sense of belonging and collective identity (Nunns, 2018, p.323). Walsh (2017, p.96) also observes this trend, describing Momentum's tactic of 'explicitly target[ing] the youth vote with satirical films and videos by credible political campaigners and

journalists, such as … Owen Jones and the writer Paul Mason.' Indeed, Momentum promoted content that was frequently recognised as edgier than customarily put out during political campaigns. The oft-cited Tory Britain 2030 video, which finishes with a daughter asking her Tory-voting father, "Daddy, do you hate me?" to which he replies "Obviously!" is perhaps the most well-known and widely viewed example of Momentum's 'use of meme-style humour' (Hotham, 2020, p.352).

Momentum's creative and varied social media content from GE2017 has been well covered in existing literature (e.g. Dennis, 2020; Dommett and Temple, 2017; Mackova, et al., 2020; Pickard, 2018; Rhodes, 2019; Thorsen, et al., 2017). However, key observations from a few focused analyses of Momentum's and Labour's use of social media during GE2017 are worth summarising. Hotham's (2020, p. i) doctoral thesis contrasts Labour's use of Facebook with Momentum's, arguing that Labour use Facebook as a 'digital recreation of a traditional offline campaign', whereas Momentum used it as part of a satellite campaign, focusing on 'partisan content' and 'using virtual members like official members.' Momentum avoided the use of rhetoric common on Labour's page, in favour of brevity, humour and encouragement to participate in offline activities as well as sharing and following links. Hotham (2020) notes that Momentum spent considerable time promoting Corbyn as leader and providing general political information, with less time on specific policy issues. Momentum preferred the use of experts or academics over that of celebrities, but interestingly 'used experts like celebrities, as figures such as Noam Chomsky have a large amount of cultural capital as left-wing figures' (Hotham, 2020, p.319), suggesting tailored content for more educated activists. However, it seems the Labour Party and Corbyn used Twitter much more than Momentum did during GE2017. According to Momentum's Twitter feed (@peoplesmomentum), the account was established in 2015; however, according to a study conducted by Cram, et al. (2017), during the election period it was not amongst the top twenty most mentioned accounts, or the top twenty re-tweeted accounts. In contrast, Corbyn topped both measures, with the official Labour Party account in second and third place respectively. There is some research to suggest that Momentum made greater use of Twitter during GE2019 (Bassett and Mills, 2021).

Innovative online tools were also developed and shared. For example, Momentum created My Nearest Marginal, an online site where users could enter their postcode to find information about nearby marginal seats and connect with other activists to

arrange carpooling arrangements for travel. Momentum aimed to move activists from canvassing in safe seats to marginals to increase Labour's chances of achieving a majority in Parliament. This was a key expression of Momentum's, and Corbyn's, more aggressive and optimistic approach to the election as compared to the Labour Party more generally (Forde, 2022). However, subsequent analyses suggest that the data underpinning the tool had an 'urban bias' and resulted in a 'misallocation of resources' (Temple, 2023, p. 10). In addition to the My Nearest Marginal tool, Whatsapp was heavily utilised by Ben's and many other local branches to coordinate these traditional election activities. The use of this social media platform was apparently so prominent, when asked to describe Momentum as an organisation, Alex called it "*a giant Whatsapp group*"; Whatsapp would become even more central to Momentum digital organising in GE2019 through its Digital Army (see Chapter 8). Supporters also designed their own campaign messages which were then taken up and promoted through Momentum's social media network. For example, in response to Corbyn's poor polling with older voters, Owen Jones created the 'Call Your Grandfolks' message which was promoted by Momentum via social media to encourage younger activists to initiate policy discussions with their relatives and encourage them to vote Labour (Rhodes, 2019).

Given the 'enormous' impact of social media and online activity overall during GE2017 (Kogan, 2019, p. 320) and the millions of people viewing Momentum's various online content (e.g. Nunns, 2018, p. 332), it seems likely that a large majority of Momentum members and supporters were aware of and involved in sharing Momentum's digital material over social media throughout the campaign period. Overall, however, it appears it may have been only a core group which created this material (e.g. see Judah, 2018; Kogan, 2019, pp.319-321; Nunns, 2018 pp.311-344). Rather, apart from sharing and promoting social media content, most of the activities grassroots members and supporters were encouraged to actively undertake were more traditional aspects of election campaigning, such as phone banking, leafleting and canvassing. Indeed, significant portions of Momentum's digital campaigning was in direct support of promoting these bread-and-butter elements of Labour's campaign (Mackova, et al., 2020). This is further evidenced, for example, by Momentum's NCG Report (2017b, p. 3), which details more than 50 'Campaign Weekends' in marginal seats, 38 training events run by volunteers experienced in Bernie Sanders's 2016 campaign, and signing up 'almost 10,000 people to "pledge the day" on polling day, knocking on 1.2 million doors.' Even My Nearest Marginal's primary purpose was to facilitate physical travel to marginal

seats to undertake door-knocking and other standard election campaign activities (Rhodes, 2019).

According to authors sympathetic to Momentum, these innovative tactics contributed directly to the surprise gains Labour made in terms of Parliamentary seats during GE2017, and Momentum's website boasts that 'of the 30 constituencies we targeted, all but five were won' (Momentum, 2021b, n.p.). This triumphant attitude towards GE2017 is echoed by activists observed during this project, manifesting in high expectations for GE2019. For example, one speaker at TWT 2019 suggested that "*winning elections is the easy part*" and wondered "*when we win - what happens then?*" (fieldnotes, 22 September 2018; see also Chapter 8). Although the significance of this will be discussed more critically in the next section, the optimistic assessment of Momentum's activities during GE2017 was formative in relation to activists' attitudes and expectations going into GE2019. Shortcomings and controversies aside, it is interesting to note that overall turnout for GE2017 increased more than 2.5% on GE2015 (House of Commons, 2019), and it would be difficult to categorically disprove Momentum's claims regarding its role in encouraging more people to participate in this poll.

5.4 Controversies relating to GE2017

5.4.1 Introduction

With hindsight, GE2017 arguably represents a high point in Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party. Although he did not win the election, the result was significantly better than expected, especially compared to what his critics were predicting (e.g. Temple, 2023). Overall, activists from Momentum took encouragement from their experience of the election campaign and emerged from the vote with renewed determination and optimism, and Corbyn's position as leader was strengthened (Murray, 2022). Despite this, however, there are some potential controversies alongside the positive narratives for GE2017. Discussion of GE2017 would not be complete and balanced without presentation of four key areas this research has identified that show Labour and Momentum's performance may not have been as clear cut as activists' prevailing depiction suggests.

5.4.2 Success?

After GE2017, despite losing the election, many Corbyn supporters and Momentum activists viewed the results a success on the basis that Labour 'won the largest increase in the Labour vote since 1945 and achieved Labour's best vote for a

generation' (Corbyn, 2017, n.p.). Indeed, this particular statistic forms a familiar refrain throughout the literature (e.g. Dorey, 2017, p.319; McGregor, 2017, p.16; Rustin, 2017, p.12; amongst others). Momentum called it an 'extraordinary electoral comeback' (Momentum, 2023, n.p.). This jubilant attitude was also evident in the June-July 2017 issue of *The Clarion*, 'a socialist magazine by Labour and Momentum activists' (The Clarion, 2018, n.p.). For example, Johns (2017, p.1) writes of a 'near fatal blow to Theresa May', and *The Clarion*'s (2017, p.6) suggested conference motion 'resolves to congratulate Jeremy Corbyn and the leadership.' Nunns (2018, p.376), Corbyn's former speechwriter, calls Labour's performance 'the most stunning surge of British political history' and claims 'all of Labour's success came in the campaign itself.' Soon after the election, Corbyn declared that Labour was now a 'Government-in-waiting,' and announced he would remain in 'permanent campaign mode on a general election footing' (Syal, 2017, n.p.).

Elsewhere, Harrop (2017, p.395) commends the 'extraordinary' performance by Labour. McGregor (2017, p.17), interestingly, exclaims that the result was 'the complete opposite' of the electoral endorsement Theresa May wanted, going on to suggest that 'it seems it is only a matter of time before Corbyn is elected prime minister and has to form a government' (p.22). Rustin (2017, p.7) explicitly calls the campaign a 'success': 'Corbyn's campaign has now demonstrated that a politics based on the rejection of neoliberalism … is capable of electoral success.' These sentiments closely mirror the dominant narrative around GE2017 that pervaded TWT events and my conversations with grassroots activists during other observations and interviews (e.g. fieldnotes, 22 September 2018 and 29 July 2019). As one illustrative example, at Momentum's first Zoom call of the GE2019 campaign, activist and guest speaker Ash Sarkar recalled anticipating "*a Tory majority for the rest of my life*" when Theresa May announced GE2017,

> *but I was wrong! And I've never been more pleased to be wrong […] It was a huge electoral upset. I remember the feeling of when, you know, the sort of exit polls came through. Complete chaos. A friend of mine like literally flung a pizza across the room out of joy and celebration* (fieldnotes, 30 October 2019).

Momentum's NCG (2017b, p.2) Action Report following the election 'congratulat[es] staff on effective campaign' and identifies 'challenges ahead - including: maintaining "momentum" and building on success'. In general, it appears that if an activist or

writer supported Corbyn, GE2017 was considered a resounding endorsement of his leadership despite the best efforts of his political opponents. This assessment persisted over time and underpinned the widespread optimism surrounding the GE2019 campaign, discussed in Chapter 8.

Critiques of the success narrative are often met with explanations relating to the perceived hostility towards Corbyn amongst Labour Party staff. Many activists appear to harbour a genuine and deeply held belief that Corbyn would have been prime minister had the Labour Party fully committed to supporting his GE2017 campaign. As one activist put it at TWT2018, Corbyn was persistently "*lambasted by the right of the party*" (fieldnotes, 22 September 2018). Some of this has been substantiated by the recent Forde Report (2022), which found evidence of significant factional conflict during GE2017. The Forde Report is extensive and carefully prepared, providing a detailed and balanced examination of the allegations around Labour Party staff conduct during GE2017. Its suggestion, therefore, that it is 'highly unlikely' that factionalism caused Labour to lose the election carries some weight (Forde, 2022, p. 62). Statistics exist that further challenge the success narrative, such as the fact May maintained 85% of the Conservative vote compared to GE2015 (Payne, 2021). Although this project had not yet started, I witnessed Labour's campaign as a registered voter and recall agreeing with Momentum that GE2017 represented an incredible opportunity for Labour to succeed in taking control of Parliament; Corbyn would surely never face weaker opposition than the 'Maybot' (Crace, 2016). Despite briefly enjoying the exuberant and hopeful atmosphere after Labour's gains had been announced as well as watching the humiliation of May being forced cap-in-hand to the DUP to form a coalition, many Labour supporters, neighbours and colleagues I spoke to at the time felt terribly let down by both Corbyn and Momentum: Labour had missed an open goal, and once the dust settled the factional conflict would not just go away. Even worse, Britain was facing yet another term of Conservative governance.

5.4.3 Youthquake?

In the immediate aftermath of GE2017, a dominant theme in election analyses was the idea of a 'youthquake'. Corbyn had run a youth-focussed campaign, with an emphasis on digital campaigning and social media, endorsement from celebrities and internet influencers, and appearances at music concerts, such as the Wirral Live Music Festival on 20 May 2017 which saw the genesis of the 'Oh, Je-re-my Corbyn' White Stripes refrain (Nunns, 2018; Pickard, 2019). Corbyn had become a

celebrity, particularly amongst young people attracted by his anti-establishment rhetoric: as Pickard (2019, p. 324) observes, 'very quickly, Jeremy Corbyn became the focus of the campaign from a bottom-up movement, which developed clearly into a cult of the personality with the ensuing "Corbynmania"'. Certainly, images of young people on the campaign trail were much more prominent in the media reports than in previous elections, and it has been argued that the hopeful, youthful, underdog campaign run by Corbyn appealed more to young people than Theresa May's (e.g. Pickard, 2019). Those involved directly with Corbyn's campaign observed high numbers of young people joining Labour and Momentum (e.g. Nunns, 2018), and arguments were made that Labour's unexpected gains had to come from somewhere. The most obvious explanation was that his efforts to entice young people into voting must have worked. This seemed even more likely when initial polling from Ipsos MORI indicated a potential turnout increase of either 16% (Prosser, et al., 2018) or 21% (Pickard, 2019) for the 18-24 year old age bracket, and other polls also supported an increase in youth turnout alongside an increase in the proportion of young people voting for Labour (Allsop and Kisby, 2019). Other authors writing more contemporaneously, such as Dorey (2017), attributed electoral gains to a combination of younger voters, support from the AB socioeconomic band and the effectiveness of social media in countering the mainstream media narratives. However, the belief in the role of young people was so strong, the word 'youthquake' was made word of the year by the Oxford English Dictionary (Pickard, 2019). This data matched activists' experiences and perceptions, validating their interpretation of the election results.

However, the British Election Study's (BES) post-election analysis that was published in early 2018, told a different story. From their data, there was no strong evidence to support a significant rise in turnout amongst younger voters, and that there may have even been a decline (Prosser, et al., 2018). A fierce debate ensued, with some authors like Allsop and Kisby (2019) and Pickard (2019) defending the youthquake narrative. These authors made arguments about the reliability of the methods used by BES, pointing primarily to the small sample size alongside the contrast between their results and the perceived atmosphere of the campaign period. As a non-expert in electoral analysis, it is difficult to make an assessment of the relative strengths of these two positions or conduct my own analysis of the raw data. However, I have some general observations regarding the arguments that have been made.

Firstly, some argue that the British Election Study is the 'gold standard measure of electoral behaviour in Britain since 1964' (Prosser, et al., 2018, n.p.). Regardless of the truth in this claim, there is a strength in having a consistent measure, with a stable method, that can be compared over time (Scarbrough, 2000). Furthermore, there is considerable merit in the argument that verifying whether a respondent actually voted strengthens the reliability of the data (Prosser, et al., 2018). Although some have criticised the 'proprietary model' of the BES and its lack of innovation (e.g. Scarbrough, 2000), it seems that these are more general complaints and that they do not necessarily impact on the reliability of the data itself, particularly in terms of the relationship between turnout and age. That is, the main criticisms seem to be not that the BES data is questionable, but that it does not give a complete or detailed enough picture of electoral behaviour or that definitions of identifiers such as class should be revisited and updated. It appears, then, that there may be strength in the argument that the data is reliable and that if there had been a surge in youth turnout, the BES could have been expected to show this relative to the turnout for previous elections due to its consistent method. Indeed, although Corbyn supporters may well question the role of institutional bias, the mainstream media did appear to generally reverse their position and adopt the narrative of the 'youthquake myth' as based on the BES results (e.g. Kentish, 2018).

Furthermore, although Pickard (2019) remains convinced that the overall turnout in younger age groups did in fact increase as shown by the earlier surveys, she also points to an increase in the proportion of young people voting Labour around which there is more agreement between the different polls. Another strand of Pickard's (2019, p.338) critique of the BES centres around accusing the authors of being too 'unequivocal' and using 'hyperbole and sensationalism' to publicise their findings. This criticism seems interesting, considering the reactions of Corbyn supporters to GE2017 presented above, alongside the fact that the BES team reports that there is no clear evidence for a particular rise in youth turnout, whilst Pickard prefers the data that shows a jump of more than 20%. Although she takes the time to refute BES's quantitative findings, Pickard further suggests that analyses of elections should move beyond quantitative data and prioritise capturing the qualitative experiences of young people during GE2017. Like Pickard, other authors have argued that actual youth turnout numbers are not as important as general youth engagement in politics. For instance, Sloam, et al. (2018) and Allsop and Kisby (2019) suggest a broader view of the concept of 'youthquake' would emphasise the visibly high levels of youth activism during GE2017. My observations and interviews

suggest that, amongst younger activists, those who joined Momentum were often already politicised, in that they participated in social movements, protests and/or the trade union movement (like Olivia and Catherine), or even were just generally interested in politics prior to becoming members (Simon). As such, they are arguably likely to have voted anyway, and the hypothesis that Momentum increased politicisation rather than inspiring previously uninterested young people could be explored further. Also, as Prosser, et al. (2018, n.p.) have rightly noted,

> People who don't vote also tend to be more reluctant to take surveys. The end result is that we can end up with too many voters in surveys, making surveys insufficiently representative of the general population (problems that led to the polls going awry in 2015). Second, some people will tell you they voted when they actually didn't. … The BES face-to-face survey is different to other types of survey, which tend to be conducted via the internet and over the phone. Those methods are particularly prone to problems of response bias – the types of people who do surveys online or on the phone are more likely to vote than the population as whole.

These arguments are compelling, even if they do not address concerns over the small sample size. Finally, considering Labour lost the election and the Conservatives retained control of Parliament through their coalition with the DUP, it is arguable whether GE2017 sufficiently reflects the Oxford English Dictionary's requirement for 'significant cultural, political or social change' in order to constitute a 'youthquake' (Cain, 2017, n.p.). However, activists cannot be blamed for wanting to defend a key source of optimism and pride arising from the GE2017 campaign, and inspiring any number of young people to engage politically is commendable. Momentum's membership and supporter numbers are testament to their influence and effectiveness in increasing political activism and engagement during this period even if the turnout data remains contested.

5.4.4 Activist Bubbles?

Another area inspiring considerable debate was whether pro-Corbyn activists suffered from a 'bubble' or 'echo chamber' effect, resulting in a struggle to break through to new audiences as well as a misperception of support for Corbyn amongst the electorate. There has been fierce resistance to this suggestion, not least because it appears to contradict the success narrative surrounding GE2017. For example, Rhodes (2019), 'an established Officer in Nottingham Momentum' (p.171), reports that 100,000 people accessed My Nearest Marginal which was 'almost four

times the number of Momentum members at the time' indicating that the reach went far beyond an 'activist bubble' (p.178). This is very similar to what Momentum National Coordinator, Adam Klug, claimed: 'we reached out way beyond our own bubble - we have only 24,000 members' (The Week, 2017, n.p.). These same figures were reported by many others, including the BBC (Therrien, 2017, n.p.): 'Momentum says the website was used by over 100,000 people - more than four times its 24,000 membership.'

However, Rhodes (2018, p.175) later cites 200,000 supporters *plus* 31,000 members 'at the time of writing' which correlates with the membership count in autumn 2017 (Farrell, 2017). Klug (2016, n.p.) wrote in October 2016 that they had '20,000 paying members and over ten times as many supporters', which would be over 200,000 supporters. These supporter figures warrant closer inspection in the context of the claim that Momentum successfully reached beyond the 'activist bubble'. Contemporaneous reports of Momentum membership during GE2017 are silent on the number of supporters, but the numbers above still provide an indication that registered supporters must have numbered in the many thousands during GE2017. It seems appropriate to assume that a significant proportion of the official supporters would at least occasionally access Momentum's online resources, particularly during an election campaign. I was not a registered supporter of Momentum during GE2017, but was for the duration of this project's data collection including GE2019; judging by the volume of emails I received inviting me to participate in Momentum's online activities, it is almost certain that supporters will have been invited to use My Nearest Marginal at least once during GE2017. If only around half of Momentum's supporters visited the site once during the campaign, this would have resulted in 100,000 people using My Nearest Marginal.

Other authors have found direct evidence to suggest 'activist bubbles' existed. For example, Melias and Banaji's (2020, p.153) ethnographic study of Momentum during 2017 identified evidence of '"filter bubble[s]" [created] by speaking within their narrowly defined, self-selecting audiences rather than across or reaching out to diverse groups of young people and political audiences.' Similarly, Pickard (2019, p.323) notes that 'the traditional mainstream media is consumed increasingly only by older electors, whereas young people are increasingly accessing news through online-only platforms in an echo chamber of pro-Corbyn discourse and thus bypassing the virulent anti-Corbyn coverage.' Furthermore, although 100,000 sounds like a large number of people, this represents only 0.2% of the UK GE2017

electorate of 46.8 million voters (House of Commons, 2019). Additionally, Momentum cannot report how many of those 100,000 who input their postcode to the website actually participated in any campaigning in their 'nearest marginal'. It is also difficult or even impossible to determine how many may have utilised it more than once for different postcodes. University students may have checked both their home and term time addresses, and I myself input two different postcodes as I was in the process of a house move at the time. In this context, the achievement loses some of its sensationalism.

The situation described above showcases potential pitfalls in the academic exploration of phenomena that are closely aligned with personal politics and how this potentially engenders a reduction in objectivity and criticality. Apparent reliance on data from grey literature such as news articles or official statements in academic publications by committed activists, such as Rhodes's (2019) chapter in the book series *Political Communication in Britain* (cited above), could be seen as potentially problematic. Another self-confessed Momentum member, McDougall (2016, p.24) writes about the importance of media literacy and 'telling the truth' in promoting left-wing causes and countering right wing politics. However, on the basis of the above observations it seems left-wing activists and writers are not immune to being influenced by political agenda, manifesting in tendencies towards framing statistics to support the desired narrative. This is also connected to Hotham's (2020) observation that Momentum Facebook posts utilised 'experts' more than celebrities, but that they were used *as* celebrities. Utilising 'truth' from 'experts' appears to be a strategy to set themselves as firmly opposed to and different from what has been dubbed 'post-truth', which is frequently associated with Donald Trump and right wing politics (e.g. Kakutani, 2018). However, the above is perhaps yet another example of how any statistic can be manipulated to suit the desired message, and also casts doubt over the attitude that the left has a monopoly on the truth. Especially in this 'post-truth' era, academics have a responsibility to test the messages being put out by those with a clear political agenda, even, and perhaps especially, if they agree with the electoral aims or ideology.

Some Momentum activists also observed a bubble or echo chamber effect that they felt impacted on Momentum's ability to connect to ordinary voters. Deep canvassing experiences provided Alex an opportunity to observe fellow activists more objectively, and realise that he had been part of a bubble himself:

> *You realise what a bubble you're in, and so they're holding the movement back. So the deep canvassing thing for me personally, [...] it was more an educational thing for myself. It's important to have conversations with people who are different than you. Just trying to piece the worldview together, and bit by bit you start seeing all the Momentum people just not even being able to.... it's like watching two different people, speaking two different languages. [...] I kind of didn't realise what a bubble I was in. But I tend to find that, most of them, they're just still locked in that kind of bubble.*

Olivia, possibly even accidentally, also acknowledged the existence of a Momentum bubble, through her reflections on being a local councillor: *"and it's really good because as a councillor, you sort of step out of the bubble of left-wing and Momentum and organising, you actually see that you are all working towards something together*." The potential role of the bubble or echo chamber effect in culturally excluding large sections of the electorate will be examined further as part of the analysis in Chapter 9.

5.4.5 Financial Impropriety?

In December 2017, mainstream media reported that the Electoral Commission would be investigating Momentum for potential breaches of campaign finance rules (e.g. Elgot, 2017; Pickard and Martin, 2017). According to the Commission's final report, the investigation actually commenced on 16 November 2017. The Commission (2019, n.p.) states that

> We investigated whether Momentum had broken campaign finance laws after we received a non-compliant spending and donation report following the general election [2017]. While investigating, we found evidence that Momentum may have committed further offences, this time in its capacity as a members association in 2016 and 2017. We expanded the investigation accordingly.

It was alleged that, as a non-party organisation, Momentum did not receive the required express authorisation from the Labour Party to exceed the maximum allowance of £39,000 for campaign-related spending across the UK, as well as other breaches including failing to properly declare donations post-poll and submit complete and accurate financial reports and accounts within the required timescales. Additionally, as a members association, which is an organisation 'made up wholly or mainly of members of a single registered political party', it was accused of failing to declare donations exceeding £7,500 within the required timescale (The Electoral Commission, 2019, n.p.). The report noted that 'Momentum did not

cooperate fully with the investigation' by failing to provide required information and clarifications within reasonable timescales, as well as 'repeatedly query[ing] the basis for our investigation and the information we requested' (The Electoral Commission, 2019, n.p.). As a result, the investigation was delayed and made more complex, and a decision was taken to cut off the enquiries after a number of the allegations had been substantiated. The allegation that Momentum exceeded its maximum spending during GE2017 was not verified, but most of the other breaches taking place between 2016 and 2017 were, and resulted in fines totalling £16,700. The Electoral Commission (2019, n.p.) admitted that this was 'the biggest fine we have to date levied on a non-party campaigner', but insisted that it reflected 'Momentum's repeated revisions to their spending return, poor record keeping, and failure to follow our advice prior to the election.' Cllr Puru Miah, Michael Chessum and Mohammed Afridi, former Treasurers and Finance Officers for Momentum, were named personally in the report.

On one hand, it could be seen as unsurprising that Momentum, staffed mainly by younger movement activists, should struggle to negotiate financial reporting rules. Governmental bureaucracy can be complex for those inexperienced with the processes. Much of Momentum's time and resources from 2015-17 will also have been taken up with the two leadership campaigns and establishing its own structures, potentially leaving insufficient opportunity to prepare for the more technical aspects of the GE2017 campaign. Additionally, there may have been a naive lack of awareness that electoral rules actually applied to Momentum, as it was not a political party in its own right. Indeed, Laura Parker, Momentum's National Coordinator when the fine was announced, made similar arguments in a public statement. As reported by BBC News (2019, n.p.),

> the watchdog 'did find some mistakes in our reporting and some clerical errors', but [she] added that this 'was not surprising for a new organisation. The fines were disproportionate [for] incredibly minor offences. … There were also various mitigating circumstances which should be taken into account. Momentum was a new, volunteer-led organisation and this was the first time we had to follow these regulations.'

Furthermore, in the jubilant aftermath GE2017, it is easy to imagine Momentum officers finding direct action to build on the 'momentum' of the campaign more attractive than governmental bureaucracy, and prioritising their time and energy accordingly.

However, a sympathetic perspective glosses over important circumstances that contribute to a more balanced assessment of this embarrassing press exposure. Firstly, The Electoral Commission's report suggests that Momentum was given specific advice regarding compliance before the election. The report does not provide details as to what this advice was, but it can be assumed that it was provided to assist Momentum to avoid breaching electoral rules. Also according to the report, had Momentum's GE2017 breaches been avoided, the historical infractions committed prior to the election would not have come to light. Secondly, not all of the individuals occupying senior positions within Momentum were young and inexperienced. Cllr Miah, Treasurer of Momentum during GE2017 and the individual found responsible for a majority of the offences, reportedly possessed legal qualifications and worked for a London magistrates' court, as well as being an executive officer in his local CLP (Brooke, 2019). Jon Lansman, veteran Labour activist, was chair of Momentum throughout the period from 2015-2020 and was director from its inception until he resigned on 10 January 2017 (Companies House, 2023b). Lansman had worked on Labour Party campaigns since the 1980s, as discussed in the previous chapter, and as such may have been expected to be well placed to assist Momentum with regulatory compliance. Although he was not an active director of Momentum during the general election campaign, seasoned Labour NEC member, Christine Shawcroft, took over from Lansman as director from 10 January 2017 until April 2019 (Companies House, 2023b). Presumably, she also could have been of assistance to Momentum in avoiding breaches of electoral rules, or in facilitating official authorisation from Labour in regards to its electoral spend.

It must also be pointed out that The Electoral Commission (2019, n.p.) found 'some evidence' to suggest Momentum overspent, although the records provided were 'not adequate to provide a reliable record' of their spending; as such the commission 'could not make a finding of an offence.' However, Momentum communicated a somewhat different version to members, stating that 'The Electoral Commission have ruled we didn't overspend in the 2017 election' (email 'RE: Electoral Commission', dated 7 March 2019). Momentum's inversion of the findings fundamentally misrepresents the meaning of the Commission's report, communicating an exoneration rather than a lack of conclusive evidence, and is another instance of Momentum manipulating information to suit their agenda and desired message. Finally, the Commission reportedly adopted a stricter attitude towards the regulation of electoral spending surrounding GE2017 than it had taken

previously (Elgot, 2017), and several other non-party organisations were also found to have committed breaches. This could be taken as mitigation for Momentum's rule violations; however, 'in most cases' these other groups did not incur any fines (Temple, 2023, p.11). Assuming the general integrity of The Electoral Commission, this suggests Momentum's infractions were significant in comparison. Regardless, a damaging investigation by an electoral watchdog was negative press that Momentum did not need, and could have perhaps done more to avoid.

5.5.5 Concluding Remarks

In all interactions and events associated with this research, activists and supporters demonstrated a distinct lack of criticality in relation to GE2017. Momentum and its members wanted success, and wholeheartedly adopted the narrative that allowed them to feel victorious. Corbyn did perform better than predicted, although because he did not win, activists' victory was not over the Tories, but over the right wing of the Party in terms of defying expectations and gaining seats despite perceived non-cooperation or even sabotage from within. Regardless of the truth of the situation, Momentum members and supporters ascribed a level of blame on their factional opponents for Corbyn's failure to become Prime Minister in 2017. This undoubtedly contributed to and fuelled the internal factional conflict that continued after GE2017, but the energy and optimism associated with the surprising result carried members into the next period of activity, which will be explored in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6: Momentum's Activities Between General Elections

6.1 Introduction

Having had three consecutive summers since 2015 dominated by active campaigns, and intervening periods focused on establishing organisational structure and processes, after GE2017 Momentum finally had the space to expend more resources and energy on other areas. Activity between the general elections falls into five broad areas: campaigning for Labour and against the Conservatives; campaigning within Labour; supporting extra-parliamentary campaigns and causes; fundraising; and continuing its national education programme, including TWT. Organisational challenges during this period will also be discussed, including antisemitism allegations and managing Momentum's internal democratic processes.

6.2 Campaigning for Labour and against the Conservatives

In support of Corbyn's permanent campaign mode, Momentum launched the Unseat campaign shortly following GE2017. 'In partnership with Owen Jones', Unseat continued to target marginal seats with intensive canvassing days supported by social events for activists (Momentum, 2021b, n.p.). A strategic assessment was made that another general election could be called soon, and therefore activists were urged to continue active campaigning in constituencies. High profile targets were publicised, such as Boris Johnson's and Ian Duncan Smith's seats (Momentum, 2021b). A 'council edition' of My Nearest Marginal was launched for the local elections in May 2018 (email dated 19 April 2018). Local branches were also encouraged by Momentum to continue persuasive canvassing to build on the positive energy from GE2017 and bolster support for Corbyn and the Party. Locally, activists recorded valuable data regarding voters' impressions of Corbyn and the Labour Party, with one woman offering a particularly damning opinion:

> Voter: *Labour people aren't Labour people like they were. They aren't representative. They don't dress as a labour person.*
>
> Activist: *Do you mean like working class?*
>
> Voter: *Yeah. They are <u>not</u> working class. [Corbyn] is too far up his own arse*" (Wadeson, 2017).

Local activists also used creative initiative, employing colourful props to help initiate conversations with voters in town centres instead of on the doorstep. Some of these interactions were filmed and subsequently posted to YouTube:

Image 5: Screenshot from Persuasive Canvassing YouTube Video

Wadeson, 2017

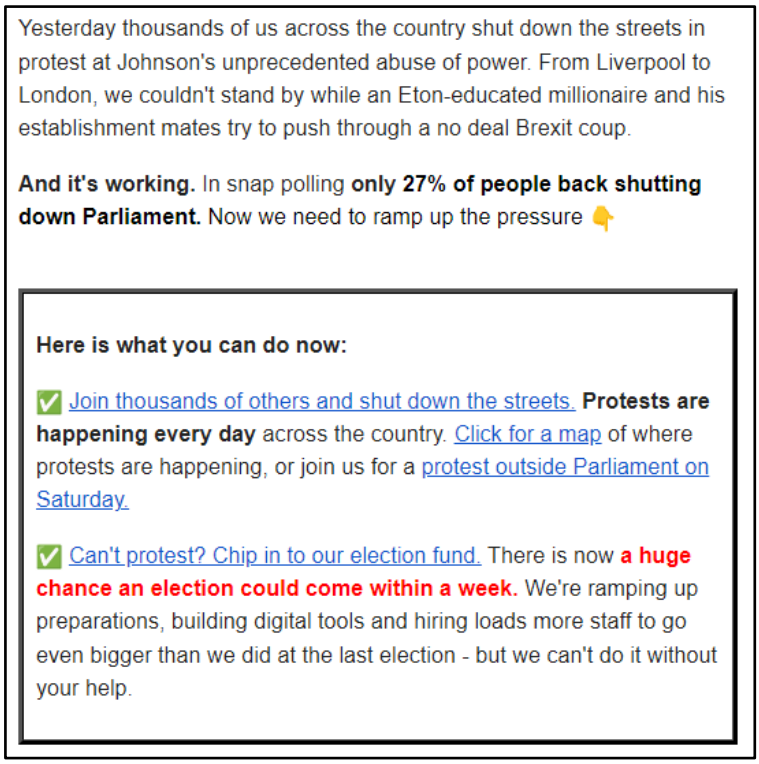
Post-GE2019, similar sentiments have been observed by analysts; for instance Murray (2022, pp.30-31) identifies Corbyn as 'the living embodiment of the politics of mass protest, of resistance to austerity and war,' but that this also made him 'so entirely unacceptable to mainstream social democracy - he was not one of them.' This voter also shared criticisms of international aid, suggesting that starving children in Britain should be supported before sending funds internationally. Interestingly, at the same time she also said she voted to Remain in the EU, although demonstrating some confusion over the issue. Again, the conversations with voters during these persuasive canvassing activities led some activists to identify some of the difficulties Labour was having connecting to the general public, and foreshadow key points discussed in the post-GE2019 analysis.

Overall, Brexit provided an important national battleground during this period, and in autumn 2018 Momentum nationally threw its weight behind lobbying MPs to reject May's proposed deal (Momentum, 2021b). The hope was that if the deal was defeated, this would trigger another general election and Corbyn would be able to capitalise on the energy carried over from GE2017, as supporters were informed when Momentum launched their VoteDownTheDeal.co.uk tool in November 2018.

Following a poll of Momentum members which showed significant opposition to the deal, Momentum directed members towards this online tool to help them write to their local MPs, circulated a number of 'viral videos', publicised a petition, and launched a related fundraising drive (Momentum, 2021b, n.p.). Notably, this was the only occasion that any interview participants could recall Momentum carrying out an online member vote on policy since the changes to its constitution following the 'Lansman coup' (Ben); this will be revisited in Section 6.7.3 below. Unfortunately, despite the repeated rejection of the deal by Parliament and May's consequent resignation as Prime Minister, a general election was not called. Instead, the Conservative Party initiated a leadership contest which saw Boris Johnson installed as Prime Minister without a public vote.

In August 2019, shortly after becoming Conservative Leader, Johnson provided an opportunity for grassroots members to get more actively involved in the issue, through his decision to prorogue Parliament. Opponents claimed this would reduce the timescale for legislation to prevent a no-deal Brexit and therefore significantly strengthen Johnson's position on Brexit negotiations (e.g. Elgot and Stewart, 2019). Following impromptu protests across the country against Johnson's prorogation of Parliament on 28 August, Momentum emailed supporters on 29 August to promote further protests that were being quickly organised, encouraging supporters to attend:

Image 6: From email 'We'll shut down the streets', dated 29 August 2019



Yesterday thousands of us across the country shut down the streets in protest at Johnson's unprecedented abuse of power. From Liverpool to London, we couldn't stand by while an Eton-educated millionaire and his establishment mates try to push through a no deal Brexit coup.

And it's working. In snap polling **only 27% of people back shutting down Parliament.** Now we need to ramp up the pressure 👇

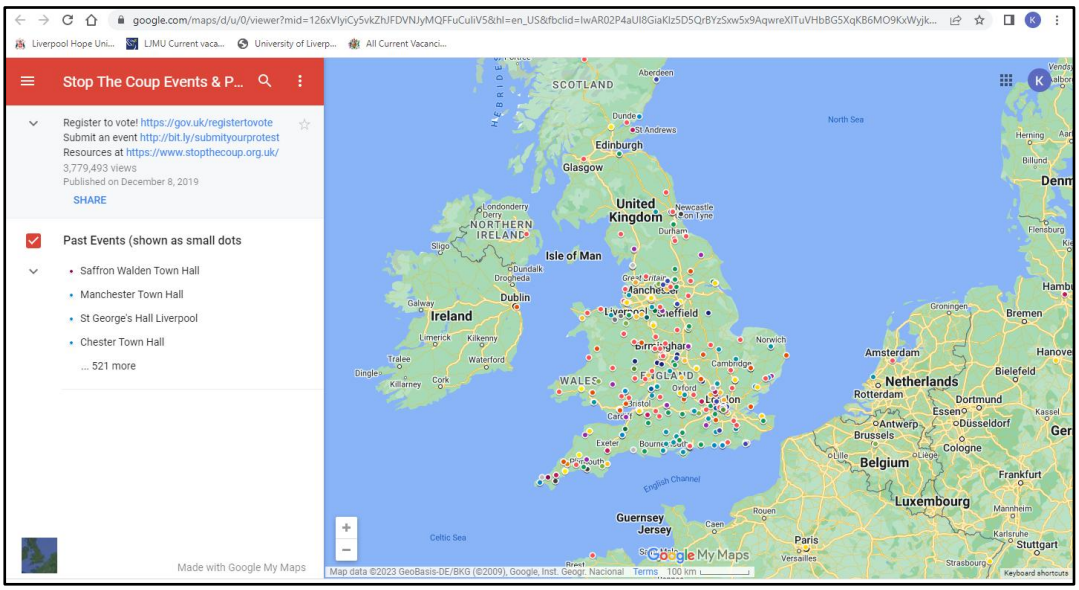
Here is what you can do now:

✅ Join thousands of others and shut down the streets. **Protests are happening every day** across the country. Click for a map of where protests are happening, or join us for a protest outside Parliament on Saturday.

✅ Can't protest? Chip in to our election fund. There is now **a huge chance an election could come within a week.** We're ramping up preparations, building digital tools and hiring loads more staff to go even bigger than we did at the last election - but we can't do it without your help.

A Google My Map was created by activists from Another Europe is Possible as part of an ‘information hub called Stop The Coup’ (The Alternative, 2019, n.p.), and could be updated online by activists and individuals by submitting a Google form with the details of planned protest events:

Image 7: Stop the Coup Events and Protests Map



Stop The Coup, 2019

The map was shared and promoted by Momentum through a link in the email, and the protest against Johnson’s actions clearly aligned with the ongoing pro-Labour, anti-Conservative campaign the group was leading nationwide. Responding to Momentum’s endorsement of the campaign, I accessed the map and attended a local protest on 31 August 2019, which was held in front of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. As with other events I attended as part of this project, the crowd was predominantly younger or older, with few middle-aged or families with children, although the number of families increased slightly as the event progressed. The general atmosphere was very quiet to begin with, with people talking softly in small groups. However, by noon I estimated a few hundred people had gathered. A wide variety of accents, British and European, could be heard although the group was overwhelmingly white, as with other events observed. Many were wearing European flags as capes, and I overheard one person comment that it was “*kind of superhero*” (fieldnotes, 31 August 2019). Once music was turned on, the general mood lightened to a certain extent. There were Unite, UNISON and Labour Party banners, a Pride flag, and humourous placards with messages such as ‘Buck Foris’ and ‘pierogi not proroguing’ alongside the ‘Stop Tory Brexit’ posters handed out by

organisers. Interestingly, Momentum did not feature prominently, although I was told later that many local Momentum members were in attendance. The tone of the event was pointedly pro-Europe, with Remain and Brexit dominating the discourse rather than party politics.

Image 8: Prorogation Protest, Liverpool, 31 August, 2019

Jewell, 2019, n.p.

Although the event was organised at very short notice, the poor quality of the sound equipment significantly affected the impact of the speakers. This contributed to a muted feeling to the crowd as many seemed to be straining to hear what was being said. There were some attempts to start chants, but these were not met with particular enthusiasm and quickly died down. Overall, it seemed that protesters were underwhelmed, as illustrated by the following comments I overheard as the crowd was dispersing (fieldnotes, 31 August 2019):

> *I thought we would protest for more than three quarters of an hour.*
> *I wish there was a march.*
> *They need a decent PA system.*

However, no one in the crowd felt strongly enough to exercise individual initiative to extend the event.

I wished to observe this protest more objectively, and was at one point mistaken for a reporter as I took notes; as such, I had no intention of getting carried away with active participation. Nevertheless, no amount of imagination could support a comparison with the energy experienced during other similar events I have attended

in the past, such as anti-fascist marches and Stop The War protests. It felt as though many activists were weary, and this may be linked to the over-exaggerated efforts I observed from Momentum staff to inspire enthusiasm and energy during the GE2019 campaign that followed these events by only a few months. According to Stop The Coup (2019), over 500 protests took place across the country and abroad, so this single experience is unlikely to be representative of the events overall. However, from the perspective of a local grassroots activist, attending this event would most likely not have been effective in providing inspiration to participate in future action, and may have even served to dampen any existing enthusiasm. It is also notable that, overall, the protests were ultimately unsuccessful in reversing prorogation, and the issue soon became peripheral in light of fast-moving developments during autumn 2019.

6.3 Campaigning within Labour

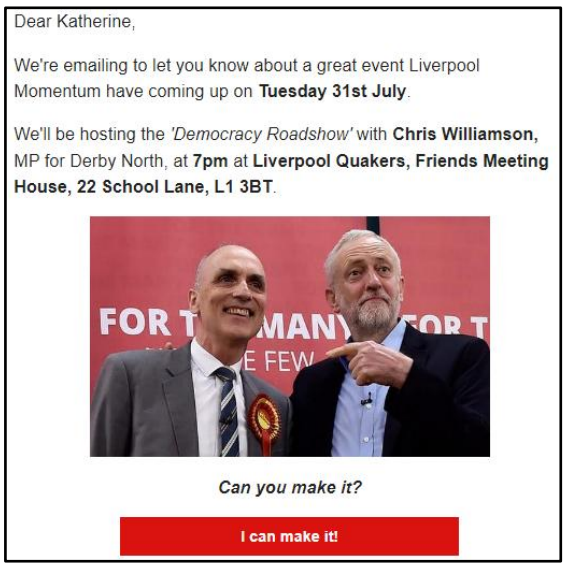
Alongside national campaigning for Corbyn and Labour, Momentum expended significant resources on activities within the Party. Momentum's activities inside Labour generally fall into four categories: lobbying for democratic reform, including participation in the Democracy Review and support of MP Chris Williamson's Democracy Roadshow; drafting recommended conference motions on national policy priorities; producing slates and endorsing candidates for internal elections; and coordinating and supporting reselection campaigns in local wards and constituencies, including campaigns against MPs who left Labour for the short-lived Change UK party.

Momentum's support for democratic reform within Labour is directly linked to Corbyn and Lansman's connections with the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD). The CLPD was established in 1973, arising in connection to an internal Party conflict between the right and left wings over proposed constitutional reforms that would make the Party leadership more accountable to the Party Conference, and, by extension, the grassroots membership (Jones, 1996). In 1979, the CLPD successfully lobbied to increase the accountability of MPs to their local constituency branches, and to this end the Labour Conference 'accepted the principle of mandatory reselection for sitting MPs' (Jones, 1996, p. 110). This opened the door to changes to candidate selection processes, which were officially adopted at the 1981 Labour Conference following a narrow vote (Shaw, 2018). From 1981 until 1993, when opponents succeeded in overturning the changes, sitting MPs were not automatically selected to defend their seats as they had been previously. Rather,

open competitions were held in advance of elections to decide candidate selection (Shaw, 2018).

There were different sides to this debate, but fighting for a selection process that avoids automatic reselection of elected politicians has been an important strategy for the left wing of the Party, seen as a key vehicle for gaining traction and power within the PLP. The logic was that if more left wing candidates were selected and went on to win Parliamentary seats, the balance of power in the PLP would shift left. In this way, the Labour Left could utilise their strength they feel they have amongst the grassroots by mobilising members at the local constituency level to select left-wing candidates. After the overturning of mandatory reselection in 1993, the CLPD continued to campaign for its reintroduction. A longstanding member of the CLDP, Corbyn gave new impetus to this issue and was supported by Momentum's campaigning amongst grassroots members, particularly in advance of the Labour Conference in 2018 (e.g. Mortimer, 2018). As part of his efforts to reignite the debate on open selections, Corbyn commissioned a Democracy Review, published just prior to Conference in September 2018, which recommended open selections for both local and Parliamentary candidates, essentially a return to the CLPD's system for selection (Labour Party, 2018) aimed at increasing grassroots activist power (Edwards, 2017). MP Chris Williamson launched a 'Democracy Roadshow' in the summer of 2018, during which he toured the UK promoting open selection (Bassett Yerrell, 2020). Local Momentum branches often supported this, and for example Liverpool Momentum hosted an event, which took place on 31 July 2018:

Image 9: From email 'Chris Williamson's Democracy Roadshow', dated 19 July 2018



Nationally, Momentum organised a petition supporting open selection, promoted through the national press as well as through direct emails to members:

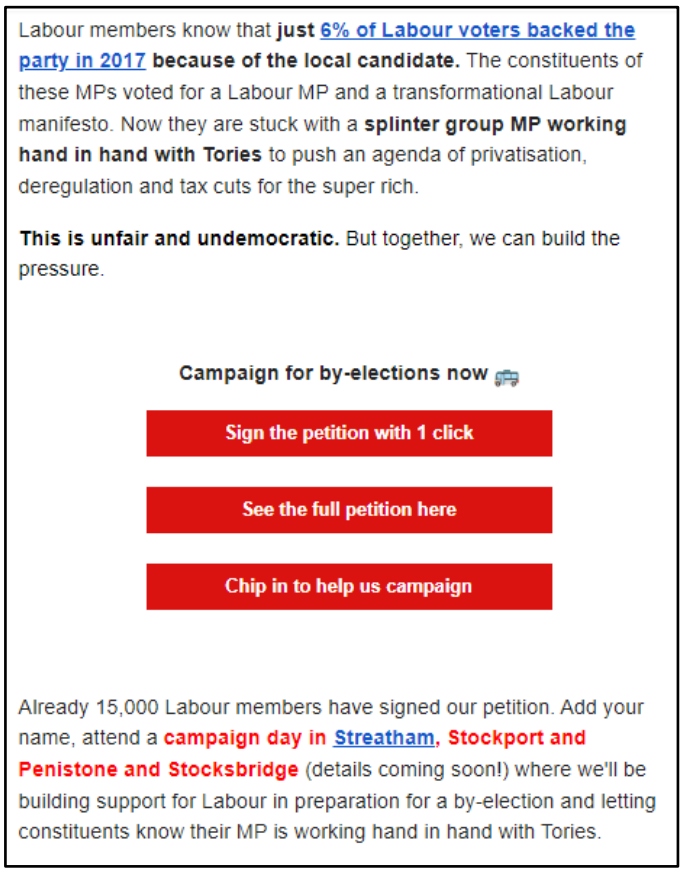
Image 10: From email 'Let's get 10,000 signatures…', dated 13 September 2018

The petition was signed by over 25,000 people (Bassett Yerrell, 2020). However, a compromise motion was drafted behind closed doors by 'key figures in the leader's office', which involved a reduction in the threshold for triggering a reselection process (Bassett Yerrell, 2020, p. 128). Despite Momentum's public support for a full debate on open selection (Rodgers, 2018c), the significantly watered down compromise was reportedly supported by 'the Momentum national leadership' (McCluskey, 2018, n.p.). Many grassroots members were understandably disappointed by the result which fell well short of the open selection process most supported, and were particularly frustrated that the compromise motion was not fully debated at conference (e.g. Bassett Yerrell, 2020; Hudson, 2018). The disjunct on this issue between Momentum's national leadership and grassroots members was symptomatic of the problems Momentum was facing in terms of its internal democracy, which is expounded upon below.

Following this compromise, reportedly very little activity was expended in pursuing selection contests for Parliamentary seats (Bassett Yerrell, 2020). However, this research found evidence that many reselections were triggered at a local ward level;

participants' experiences of this is presented in detail in Chapter 7. The fact that Momentum nationally launched a 'local councillors network' in February 2018 (Momentum, 2021b) suggests that local branches may have acted similarly in other areas and been equally successful, both in triggering reselection contests and ensuring Momentum-backed candidates were selected. Additionally, Momentum promoted active campaigning against the former Labour MPs that left the Party for the ill-fated Change UK party in early 2019. According to Momentum's official website, this included 'mass canvassing events' in defectors' constituencies (Momentum, 2021b, n.p.). Judging by the lack of communication on this from the Liverpool branch, there does not appear to have been any mass canvassing in Luciana Berger's constituency of Wavertree. However, the National Office did produce a video, support a petition calling for by-elections and advertise canvassing events in Streatham, Stockport and Penistone, and Stocksbridge:

Image 11: From email 'All aboard the by-election bus 🚌', dated 26 Feb 2019


Labour members know that **just 6% of Labour voters backed the party in 2017 because of the local candidate.** The constituents of these MPs voted for a Labour MP and a transformational Labour manifesto. Now they are stuck with a **splinter group MP working hand in hand with Tories** to push an agenda of privatisation, deregulation and tax cuts for the super rich.

This is unfair and undemocratic. But together, we can build the pressure.

Campaign for by-elections now 🚌

Sign the petition with 1 click

See the full petition here

Chip in to help us campaign

Already 15,000 Labour members have signed our petition. Add your name, attend a **campaign day in Streatham, Stockport and Penistone and Stocksbridge** (details coming soon!) where we'll be building support for Labour in preparation for a by-election and letting constituents know their MP is working hand in hand with Tories.

Following the conclusion of the debate around open selections, Momentum encouraged members to push for constituency support for motions on other issues. Momentum pointedly refused to take a position on Brexit at Labour Conference

2018 (Oppenheim, 2018), but in advance of Labour Conference 2019, the National Office published ten recommended policy motions members were encouraged to bring to their local CLPs for endorsement (Momentum, 2019a). Momentum's three 'flagship' proposals were support for a Green New Deal, pursuing a 4-day working week, and ending immigrant detention, and all three of these headline policy motions were adopted at conference (Momentum, 2021b, n.p.).

In terms of other national activity within the Party's democratic structures, Momentum regularly cooperated with other left-leaning groups, such as the CLPD, in agreeing and promoting 'slates' for internal Labour Party elections, such as for the NEC or NCC. These were circulated to Labour members advising them who to vote for, as well as promoting individual candidates who were publicly endorsed by Momentum. Indeed, internal Labour elections dominate the agendas provided in the publicly available minutes and action reports for Momentum's NCG meetings between GE2017 and summer 2019, although, as seen below, choosing candidates for slates was not without controversy. Additionally, Momentum-endorsed slates also provided a catalyst for factional conflict associated with internal elections, for example at the Young Labour elections in 2016 as recounted by Jones (2020). However, most slates appear to have been agreed without incident, and several were successfully elected en masse (e.g. Rodgers, 2018d).

6.4 Supporting Extra-Parliamentary Campaigns

Nationally, Momentum endorsed many high profile campaigns within the UK during Corbyn's leadership, spanning a wide variety of causes. Some related to protests, such as opposition to bombing in Syria in 2015; counter demonstrations against the far right and racism, such as those against the Democratic Football Lads Alliance and Tommy Robinson in 2018; and events around BAME rights and climate change (Momentum, 2021b). Others related to workers' rights, including McStrike in 2017 and Post Office strikes in 2017, and Uber demonstrations, McStrike #2 and UCU strikes in 2018 (Momentum, 2021b). Political causes were also promoted, most notably Momentum's campaign to remain in the EU during the 2016 referendum and its support for the 'Fck Boris' demonstrations over Johnson's appointment as Conservative leader in 2019. Interestingly, Momentum also organised phonebanks for members to call Americans to garner support for the 'Medicare for All' campaign (Momentum, 2021b).

In addition to these campaigns highlighted on Momentum's website, many others were promoted through emails to supporters. From the emails I received during data collection, by far the most common action supporters were asked to undertake was to watch and share videos, followed by attending local protests, and signing petitions. The table below summarises the email requests for action relating to extra-Parliamentary campaigns received between April 2018 and December 2019.

Table 4: Emails relating to Extra-Parliamentary Campaigns

Type of Action Requested	Campaigns/Issues
Watch and share a video	Against fracking Against Arm Sales Against Trump's visit to UK in July 2018 Against Tommy Robinson/far right Against transphobia and for trans rights Antisemitism Theresa May's 'Brexit cake' 'Universal Credit Sucks' Bankrupt Climate Change Against Panorama's portrayal of antisemitism within Labour
Attend a protest	Against bombing in Syria Against Trump's visits to the UK in July 2018 and May 2019 Against Tommy Robinson/far right Bankrupt Climate Change Student climate strikes
Sign a petition	Vote down Theresa May's Brexit deal Vote of no confidence in Theresa May Against Panorama's portrayal of antisemitism within Labour
Access interactive maps	Against bombing in Syria Student climate strikes
Participate in phonebanking	Medicare for All (USA)
Organising call via Zoom	Bankrupt Climate Change

Additionally, the NCG (2018a, p.8) discussed supporting the UCU strikes, resolving that Momentum should 'encourage Momentum members to take part in solidarity actions like rallies, leafleting and joining picket lines.' However, no emails were received for this issue. Donations were frequently solicited, although this was always in terms of donating money to Momentum, not directly to the cause itself. Fundraising will be discussed in more detail below.

Although I was not privy to any local organising Liverpool Momentum that was conducted via platforms such as Whatsapp (for reasons explained in Chapter 3), information on local activity was communicated by email to me as a registered supporter. In general, the frequency of local communications was much more sporadic than those from Momentum nationally. I received a total of 24 emails directly from Liverpool Momentum as a registered supporter beginning in July 2019, with a further two personalised to the local area that were sent via the national email team. Local email communications appeared to cease in the run-up to GE2019, as I did not receive any emails from Liverpool Momentum after October 2019, and I unsubscribed from Momentum emails following GE2019 when data collection finished. Email content from the Liverpool branch generally fell into four categories: garnering support for campaigns; invitations to local training, educational and social events; notice of local meetings and AGMs; and requests to participate in local election-related activities.

Table 5: Summary of Content in Emails from Liverpool Momentum, 2018-2019

Content	Number of emails	Additional information
Support for campaigns	5	Campaigns included: Keep the Guard on Merseyrail, Everton Stadium, Democracy Roadshow, Save Liverpool Women's Hospital, Climate Action, LGTB+/Liverpool Pride
Offers of training, educational material or invitation to social events	10	
Notice of meetings/AGMs	9	
Requests to participate in election-related activities	10	
Other	1	correction of an error in a previous email

* Note: The numbers in the above table add up to more than 26, as occasionally emails contained content from more than one category.

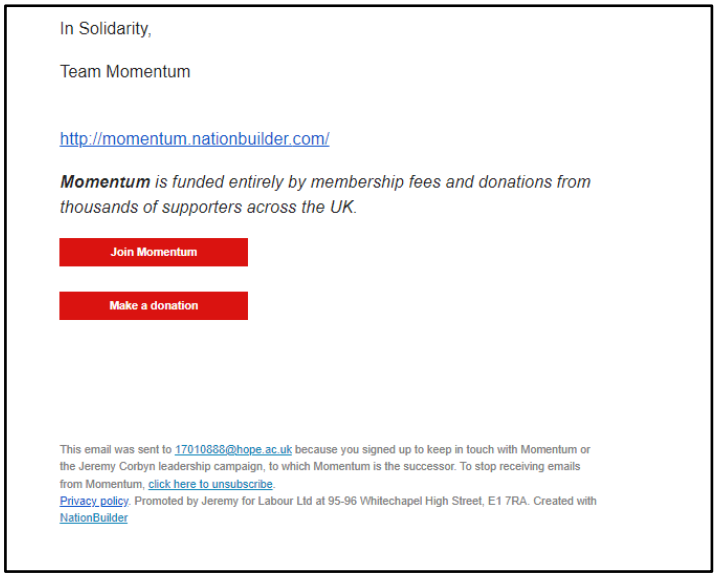
Overall, what was actually being done and being asked of members was well within the bounds of the types of action that was requested by Momentum nationally. Support for local movements appears to consist of endorsement and publicity from

the local branch, with practical support mostly provided by and on the individual initiative of grassroots members, as and when they took an interest in the issue.

6.6 Fundraising and Member Recruitment

As noted above, a large proportion of Momentum's email communications included explicit requests for donations. Momentum's fundraising efforts increased dramatically following GE2017, and the organisation experienced corresponding expansions in terms of the number of paid employees and overall budget. Momentum clearly learned from their experiences with The Electoral Commission, and secured permission from the Labour Party for their campaign spending, as indicated by the comparatively large fundraising targets set during GE2019, discussed further in the Chapter 8. During the period between elections, Momentum's tactics for both fundraising and recruitment involved the regular use of button links within emails. Almost all emails from Momentum contained recruitment and donation buttons towards the end of the message as part of the signature, regardless of the topic or purpose of the communication.

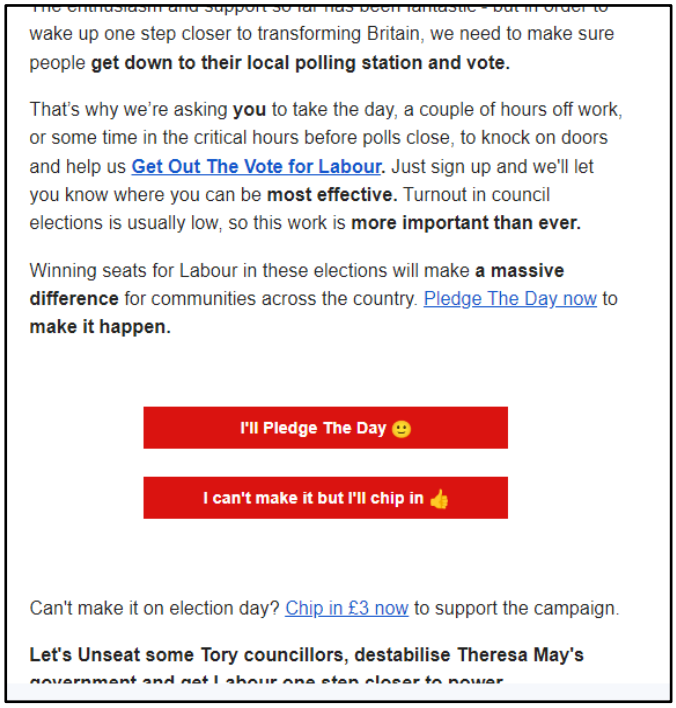
Image 12: Corporate Momentum Email Signature



Often, when activists were invited to an event, they were encouraged to click on a button to confirm attendance, or alternatively to make a donation instead if they were unable to attend. The phrase 'chip in' was frequently used instead of 'donate' when supporters are asked directly for money. This word choice invokes feelings of solidarity and friendly cooperation as opposed to a charitable solicitation. It also

contributes to creating the impression that giving money is an active undertaking, a comparable alternative to attending an event rather than being a passive act.

Image 13: From email ‘It’s so close 😩’, dated 26 April 2018


wake up one step closer to transforming Britain, we need to make sure people **get down to their local polling station and vote.**

That's why we're asking **you** to take the day, a couple of hours off work, or some time in the critical hours before polls close, to knock on doors and help us **Get Out The Vote for Labour.** Just sign up and we'll let you know where you can be **most effective.** Turnout in council elections is usually low, so this work is **more important than ever.**

Winning seats for Labour in these elections will make **a massive difference** for communities across the country. Pledge The Day now to **make it happen.**

I'll Pledge The Day 🙂

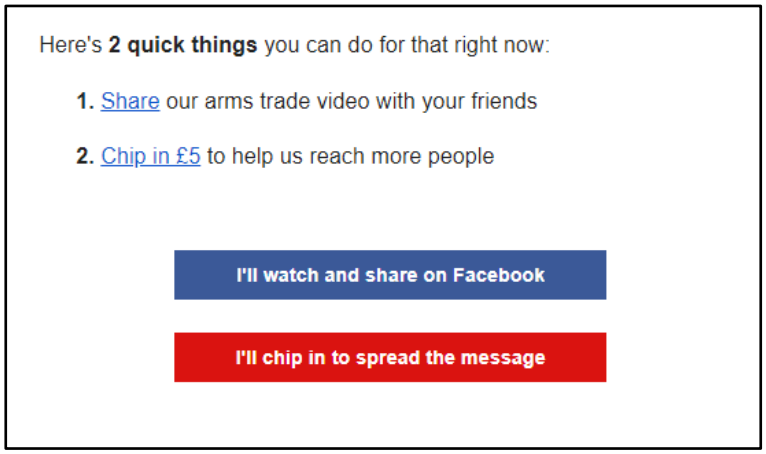
I can't make it but I'll chip in 👍

Can't make it on election day? Chip in £3 now to support the campaign.

Let's Unseat some Tory councillors, destabilise Theresa May's

Activists were also asked to donate to support the dissemination of Momentum’s video content:

Image 14: From email ‘Let’s arm everyone ✈’, dated 16 May 2018


Here's **2 quick things** you can do for that right now:

1. Share our arms trade video with your friends
2. Chip in £5 to help us reach more people

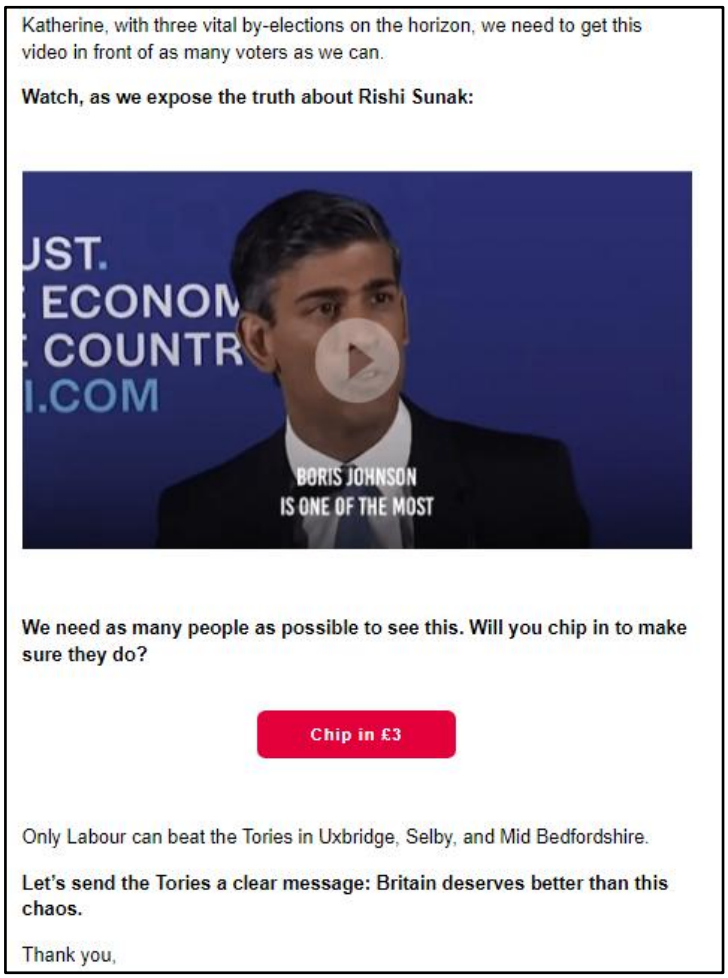
I'll watch and share on Facebook

I'll chip in to spread the message

As evidence in support of the cross-over of staff between Momentum and LOTO, the style of emails from the Labour Party received during and after data collection

closely mirrors this approach. For example, the following email was from Labour, although the sender was listed as ‘Tory Activity Alert’:

Image 15: From email ‘£3 to show this video to 3000 people’, dated 15 June 2023


Katherine, with three vital by-elections on the horizon, we need to get this video in front of as many voters as we can.

Watch, as we expose the truth about Rishi Sunak:

We need as many people as possible to see this. Will you chip in to make sure they do?

Chip in £3

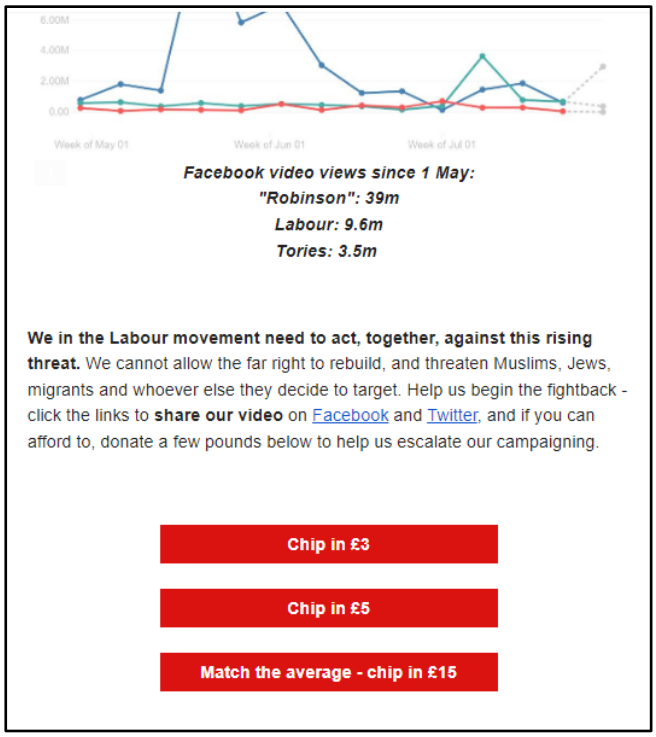
Only Labour can beat the Tories in Uxbridge, Selby, and Mid Bedfordshire.

Let’s send the Tories a clear message: Britain deserves better than this chaos.

Thank you,

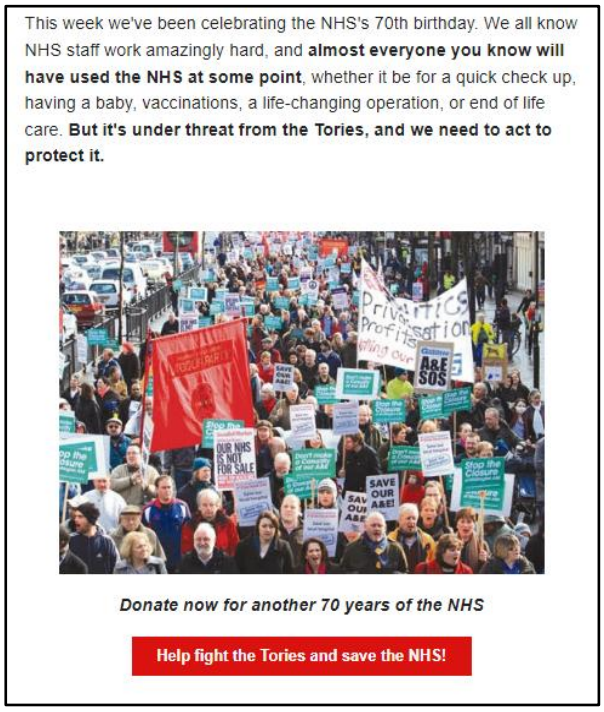
A full analysis of Momentum’s emails and lasting impact on Labour’s email communications could form the basis of future research. Other times, activists were presented with a situation or event inspiring righteous anger, and then asked to ‘chip in’ to help solve the problem. In the email below, supporters were asked to share a video about far-right campaigner Tommy Robinson, with a graph showing increasing popularity of his Facebook content. The message also introduces the option to ‘match the average’ that some Momentum emails began including, starting in the second half of 2018. Challenging the recipient to donate the ‘average’ clearly serves the purpose of creating peer pressure to donate higher amounts:

Image 16: From email '📽 Forgive the language…', dated 2 August 2018



Some emails appeared to be for the sole purpose of fundraising, with the activists not being asked to do anything except donate. For example, the following message was sent in conjunction with the 70th anniversary of the NHS, with the button link directing the recipient to Momentum's donation page:

Image 17: From email 'The NHS has turned 70 - but we need to protect it', dated 6 July 2018



In some fundraising attempts, Momentum appeared shameless. As discussed previously, Momentum's narrative around The Electoral Commission's report is open to challenge, and an email was cited to illustrate Momentum's misrepresentation of the findings. Nevertheless, a dedicated fundraising drive was set up asking members and supporters to cover the fines:

Image 18: From email '70% of the way there! 😲', dated 9 March 2019

Similar tactics were employed to encourage recipients to join Momentum. For example, this email featured an Owen Jones video on GE2017:

Image 19: From email 'Thanks! 🎥☺', dated 9 May 2018

These tactics, alongside the corporately uniform visual presentation of communications from Momentum are reflective of the Americanised consumer culture, and are consistent with standard advertising and marketing approaches (Brierley, 2002). As noted previously, US-style persuasion and selling techniques seem to have been imported through close links with activists from Bernie Sanders's campaigns, such as Becky Bond who 'visits the UK regularly and advises Momentum' (Courea, 2019, n.p.). Emails display a variety of persuasion techniques, such as appealing to party political conflict (e.g. 'Help fight the Tories'), edgy and challenging critiques of societal injustice to inspire and attract attention (e.g. Tommy Robinson and the far right), and presenting satirical narratives (e.g. 'Let's arm everyone'). Momentum moves to complete the sale by providing clear, specific, directed opportunities for the reader to take action on the issues presented (Brierley, 2002): sometimes joining Momentum or participation in activities or events, but consistently alongside an option to donate. Analysing Momentum's tactics and strategy in regards to fundraising could be examined in much further detail. However, the approach to email communication mirrors the sales-oriented approach of persuasive conversations discussed in the previous chapter, and further supports the influence of American consumer culture on Momentum. There is a certain irony that can be found in an organisation claiming to promote socialism utilising such fundamentally consumerist tactics.

6.6 Political Education and The World Transformed (TWT)

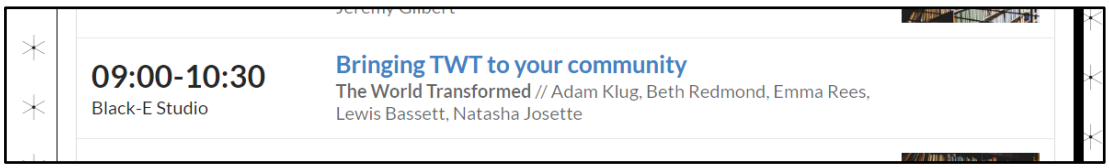
Political education has always formed a key focus for Momentum's activities alongside its campaigning; its webpage still lists one of its primary functions as promoting 'socialist ideas through political education and campaigning' (Momentum, 2021c, n.p.). Political education has taken a variety of forms, from the many local events organised at branch level to national initiatives. A short summary illustrating the breadth of different types of political education Momentum supported will be provided, followed by a more in depth discussion around its most prominent political education event, The World Transformed (TWT), drawing primarily from my observations of the TWT2018 in Liverpool.

Nationally, Momentum produced many handbooks and resources which were available online and/or disseminated via email links. Some training programmes were developed, such as the media training mentioned above and the National Training Network for developing persuasive canvassing techniques (Momentum, 2021b), but overall political education focussed on activist training, rather than on

politicising or connecting with the voting public. Local events were occasionally more outward looking; for example, even as a non-member, I was encouraged to attend local events, although they were dominated by Momentum activists. Political education was regularly raised in NCG meetings; in June 2018, issues regarding capacity for 'leading a [national] programme of political education' for activists was discussed and the suggestion that a partnership with unions and Labour would be better than Momentum developing such a programme itself (NCG, 2018b, p. 5).

However, the largest and highest profile political education event associated with Momentum is undoubtedly TWT. According to its website, TWT (2022a, n.p.) 'is an annual festival and year-round political education project.' Since 2016, TWT has organised an annual event alongside each Labour Party Conference, but there are also a number of local, autonomous Transformed groups that organise their own events (TWT, 2022b). Momentum played a pivotal role in the establishment of TWT, directly 'presenting' the first festival in 2016 (Momentum, 2021b, n.p.), as well as providing ongoing annual organisation and event management. For example, in the run-up to TWT2018, three Momentum staff members were also members of the TWT 'Core Group', and were heavily involved in planning, fundraising and strategy as well as providing a liaison between Momentum and TWT (NCG, 2018a, p. 3). Adam Klug and Emma Rees, former Momentum National Coordinators, participated in one session as part of the TWT team:

Image 20: Screenshot from TWT2018 Programme



(The World Transformed, 2018a, n.p.)

By the time I attended the third annual TWT in 2018, the event was well established. Momentum endorsed TWT through emails regularly for weeks prior to the event, and therefore local grassroots activists and supporters would likely have attended. Indeed, many travelled from across the country to attend TWT2018 which began on Saturday 22 September and continued for four days until Tuesday 25 September. Speakers and other events took place at a variety of locations near the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, all within about 10 minutes' walk from each other and 15

minutes from the main Labour Conference, including The Black E arts centre, and the Hinterlands and Constellations event venues (TWT, 2018b).

Each day contained a full programme of events from 9.30am to past 9pm each day, with opening and closing parties going into the small hours of the morning on Saturday and Tuesday. A wide breadth of topics were covered: economics, left and right politics, the Labour Party, international relations and issues, movement building, and various policy issues. These were interspersed with sessions aimed at young people aged 8-18 as well as art/cultural events including: film showings, football, origami, scrapbooking, yoga and reading groups. Each day also had at least one skills session by Momentum Tech (TWT, 2018a). Throughout the event sessions were frequently concurrent, across the three venues, so choices had to be made which to attend. The cost for TWT 2018 began at £15 for a student/low income, with higher ticket prices for other groups. By 2022, TWT was offering a limited number of free tickets available by request for those struggling financially, although there were heavy fundraising efforts on the day to cover the full cost of the event. Many prominent left-wing Labour MPs and activists had slots, including Corbyn, McDonnell, Abbott, Lansman and others. Trade unions were represented, and Ed Miliband hosted his annual Pub Quiz. Other speakers included writers and journalists such as Paul Mason, Owen Jones, Dawn Foster, Ash Sarkar and Ellie Mae O'Hagan, as well as more academic authors such as Naomi Klein, Chantelle Mouffe, Leo Panitch and Hilary Wainwright. The vast number of different speakers and events supported TWT's (2022a, n.p.) claim that it is 'the biggest leftwing multi-day event in Britain'.

Due to childcare constraints, I was only able to attend on Saturday and Sunday. The first session I attended was a panel discussion in The Black E main space, titled *Parties and Picket Lines: Building Socialist Culture*, with speakers from Manchester Momentum along with film director Ken Loach. I had chosen to attend this session in the hope to gain a better understanding of how Momentum activists conceptualised 'socialism' as well as for the opportunity to hear Ken Loach, having to forgo other sessions on the far right, global finance, prisons, social strikes, internationalism and building movement leaders which were all scheduled for the same time. Amongst the audience, there was a mix of ages although predominantly younger people with another sizable section of older attendees.

We were asked to queue outside for the larger events, to be let into the venue nearer the start times. Leafleteers from all the usual left-wing publications and causes distributed material to the queue, such as SWP and many others. As I waited, I looked around admiring the architecture of The Black E and the Chinatown archway, until my eyes fell on a small gathering on the opposite side of the street. In several smaller groups of five or six people were individuals appearing to be Liverpool residents, who were not attending TWT. They were watching the queue and general crowd with avid interest. I followed their gaze and immediately saw what I assumed had caught their attention. The almost entirely white TWT crowd had a visible character to it, with many wearing hippy-style clothing. People were discussing the relative benefits of vegan diets or where they went on their foreign holiday that summer. In stark contrast, the gathering opposite was mostly younger men wearing tracksuits and trainers hanging around on public benches, with a few old bicycles and tatty bags. The comparison could not have been more stark, and I watched as they pointed and laughed at something in the queue ahead of me. There was no one in the TWT crowd who looked at all like them, and I could not imagine any of them either feeling comfortable or having any interest whatsoever in the event going on inside. No one else in the queue appeared aware of what was going on, so absorbed in the event atmosphere and their own conversations. Great George Street formed a chasm between two worlds.

Eventually we were ushered into the main space in The Black E, which was decorated with banners hung along balconies. Tables were arranged with seats for eight people on each, with some additional seating along the walls. Once inside, a mix of ethnic music played until speakers arrived. As with many of the sessions, this talk took the form of a panel discussion followed by questions from the audience. We were informed that Ken Loach had given his apologies, so the panel consisted of several activists from Manchester Momentum. The content of the talk was very upbeat and focussed on the importance of scheduling social events to draw people into the Labour Party and Momentum, and keep them interested. Speakers contrasted these events with "*draining*" Labour meetings (fieldnotes, 22 September 2018). One question from the floor suggested attendance at Labour meetings was important, and a speaker agreed that "*nerds*" who knew party rules were needed alongside social people. A note from Ken Loach was read out about needing to "*transform the Labour Party*" and develop "*a new generation of MPs*", but overall I left the talk considerably more confused about how Momentum members saw socialism than when I started. From this panel, it appeared that socialism was

mostly to do with making sure there were fun social events to counterbalance boring Labour Party bureaucracy. With hindsight, I have wondered whether some activists actually considered the words ‘socialism’ and ‘social’ linguistically connected in this context.

As I queued for the re-launch of the *Tribune* magazine with Owen Jones, I overheard a couple behind me talking about how they considered themselves working class. Remembering the cultural divergence I experienced earlier, I wondered how to classify the group across the street if the people behind me were working class. When we entered the room, there were several long rows of chairs set out, utilising all the available space for seating, with chairs for speakers arranged in a shallow horseshoe on a raised stage. The event opened with Professor David Harvey outlining historical context, including a potted history of the Labour Party, trade union links, neoliberalism and the lamentable state of universities. He suggested that movements need to consider “*how well they relate to other movements*”. I wondered to myself whether anyone considers ‘how well they relate to people who are not in a movement?’ (fieldnotes, 22 September 2018). The late *Guardian* journalist, Dawn Foster, also gave an emotional account of her childhood in an impoverished single parent household, and another young activist suggested that “*the left is going through an intellectual renaissance*” and that Labour represents the “*95% of people who live off work, not wealth*” (fieldnotes, 22 September 2018).

On Sunday, I attended other sessions including one on the Lucas Plan with Hilary Wainwright, which featured a poorly-received push for her recent book (fieldnotes, 23 September 2018). Many left early to join the queue for Corbyn’s slot, eliciting annoyance from the speakers. Staying to the end caused me to miss out on Corbyn’s speech, as the sessions were first-come-first-serve and the venue was vastly over-subscribed when I arrived. Instead I attended another economics session arguing for nationalisation of banks, and in the evening I attended the main event, ‘A Movement in Government?’ as Laura Parker, then Momentum National Coordinator, was one of the speakers. Throughout, the energy and enthusiasm from the audiences were notable. However, for me, the weekend was dominated by my observations of class and culture divisions, and this event provided the initial foundations for much of my analysis and critique of Momentum.

6.7 Organisational Challenges

6.7.1 Introduction

Alongside its expanding repertoire of activities, Momentum faced two substantial challenges that influenced both the group's public reputation and its relationship with grassroots members during the period between general elections: antisemitism and internal democracy. Accusations of antisemitism with the Labour Party were widely reported in the national media, and many stories involved individuals closely associated with Momentum, to such an extent that antisemitism was identified as a key issue to be included in interview guide questions during this research. Participant views and experiences of the issue will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, but some comment on the wider organisational implications is provided here. Additionally, although Momentum supported some remarkable experiments with member-led democracy, a strict, top-down approach was often taken towards decision-making at a national level and the leadership often struggled to adhere to democratic processes required by its constitution. The disparity between Momentum's commitment to participatory democracy and grassroots power, and its policy and practice of internal democracy will also be examined below.

6.7.2 Antisemitism

Antisemitism amongst left-wing activists is often directly linked to the Israel-Palestine conflict, which remains a key international issue for many; considering Corbyn's long standing support of the Palestinian cause, it is not surprising that this should emerge as a point of criticism during his leadership. Accusations of antisemitism began in his first leadership contest (e.g. Mason, 2015), and were widely debated in the press and on social media throughout his leadership. There were several high profile cases involving Momentum directly, beginning with the suspension of Jackie Walker, former vice chair, from Labour in May 2016 (BBC News, 2016). The messy saga continued for months and Momentum's eventual statement that the NCG had 'lost confidence' in her as vice-chair was met with criticism from both sides (Firmin, 2018, n.p.). Additional high profile suspensions including that of former London mayor Ken Livingstone also contributed to Corbyn's commissioning a report into antisemitism within the party (Edwards, 2016). Christine Shawcroft, former Momentum director, resigned from her position on the NEC over her handling of antisemitism complaints in March 2018 (Stewart and Perkins, 2018), although she was not removed as Momentum director until April 2019 (Companies House, 2023b). In July 2018, Peter Willsman, a longstanding left-wing activist, Corbyn ally, secretary of the CLPD, and Momentum-backed candidate for Labour's

NEC, was confronted publicly with recordings of antisemitic remarks (McGuinness, 2018). Despite initially avoiding Labour Party action over the comments, many Momentum activists lobbied the national office to withdraw its endorsement of Willsman in the ongoing NEC elections (e.g. Olivia, see Chapter 7). It was withdrawn, but the voting window had already opened; it is likely many Momentum members had already cast votes based on the original slate, and Willsman was elected anyway along with the full slate of Momentum endorsed candidates (Rodgers, 2018d). He was eventually suspended from the Labour Party in May 2019, following a number of further objectionable recordings coming to light (Syal, 2019).

These instances, and others involving less prominent Momentum members (e.g. Smith, 2017), were debated and documented in detail through media reports. There was also considerable coverage of general controversy over Labour's adoption of the official International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism (e.g. Sabbagh, 2018). Throughout this time Momentum appeared to prefer to avoid active engagement with the debate over antisemitism, possibly in an attempt to limit negative press without publicly denouncing those of its members who could be implicated. However, the situation continued to deteriorate and finally, in August 2018, Lansman released an official statement from Momentum. The statement admitted that antisemitism was a problem in the party, and expressed 'disappointment' in the ineffective and insufficient response by Labour (Craig, 2017, n.p.). Momentum on the same day released a video on antisemitism featuring Jewish Corbyn supporter, Michael Segalov, that was promoted via social media (LabourList, 2018). Following summer 2018, Momentum seemed to have finally begun a coordinated rebuttal of antisemitism claims, which included another video on antisemitism emailed directly to members and supporters (email 'VIDEO: My Perspective on Antisemitism', dated 9 November 2018). Momentum also endorsed protests, such as one against David Icke in Watford (email 'CREWE TODAY: Protest David Icke's antisemitism, dated 3 December 2018). However, as discussed in more detail in the next chapter, despite national furore and counter-messaging by Momentum's national office, antisemitism did not feature as prominently in interviews or participant observations as expected. Considering this and the extensive press coverage of the issue, the remainder of this section will be restricted to comments and observations that add to the existing debate.

Although it did not seem to impact noticeably on Momentum members themselves, negative press coverage on this issue undoubtedly influenced the views of many members of the public. For one illustrative example, in summer 2018 I was attending an eye test, and my optician conversationally asked me what I did. I explained that I had just started research on Momentum, and he immediately burst into an impassioned and emotional tirade explaining how the group was antisemitic, expressing despair over their influence within Labour. This was the only unsolicited comment related to antisemitism I encountered throughout data collection.
Based on my observations and interviews, Momentum members appeared to take one of three attitudes towards antisemitism: those who were passionately pro-Palestine and often risked crossing the line into antisemitic behaviour; those who saw allegations of antisemitism potentially damaging and took action to counter the allegations; and those who had less interest in engaging with either the anti-Zionist cause or combating antisemitism. A large majority of Momentum members appear to be aligned with the final category, as illustrated, for example, through the general lack of engagement with this issue during interviews (most of the participants, see Chapter 7). A much smaller number of members seemed to fall in the second (e.g. Grace and Olivia). Although no interviewees appeared to prioritise the Palestinian cause, this overall distribution is perhaps a significant contributor to the problem surrounding Momentum's public image on the issue. Admittedly, this small sample is not generalisable to the rest of the organisation, but there are observational and documentary data to support the argument that issues other than Israel-Palestine dominated Momentum-related events, such as The World Transformed (e.g. The World Transformed, 2018a, 2022c). If a majority of Momentum was either not particularly interested or flirted with antisemitism, with only a minority trying to actively combat it, this potentially communicated an attitude of tolerance for extreme views.

As an individual, it is defensible for Corbyn to be afforded the freedom to support causes that he believes in. It is also understandable how left-wing activists who believed passionately in the Palestinian cause would have been eager to take full advantage of the power and platform Corbyn provided through his leadership position. However, his status as Labour leader carried with it responsibilities and restrictions in terms of representing all Party members. It is difficult to walk the line between criticism of Israel and antisemitism, and this is clearly something with which some on the left struggled particularly within the binary, us-versus-them context of factional and ideological conflict. As former Corbyn advisor Murray (2022, p. 120)

admitted, he himself has been guilty of ‘rhetorical excesses’ uttered in passion over the issue. Furthermore, it must have been anticipated that Corbyn’s position on the Israel-Palestine conflict represented a political vulnerability, leaving him open to attack from his opponents. As such, Corbyn and his allies could have distanced themselves from the debate to avoid negative press and prioritise building the left’s influence within Labour and amongst the wider electorate. Refusing to do this had a number of potentially damaging consequences.

First, most obviously, it provoked some members of the Jewish community who understandably took personal offence. This was seen through the highly publicised criticisms as touched on above, and many other sympathetic members of the public may have been similarly incensed by the content of reports on member misconduct, as my optician was. Regardless of whether the incidents were over-reported or exaggerated, the fact remains that the negative press was relentless and damaging, and many did find Corbyn’s insistence that he was ‘against all forms of racism’ unconvincing (e.g. Schofield, 2018, n.p.). For these individuals, Corbyn’s reputation for being principled was eroded. Secondly, the importance placed on international causes such as Palestinian rights could be interpreted as a relative disregard for British citizens, an important issue for voters, for example as illustrated above through the comments encountered during persuasive canvassing (see also Murray, 2022). A feeling of losing out to foreign nationals is also a key aspect of anti-immigration sentiments and support for Brexit (Payne, 2021; Winlow, 2019); as a potential prime minister, Corbyn could have done more to communicate a prioritisation for his own citizens by reducing the priority afforded to international causes. This will be more explicitly connected to the role of class identity in Labour's GE2019 defeat in Chapter 8.

Finally, tactically, it is unclear what political gain Corbyn expected through his position on this issue. Unless and until elected Prime Minister, he had little power to influence the UK’s policy on Palestine, and the damage from attacks by opponents did not appear to be balanced by any tangible political advantages, either in terms of UK politics or the Israel-Palestine conflict. There is room for debate over the relative benefit or detriment in remaining steadfast; as Murray (2022, p. 124) argues ‘the price of peace [on the issue of antisemitism] would be a full capitulation by Labour to the Zionist argument.’ This may have been the case once accusations of antisemitism had escalated past a point of no return. However, arguably, had Corbyn tempered his internationalism and controlled the agenda from the start,

accusations might not have reached the same level of relentlessness and hostility. With a more equivocal example from the leadership on the issue, problematic supporters might also have demonstrated more restraint. Furthermore, the issue of Palestine itself does not feature in the top concerns for the UK electorate, for example as researched during GE2017 by the British Election Study (Prosser, 2017); as such, to a general public largely unconcerned with the Israel-Palestine conflict, Corbyn's response to the raft of antisemitism allegations and proposed amendments to the IHRA definition of antisemitism will have been seen from a very different perspective than many on the left. For the majority of the electorate, Corbyn's stubborn refusal to distance himself from these politically damaging issues may have been difficult to understand, and could have contributed to impressions of him being politically naive or even incompetent. It is also notable that in 2020, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2023, n.p.) found the Labour Party 'responsible for unlawful acts of harassment and discrimination,' although Labour's action plan for improvement was successfully concluded in January 2023.

6.7.3 Internal Democracy

The controversy around Lansman's changes to Momentum's constitution was covered in Chapter 4. Following GE2017, Momentum leaders continued to grapple with formal democratic processes at the same time as exploring more innovative forms of participatory democracy, and accounts of some of the achievements and challenges are drawn from interviews, emails, NCG minutes and grey literature. Momentum's more creative and potentially democracy-enhancing activities, the Members Council and its Digital Democracy Platform, will be discussed first, followed by a critique of Momentum's execution of its constitutional democratic processes as manifested in repeated failure to hold required meetings and elections, and autocratic decision-making.

Momentum's Members Council represents an interesting experiment in member-led democracy. The council took place on 9 September 2017, and saw 50 randomly selected Momentum members come together to identify and discuss key priorities and actions plans for the organisation. Based on first-hand accounts from Vicki Morris (2017), a Council member, and Grace, a facilitator, a picture of the event can be drawn alongside some wider implications regarding Momentum's internal democracy. Small groups brainstormed broad areas of activity and then came together to vote, resulting in six key areas they wished to focus on. Grace described the process undertaken:

> *So we'd sit in a group and basically everything we said went on the board and then we'd have three stickers and we'd put a sticker by the ones that we liked the best. And the ones that had the most stickers we transcribed onto a new sheet and that went up. And then we had a break and then we presented our arguments for these three points. And then everybody got some more stickers and then they voted again [...] it was the most democratic thing I've ever seen*.

Vicki recalled the six priority areas chosen:

> • Democratising the Labour Party
> • Democratising Momentum
> • Developing media skills and resources to counteract the mainstream media
> • Encouraging Momentum groups to work in local communities
> • Educating and skill sharing among momentum members
> • Campaigning for free movement and supporting migrant communities
> (Morris, 2017, n.p.)

After lunch, members formed groups for each topic, and discussed and voted on policy positions or activities they wanted Momentum to support under each area. The Council prepared a number of recommendations under each area and reported these back to the NCG at the end of the session; key points included support for freedom of movement and opposition to the expulsions from Labour based on membership of socialist organisations, in addition to improvements to Momentum's internal democracy:

> The working group on democratising Momentum did not revisit the question of the new constitution but was critical of current Momentum organisation including the poor relationship between the centre and local groups. It argued for the Members' Council to have powers to produce their own report on the day's proceedings in addition to the official report which will appear soon. We also asked for our own Facebook group to communicate with each other. People expressed annoyance that the ordinary Momentum members only have a minority voice on the National Coordinating Group (Morris, 2017, n.p.).

Although Grace felt the event was '*possibly one of the best things I've ever seen in terms of organisation and in terms of facilitation*', she also witnessed a heated exchange between other facilitators and one Council participant who was also a member of the AWL:

> *It was so interesting because we said that it had been done really democratically, and he went 'well, you call it democratic'. I nearly lost my shit. I just thought, oh my god! All the things I've heard about the AWL are so true.*

Vicki (2017, n.p.) also related some frustrations with how the event ended:

> As if to underline the need for more democracy in Momentum we were required to present our action plans to some members of the NCG ushered in at the end of the day hot foot from their own meeting. It wasn't clear whether we were instructing or lobbying them on what should be Momentum priorities for the next six months.

A second Members Council with the same cohort was initially planned for Dec 2017 (Momentum, 2021d); however this did not take place. According to the February 2018 NCG minutes (2018a, p.2), the 'final meeting of the first tranche of the Members Council is on the 10th March', although this also does not appear to have taken place. Grace commented that although the event was an incredible example of participatory democracy, facilitating it was '*hard work',* and afterwards '*I was exhausted, like a wet rag!'* She went on to explain that she was approached to facilitate the second iteration, but in the end Momentum was unable to identify enough volunteers to run the exercise again. However, other members claimed that it was because the Council 'proved too independent minded' that it was not repeated (Murrell-Dowson, 2019, n.p.). A report covering the first event had been promised on Momentum's website since December 2017, but was never provided. On 16 June 2023, the report was apparently still being compiled (Momentum, 2021d), although the page had been deleted by 30 June 2023:

Image 21: Members' Council Report


The day was a huge success with 50 members coming together to explore Momentum's priorities over the next six months and the next 3 years. Members of the National Coordinating Group joined the Council at the beginning and end of the day, to listen to the contributions from the Council members.

We are currently compiling a full report of the Members' Council

This will be presented to the National Coordinating Group at their next meeting in December. Members of the Council will receive the report by the end of September.

Unfortunately, what was clearly an inspiring process has not to date been revisited by Momentum, and the issues raised by the Council regarding concerns with internal democracy do not seem to have been addressed, as demonstrated below. It seems better clarity and understanding regarding how much weight the Council's

recommendations would carry would have also improved the usefulness of the exercise as well as the experience of participants.

Momentum's Digital Democracy Platform offered another potentially exciting opportunity for member democracy, and this innovation was a key factor in the widespread member support of Lansman's 2017 constitutional changes. Members were assured that they would be regularly consulted on policy issues and priorities, that they would be given significant influence in the development and direction of the organisation, and that this OMOV method of decision-making was more democratic than the delegate system. Deployed faithfully, the platform arguably had potential to deliver on these promises. However, in practice, it appears to have only been utilised once, possibly twice, during the period of data collection for this project. As a supporter rather than a full member, I did not have access to the platform. However, the consultation on May's Brexit deal in autumn 2018 mentioned above was the only occasion any Momentum-member participant could recall being invited to vote on a policy issue (Ben). According to Momentum (2018, p.1), 'over 6750 members' took part in the poll. With the group having passed 40,000 members six months previously (Cowburn, 2018), this would be a turnout of approximately 17%. A key question was around whether members supported a general election or another vote on Brexit, and Momentum's official position would be to push for another general election. There is some justification for this, as provided in their summary of the results: 'while 41% of members support a public vote in all circumstances a total of 57% either prioritise a General Election over a public vote or do not want any public vote' (Momentum, 2023b, n.p.). However, as can be seen from the excerpt from the results below, the 41% who voted in support of a public vote represented the largest single group by a significant margin (Momentum, 2018, p.3):

Image 22: Except from Momentum's Brexit Consultation Results

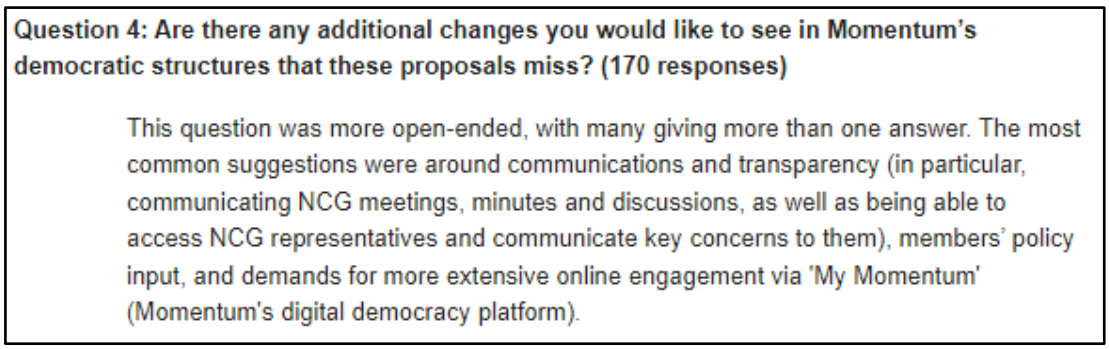
5. **In the event that there is no General Election, Conference has said that Labour must support all options remaining on the table including campaigning for a public vote. Do you support a public vote and, if so, in which circumstances? (please choose one answer)**	
- I support a public vote remaining on the table as an option if there is no general election	28
- I support committing now to a public vote but only if there is no general election	12
- I support committing now to a public vote in all circumstances	41
- I do not support a public vote	17
- Don't know	2

Any pro-public-vote member who took the time to review the full results may have felt justifiably aggrieved at Momentum's official stance on this issue. However, it

reflected Corbyn's preferred position, and Momentum's general policy on all issues was 'to support the position of the Labour Party and the party leadership' (personal email communication from Beth Foster-Ogg, dated 20 August 2018). In this case, Ben may have been correct in suggesting that Momentum would have been better not asking members for their input.

A second time the platform may have been used was in June 2019, when members were asked for feedback on Momentum's internal democratic arrangements. Members were consulted on a proposal that would see changes to geographical boundaries used to assign seats on the NCG, an overall increase in representatives, and moving from one- to two-year terms. Rather than a true OMOV, it has been reported the invitation to participate in the consultation was only sent to the 'most engaged Momentum members, including group role holders and those who have signed up for regular updates', along with 'rumours' that this was only around 3,400 people (Hannah, 2019, n.p.). A participant forwarded me the Momentum email containing the results; amongst the 357 members who responded, there was overwhelming support for all of the proposed changes. However, interestingly, there was also an opportunity to provide general feedback, and the following excerpt demonstrates the dissatisfaction of members:

Image 23: From email 'Your feedback on democratising Momentum', dated 21 June 2019


Question 4: Are there any additional changes you would like to see in Momentum's democratic structures that these proposals miss? (170 responses)

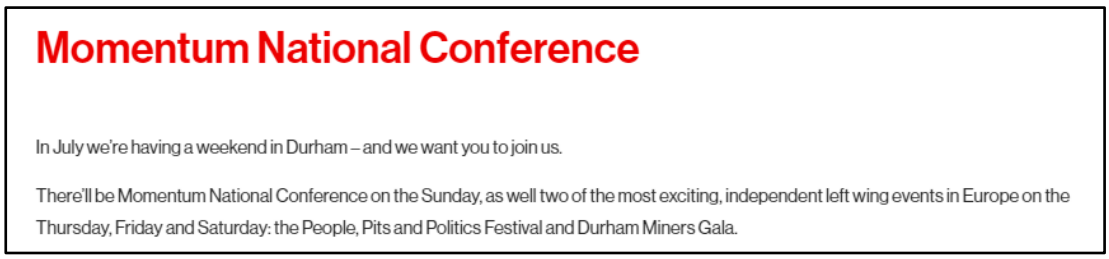
This question was more open-ended, with many giving more than one answer. The most common suggestions were around communications and transparency (in particular, communicating NCG meetings, minutes and discussions, as well as being able to access NCG representatives and communicate key concerns to them), members' policy input, and demands for more extensive online engagement via 'My Momentum' (Momentum's digital democracy platform).

National Office staff and members of the NCG may have been inexperienced and unfamiliar with democratic processes, which are arguably at odds with movement-style organising. From the minutes of the NCG over the period from its inception in 2017 to the first meeting following GE2019 in Jan 2020, the overall tone of the meetings appears to be focused on action rather than process, reflecting the movement activist influences the group is known for. However, as noted previously, Momentum cannot claim they were without access to expertise to assist them. Considering this alongside regular member complaints regarding internal

democracy, it is important to note some key organisational failings, even if there might be some sympathy for Momentum's leadership and the sometimes difficult position they will have found themselves in terms of balancing the views of members with the priorities of LOTO.

As noted in Chapter 4, Momentum held a National Conference in February 2017, following the changes to their constitution. However, in December 2017, the NCG recorded an agreement 'that the [2018] conference should be moved to later in the year, and perhaps in conjunction with existing events', and a suggestion was made that NCG members should serve a longer term 'so they have more time to be effective in their role' (NCG, 2017b, p.5). In February 2018, a 'revised timetable' for NCG elections was agreed, with no detail provided (NCG, 2018a, p.4). In June 2018, NCG officer elections took place within the meeting, though a member vote for the full membership of the NCG does not appear to have taken place. All officers were elected unopposed (NCG, 2018b, p. 3-4). Even more interestingly, the June minutes state the meeting received 'a very brief rundown of the successful Momentum conference at the Durham Miners Gala' (NCG 2018b, p. 2). However, Momentum's website advertises the event as taking place in July (Momentum, 2023c):

Figure 24: Momentum National Conference 2018



In September 2018, the full conference report was postponed (NCG, 2018c). In December, the NCG agreed to appoint a separate working group to look at conference and Members Council arrangements, and the issue seemed to have been moved outside the remit of the NCG meetings pending the production of an options report from a smaller working group (NCG, 2018d). Although there is a link to the next meeting's minutes on Momentum's website, the link has always returned an error, and I received no response to a direct email request to Momentum for access. Padraig was interviewed on 8 April 2019, and he confirmed that no national AGM or conference had taken place to his knowledge. In July 2019, the NCG discussed their review of internal democratic arrangements and agreed to ballot the

members on proposed changes, the results of which were presented above. It appeared that elections would again be postponed pending the outcome of the member consultation (NCG, 2019a). In October 2019, there was yet again 'consensus on delaying the NCG elections', this time relating to prioritisation for UK and local elections (NCG, 2019b, p. 1). From the study of Momentum's minutes, therefore, it appears annual elections for representatives on the NCG may not have taken place at all between 2017 and 2019. On 11 January 2020, after discussions around constitutionality, NCG elections were delayed yet again until after the May local elections. NCG agreed to email members to this effect, with no timetable (NCG, 2020), although by this point my data collection had ceased.

In addition to these clear constitutional failings, activists from all levels of the organisation expressed concerns about decision-making within Momentum. In December 2017, one NCG member addressed the meeting, expressing 'dismay' that he had 'to find out about the appointment of Laura [Parker as National Coordinator] via the media, and that he would have liked for the NCG to have found out first' (NCG, 2017c, p.3). In February 2018, an agenda item from another NCG member outlines concerns from 'a variety of people' about the way Momentum's slate for Young Labour positions 'was decided at a meeting only publicised by word-of-mouth and not open to nominations from all of Momentum's eligible members' (NCG, 2018a, p.7). Internal democracy featured heavily in the meeting on 1 September 2018, with debate around 'how discussions and decisions can be relayed to members [although it was] noted that the website wasn't suitable for minutes' (NCG, 2018c, p.1); most meeting notes are still publicly available via Momentum's website. Following this, a presentation from representatives from Manchester, Bolton and Stockport Momentum branches prompted a 'discussion around how NCG can liaise with and support groups better' (p.2). As seen from the above consultation results, concerns with feeling locked out of decision-making and lack of transparency within the organisation were common. Simon Hannah, activist, author of *A Party with Socialists in It*, and editor of *The Clarion* penned a number of articles complaining of the lack of internal democracy within Momentum: for example, 'Momentum for the less than 1pc' (Hannah, 2019) and 'What do you think of Momentum democracy? I think it would be a good idea' (Hannah, 2020).

A few interview participants expressed frustration with Momentum's internal democracy and decision making processes. Simon echoed objections regarding decisions over who was elected to NCG and selected to appear on slates. However,

Padraig expressed the opinion that internal democracy was not important on a national level, whilst at the same time conveying frustration at inefficiency and unprofessional behaviour at a local Momentum AGM. Ben also did not appear concerned about internal democracy, preferring to focus on campaigning and other action. On this basis, it appears that although there is clear evidence of poor practice organisationally, dissatisfaction with internal democracy may have been experienced by a relatively small number of grassroots members. See Chapter 7 for a more detailed presentation of interviewees' views on democracy.

6.7 Concluding Remarks

The above discussion supports a noticeable divide between the National Office staff and the NCG, and local members. Far from being an organic, movement-like organisation that supports and values member initiative, outside of social media forums Momentum's National Office appears to have exercised significant control over the national agenda and programme of activity. At the same time, however, although as argued previously Momentum was not a movement organisation, ironically the group seemed much more effective at movement-related types of activity. For instance, campaigning and organising events appeared to be much more successful than the bureaucratic side of running an ostensibly democratic organisation. The heavy influence of American consumer culture and corporatism is both ironic and interesting, and is arguably consistent with the autocratic style of management from the national office. In keeping with the broadly chronological structure of this thesis, interview data will be presented next in Chapter 7 as all of the interviews took place during this period between elections.

Chapter 7: The View from the Grassroots

7.1 Introduction

Previous chapters drew a picture of Momentum as an organisation, focusing on historical evolution, structures, goals, practical activities, and relationships with other organisations. This chapter will build on this to examine Momentum from the perspective of activists, moving towards a deeper understanding of the organisation on a grassroots level through presenting data that was gathered through interviews. Twelve semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) took place between August 2018 and October 2019. There was a selection of topics which were identified as potentially significant and which were included in the guide questions for the interviews. However, in the spirit of this being an ethnographic study, I entered into data collection with a very open mind; beyond seeking a greater understanding of why participants joined Momentum, what the organisation meant to them, and how the close association with the Labour Party affected their experiences, I did not hold preconceptions about the knowledge I expected to generate through my research. Interviews were loosely structured, and participants were encouraged to discuss areas of personal importance to them. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes in length to almost 2 hours; as noted, I transcribed audio recordings for nine of the interviews, two interviews were recorded through contemporaneous handwritten notes, and one participant answered questions in writing by email. A thematic analysis of interview notes and transcripts was conducted, utilising an iterative and pervasive approach to analysis that began before the first interview took place and continued throughout the project (see Chapter 3). The results of this assessment of the data are presented here, which build on the more structural discussion from Chapter 4, as well as the observational data from Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapters 8 and 9, the results discussed in both this and the previous chapters will be examined together to develop further analysis specifically relating to observations of Momentum's GE2019 campaign activity, with links and conclusions drawn in relation to potential implications of the findings within a wider theoretical, societal and political context.

7.2 Background and Context

7.2.1 Who are the Participants?

During the thematic analysis, participants were assigned a pseudonym, and these are used consistently to refer to individuals when presenting quoted or paraphrased material, or relevant contextual information. Generalisations around the group as a

whole are summarised here, with additional relevant personal context for each participant in the Appendix. Participants were all recruited from the Merseyside area and the wider North West, across four different local authority areas, although references to the specific location of each participant have been omitted to protect anonymity. The local authority and smaller constituency areas represented cover a spread of political environments, ranging from a longstanding Labour minority, to a current majority that has been historically contested, to a safe but more centrist Labour majority, to a both safe and more left-leaning Labour majority.

Although the interview participants were identified using a snowball approach, efforts were made to ensure a representative spread in terms of key demographic attributes. This was most successful for age; participant ages ranged widely with one under 20 and two over 65 at the time of interview, and the remaining nine participants spread relatively evenly between. Only four were female, although efforts in this area were hampered by some potential interviews falling through. It is notable that Bassett Yerrell (2020) experienced a similar gender disparity in his participant base. However, it is significant that all the participants were from white backgrounds. Although this is not representative of those in leadership positions within Momentum nationally due to specific constitutional requirements ensuring BAME representation (Momentum, 2019d), from my observations it is representative of all the Momentum-related events, large and small, which I attended during data collection. Furthermore, it is also consistent with research by Mejias and Banaji (2020) which found that a majority of Momentum staff, volunteers and wider networks were predominantly from a white background, as well as with Bassett Yerrell (2020, p.44) whose participants were also ‘overwhelmingly’ from a white British background. On this basis it was determined that the lack of ethnic diversity amongst interview participants was broadly representative of Momentum’s grassroots membership and therefore acceptable for the purposes of this research.

The level of activism within Momentum specifically also varied between the participants. All but two of the participants were current or formerly active members of Momentum at the time of interview, and all participants generally considered themselves to be either wholeheartedly or broadly supportive of Momentum’s position within the Party and/or a majority of its main policy stances. Opinions on Corbyn himself varied somewhat, although a large majority were vocally supportive of his leadership. Some participants expended very little or no time and energy on activism within Momentum itself, but around half held positions within local

Momentum at one time or another, and four had a measure of involvement with various nationally-organised activities and events within the organisation.

As will be discussed in more depth below, the personal background to each participant helps provide a basis for the analysis of the role of identity in their political activities and memberships, explored further in Chapter 10. Overall, the participant group represented the spread of backgrounds suggested as common for Momentum members (Klug, et al., 2016), as well as a spread of activity level with and commitment to both Labour and Momentum. Interviewees can be grouped into the following four categories according to similarities regarding their membership of the Labour Party and Momentum:

1. Tom and Mark were both longstanding Labour Party members.
2. Dan, Robert and Alex were all previously members of the Labour Party, but had allowed their membership and/or activism to lapse for a significant time before returning for reasons relating to Corbyn's leadership.
3. Padraig, Ben and Simon were new to both Labour and Momentum and joined in connection with Corbyn's successful leadership campaign in 2015.
4. Grace, Catherine, Emma, and Olivia were also relatively new to both Labour and Momentum, but were additionally supported by Momentum to successfully obtain elected positions in local government.

7.2.2 What Does Momentum Mean to the Activists?

As discussed, there is an observable divide in organisation, culture and activity between Momentum nationally and the local branches, as well as a cultural distinction between local branches in areas with existing organised Labour Left groups and those that formed in areas without pre-existing organisation on the left of the party. Of the four local Momentum branches represented in this project's data, two had long-standing, well organised group(s) of Labour Left activists and the other two were established in areas without. This local context had significant influence on the experiences of the Momentum activists and also relates closely to the perceptions and opinions held by activists in relation to the nature and role of Momentum as an organisation. Grace and Catherine had direct personal involvement with Momentum's national office and staff, Robert and Simon had second-hand knowledge of Momentum's national office through friendship networks, and the rest experienced Momentum exclusively through participation in activities at their local Momentum branch or CLP, or attendance at large events such as The

World Transformed, as well as through email communications and exposure through the media. Participants' impressions of Momentum were influenced by their personal lived experience of Momentum as well as their views on the wider role of the organisation.

Overall, this research identified three broad, sometimes overlapping functions Momentum seems to have served for participants personally:

1. an introduction to mainstream party political activism through an organisation that appeared less formal and bureaucratic than the Labour Party itself;
2. a vehicle to selection as Labour candidates as an alternative to trade union activism or establishing themselves in CLPs; and/or
3. organisational energy and/or resources to harness in support of the continuing struggle for power by the Labour Left.

The participants who lacked experience of Labour Party activism prior to Corbyn generally found Momentum to be of great personal benefit in terms of helping them learn about party politics and become more confident with Labour's internal structure and organisation. As mentioned previously, Momentum published a wide range of informational material on Labour Party processes and campaigning advice which was freely available and promoted online through social media, direct emails and their website. For some, such as Ben, the local Momentum group was an important forum for sharing ideas and coordinating campaign activities during elections separately from their CLP, particularly through the local WhatsApp group. For example, as outlined in Chapter 5, Ben and his local group identified their own target constituencies and campaign priorities during GE2017, and organised trips for Momentum members to canvass in Bolton West contrary to official Labour Party strategy. Local groups also held political education events, which were potentially open to members of the public but aimed primarily at Momentum members, as well as actively participating in local campaigns in their areas with or without explicit Labour Party support (see Chapter 6). Several activists (including Padraig, Grace, Ben, Catherine, Emma and Olivia) formed influential and long lasting peer networks through their local Momentum groups, which in many cases had their inception during the *Jeremy for Leader* campaign of 2015.

For some activists, these groups remained important, mostly online, spaces for communication and discussion, but also

> *an excuse to socially get together and... so from their point of view it doesn't really matter if it's an echo chamber, you'll just get more facts that tell you the truth, what you want to hear. But you hear it in the room with people who are like you and you can socialise with them*" (Alex).

Indeed, in addition to implicit criticism for what he perceived as an echo chamber effect from these groups, Alex also at one point characterised Momentum as "*a giant WhatsApp group*", emphasising the importance of social media and digital organising he witnessed in Momentum. However, many of these digital groups fostered peer networks that persisted long after the initial leadership campaigns, and some formed the basis for increasingly committed participation in both Momentum and the Labour Party (e.g. Grace, Catherine, Olivia).

For some of the interviewees, participation in activism through Momentum quickly built their confidence as Labour activists and led directly to participation in electoral politics through positions as local councillors, as in the case of Grace, Catherine, Emma, and Olivia. As Emma recalled, "*Momentum was an initial springboard into political activism and the local Left community."* Momentum provided practical advice, training materials and, most importantly, lists of local Momentum members who could be directly canvassed for support during both CLP selection processes and local election campaigns. Padraig also benefited from Momentum endorsement when running for internal Labour Party positions. As a result of Momentum's large membership and requirement for full members to also hold Labour Party membership, inclusion on a Momentum slate or public endorsement by Momentum was a valuable asset in maximising votes when competing for selection or running for office within the Labour Party, as well as opening access to additional resources and manpower via Momentum during campaigns, as discussed in more detail below.

For others, especially those who were already familiar with grassroots party political activism or who already held positions within Labour, Momentum represented more of an organisational resource to utilise in the left-wing struggle for power within the party. Robert and Simon found their local Momentum group to be particularly useful as an additional forum for left wing Labour members to meet, separate from their CLP. For some, such as Dan, Tom and Mark, who were not as active in Momentum as compared to the Labour Party, Momentum represented an important national ally in the broader struggle for left-wing influence and power within the party, as well as

providing valuable on-the-ground support during elections. Additionally, as newer activists became more familiar with and committed to the Labour Party, Momentum's role in promoting the leftist cause within the party gained significance, and some such as Catherine and Olivia were very vocal on this, as well as on the value and importance of strong links between Momentum and LOTO. For example, when asked about Momentum's policy positions, Catherine echoed Foster-Ogg by suggesting that Momentum "*exists to be the spokesman [sic] of the Leader's Office. [We] would not want to contradict.*"

In addition to the personal benefit and role of Momentum, many participants expressed a wider view in regards to its function both for its activist base and within British society more generally. For most participants, there was an overarching focus on promoting left wing ideology, both within the Labour Party and the UK political landscape. As Padraig put it, "*we're trying to achieve a socialist Labour government [led] by Jeremy Corbyn*." Robert identified Momentum's purpose to be "*push[ing] the Labour Party to the left*", whereas Mark suggested it was *"to turn the party into a more socialist left-wing platform. Evidently*." Dan agreed, stating that "*I think Momentum are primarily there to support Corbyn's leadership, [and a] change in direction of party policy,"* but that they also "*fulfil a useful mainstream media bogey presence."* Simon sited this within the context of Labour Party history, commenting that *"the main body of [my local Momentum group] was sort of old members in a kind of Bennite tradition who had re-joined recently… they saw Corbyn as a reflection of that, an end to the New Labour era."*

All interviews were completed before Corbyn's defeat in GE2019, so, unsurprisingly, participants generally expressed optimism regarding the progress Momentum was making in promoting a left-wing narrative. However, as early as 2018, Robert lamented over what he viewed as squandered potential in making a real difference to Labour:

> *My overall bottom line on Momentum is that it hasn't been much use. I think it had enormous potential to start with, but I don't think much of that's been realised, partly because of the way Lansman and Christine Shawcroft and others have organised it. So centrally and autocratically. Partly because it hasn't really got involved in policy. I think it has had some uses, but some Momentum people who were really good at policy, actually left Momentum or left the employment of Momentum in order to work in Jeremy Corbyn's office. [...] Another general point is that an awful lot of people in the*

> *Labour Party who are on the left, they joined Momentum because it showed a lot of promise, but they'd have been doing much the same stuff even if it weren't for Momentum* (Robert).

Mark also made a similar suggestion, commenting that "*when Corbyn first was elected there was a surge of new members like there were in many places. And a lot of young people came in. I think a lot of people had high hopes of change. Um, I think since then some of them have been disappointed*."

There is some evidence that Momentum may have had little influence on certain members' activities. Dan and Tom never joined Momentum because they were already heavily involved with their local CLP or were put off by factionalism; even though they were members, Padraig and Alex also concentrated their activities more within the Labour Party than Momentum. Mark, although he joined and was very vocally supportive of Momentum, had been a local Labour councillor for decades, and many local policy initiatives supported by his local Momentum branch were the result of campaigns or programmes in existence well before Corbyn's leadership. As a result, most of the activism discussed was more related to activities within his local Labour Group rather than Momentum; he also shared that

> *The people are interrelated. The people who are part of Momentum, some of them are the same people who are in the constituency. [...] A big overlap. And they live near each other. [...] Been involved in the party before me, and there aren't too many of those people left now!* (Mark)

As discussed in previous chapters, Momentum consistently calls itself a 'movement' (Momentum, 2022a); as a result, participants were asked for their views on this description of the organisation, and responses were clearly divided into two groups, which correlated closely with participants' primarily identity as being linked to either Momentum or the Labour Party. Participants who saw themselves more as Momentum activists appeared overall much more open to defining Momentum as a movement. For example, Emma stated that "*I would say that it functions primarily as a social and campaigning movement and to support the election of a Labour government with anti-austerity and socialist policies. It facilitates links between activists who are like-minded*." Olivia also expressed a distinction between Momentum and Labour:

> *I still see [Momentum] as like one body of people that feed into something, and then that gets filtered into a direction. Um, so we run alongside the Labour Party, but I think we also present campaigning and alternative narratives, or we provide a platform for many discussions that sort of get pushed to the side because they're not in the mainstream media. [...] So, Momentum, the social movement side of it, is that it gives an alternative narrative and it gives a platform to ideas that usually wouldn't have that platform* (Olivia).

She went on to emphasise her role as a movement or protest activist as opposed to a traditional Labour councillor:

> *I see myself as, like, a Labour Party councillor, but very much like a Momentum activist and belonging to that, because that's the forum that's... we bring ideas to each other. [...] So it's about questioning things in the council and being an activist. You know, I think that's like the main thing. You can't get complacent* (Olivia).

Grace recalled a crossroads where Momentum could have become a movement party, like Podemos or Syriza with whom the organisation is often compared, as well as pointing out an organisational divide between Momentum and Labour:

> *I think there was one point where it looked like it could have gone that way [movement party like Podemos], where Momentum could have gone to, like, say we're not ascribing to the Labour Party, we're actually, we're Momentum and we're going this way. But I think there was a very strong pull then, back to the Labour Party and Momentum as a social movement is there to support the Labour Party. Because we, I would agree with this, we couldn't trust the machinery of the Labour Party at that point. We had to have something different. We had to have something... related, but different* (Grace).

In contrast, participants who identified primarily with Labour Party membership felt that characterising Momentum as a movement was less important, irrelevant or even entirely mistaken. Mark struggled to define Momentum at all, stating that

> *I can't define it. Sorry. I haven't got a definition. Because it's a loose group isn't it? And will remain so as long as it doesn't have any power. Power as in changing anything in government or causing changes in legislation. We haven't got a Labour government…* (Mark)

Simon had no recollection of Momentum being described as a movement:

> *Well, I think this is perhaps the first time I've heard that language used, as being a social movement. A debate that's often had is: to what extent is Momentum's role within the Labour Party? and outside the Labour Party?*

Notably, both Mark and Simon worked within local areas where there were established, pre-existing networks of left-wing Labour activists, and their local Momentum groups were therefore not dominated by newcomers to the Party.

Robert also disagreed with calling Momentum a 'movement', but mainly on the basis that it did not engage with large numbers of activists in support of specific issues outside of the Labour Party:

> *It's not trying to get a mass movement of people and as far as I know that's the only way to get radical transformative change, is when millions of people are making it clear that it's going to happen. [...] Well, it was initially to try and ensure that Corbyn was elected and stayed re-elected as leader... but then secondly it was to try and get a Corbyn-led Labour Party in government. Although it's been mainly reduced to organising within the Labour Party rather than campaigning externally* (Robert).

Overall, Padraig had the most strongly held views on the subject, and approached the idea from a slightly different perspective:

> *It's designed to be a pressure group. To effect change within the Labour Party. So you can't have all these positions and them sort of mirroring the Labour Party. No. [...] Momentum's a pressure group designed to do one thing which is to achieve the socialist Labour-led government by Jeremy Corbyn. And also to change the Labour Party's policies on many things*. […] *We're trying to achieve a socialist Labour government [led] by Jeremy Corbyn. Just get on with the job. Just lobby the party, change the party from within. It takes the focus away. In terms of being a social movement, I think... it has the ability to do that through the local groups. [...] But Momentum is, it's more a pressure group. In terms of it being a social movement, I'd agree to a degree, but it's a social movement in terms of changing the Labour Party, not to sort of do what the Labour Party is there to do* (Padraig).

Coming from such divergent understandings of what Momentum's nature is and its purpose should be, it is unsurprising that participants displayed a variety of perspectives on the issues discussed during interviews. As mentioned, due to prominence in the national media at the time, antisemitism within Labour and Brexit

were specifically included in the interview guide questions, and all participants were invited to share their views and experiences relating to these issues. A further three additional themes of democracy, socialism and class were identified; these will be discussed in turn in the remainder of this chapter.

7.3 Interview Themes

7.3.1 Antisemitism and Brexit

During 2018 and 2019, when interviews were taking place, the issues of Brexit and antisemitism within the Labour Party appeared to represent pivotal and influential debates within British politics; to reflect this, the topics were raised at each interview. Interestingly, these areas of policy and practice did not hold as much importance for the participants as other issues, with several preferring to avoid expressing a specific view on one or both topics. Of those who did voice an opinion, most only shared very brief comments on each. Because of the explicit inclusion in the interview guide questions, the relatively limited content on each issue will be presented in turn. However, although these areas have not been assessed to be important enough to participants overall to be considered main interview themes in themselves, the absence of importance ascribed to them by interviewees is notable and arguably has potential relationship to the issue of class that will be discussed below.

The Brexit referendum took place in June 2016, before this project began; the main issue in the national media during data collection was the campaign for a 'People's Vote', which was advocated as a route to either further confirmation or an overturning of the 2016 result (Pogrund and Maguire, 2020). Of the seven participants who expressed any opinion on Brexit generally, none held a notably strong view. Robert only mentioned it in the context of support for a united Ireland. Padraig, Alex and Simon echoed Corbyn's general position, that there were other more important issues to discuss and that the conflict between Leave and Remain made the topic both inherently divisive and an unhelpful distraction: "*I'm glad that Labour is still focusing on these core issues which have a magnitude of comparable if not greater than what Brexit will have on people's lives*" (Simon). As pointed out previously, Ben expressed regret that Momentum had polled its members on the issue, and Mark went a little further in sympathising with the difficult nature of Corbyn's position on Brexit, explaining that,

> *he's a Brexiteer, is Jeremy, always was. But he knows, you see, that people have spoken in a referendum and whatever Jeremy does it's wrong for somebody. We can't change tack now, we've gone too far down the road to do that on this one. So whatever he does it's wrong for somebody. Can you imagine now how that would look if you were to try to overturn what was a 'people's vote' already?* (Mark)

Other comments were wide-ranging, but similarly brief in nature. Olivia reflected that the topic was "*boring*" when discussed at meetings, whilst Padraig suggested that "*a right wing person will use Brexit as a way to try and progress themselves to the leadership position [within the Labour Party].*" Dan expected Brexit would be a failure, but that this might actually help the Labour Party in the longer term by reflecting badly on the Conservatives. However, the general brevity and absence of elaboration suggests a lack of importance ascribed to the topic, standing in stark contrast to the strength of feeling expressed by many working class communities and voters. The only participant to go any way towards specifically connecting these issues was Simon:

> *I think there has been some disillusionment with the Labour Party and with Momentum, and particularly with Jeremy Corbyn, for being very quiet on Brexit. And to a certain degree I sympathise with that view. I think, yeah, Brexit is a major contemporary issue which is going to affect everyone including working class people, and so... I want to know what the Labour Party position on that is. And in fact, it was probably something to do with Labour being very quiet on it that meant they came... third I think? In the European elections...Obviously beaten by the Brexit Party, the overtly Brexit party, and the Lib Dems, the overtly Remain party. And that perspective that we see of the public vote where the Labour Party having been a bit... beaten around the bush if you like, in not expressing a clear view on Brexit, led to its unpopularity* (Simon).

Interestingly, this lack of focus on Brexit as a pivotal issue has also been observed by Michael Chessum, who was involved not only with Momentum's leadership team, but also with the anti-Brexit group Another Europe is Possible. According to Chessum (2022, p.178), 'the [2016] referendum was barely considered a priority at all in Momentum, and without much of a central lead, many of its local groups remained dormant,' which he attributed to LOTO influence over Momentum's policy positions.

Discussion was slightly more animated amongst interviewees around the issue of antisemitism within Labour, and eight of the twelve participants shared a view on the subject. Many expressed either an implicit or explicit belief that the problem was not as widespread or serious as reported in the media. Mark explained that he had never experienced antisemitism in the Party, but felt that social media and the internet had made the issue more visible. Dan also had never witnessed antisemitism, and added that

> *I think the best answer to that is a Facebook post that a dear comrade and friend of mine made, which is: 'Anti-semitism in the Labour Party is like lions in Norway. Yes, there is antisemitism in Labour just like there are lions in Norway, but it's not their natural environment*' (Dan).

Robert also felt allegations were overblown, arguing that "*there's a darn sight more [antisemitism] in the Tory Party and there's a darn sight more in the world at large than there is in the Labour Party, and we are doing something about it!*" However, he also felt that Christine Shawcroft had mishandled her involvement with internal Labour Party investigations of the issue. Alex and Ben agreed that the issue was not as serious as reported, but went further to suggest that it was used by some for political gain, and that public discourse was inflamed by social media. Simon connected alleged antisemitism primarily with the Israel/Palestine conflict, but also explained that there was a widely held belief within the left of the party that "*the antisemitism problem is used to sort of expel and suspend [certain] Labour Party members which led to an organisation being established in opposition to the antisemitism witch hunt*." Padraig went further in expressing sympathy for those accused of antisemitism and articulated a belief that at least some of the time Momentum was more concerned for its public image than standing up for injustice, commenting that

> *whether they are antisemitic comments, or whether they're not, Momentum's distanced themselves from them. They all kick up a fuss about that. And I just think it's completely, you know... completely wrong that this individual has been targeted. Momentum aren't supporting them* (Padraig).

Olivia felt markedly more strongly about the subject, recalling how she and her local branch had been proactive and pivotal in lobbying for Momentum to remove its endorsement from Corbyn ally Peter Willsman; Willsman had been included on

Momentum's recommended slate for Labour's NEC elections in 2018, but was subsequently accused of making antisemitic comments and removed from the slate (Johnston, 2018). When the allegations first came to light, Olivia and her branch communicated their concerns to Momentum's National Office:

> *this was a person who we thought, he's antisemitic and if you're antisemitic you cannot identify as a socialist, because being a socialist in the most basic sense is viewing everyone as the same and as equality [sic]. And we didn't want to be associated with him, we didn't want to organise with him. [...] And we were not happy. And we said as a [local] Momentum group, if this continues then we will disperse and we won't organise, and we then coordinated that with the North West and we sent between us a very strong message that we would just not meet and we won't do anything [unless action was taken on a national level]* (Olivia).

Grace also expressed frustration at antisemitism, sharing her recollection of when a Labour Party member called MP Luciana Berger "*a Zionist bitch*", and indicated a belief that some individuals attempted to use their self-identification as socialist as a moral shield, saying that "*stupid people were accusing her of being a traitor, and all this kind of stuff. And we just think that that's acceptable language! Because they're socialists and they believe in, you know, socialist values, and anybody else is a traitor…*" Despite recalling this abhorrent behaviour, Grace also provided an eloquent summary of what came across as the most pervasive attitude amongst grassroots Momentum activists during this time:

> *It is important how you use language, but we're talking about a mass movement of half a million people [i.e. the Labour Party], there's going to be some dullards. Who don't know, you know? And, to de-legitimise the whole of the Labour Party because of that is a bit unfair, I would say. I mean a lot of people deny that there's antisemitism because they don't see it as antisemitism. [...] They don't see that actually, you know, a trope is actually a really dangerous thing to have in any society, about any outside group. The only way to combat that I think is through education, but I don't think that we are.... capable of having calm conversations about it, honest conversations about it. People will have unconscious biases that they aren't aware of. But if they admit to those unconscious biases, they could be accused of being antisemitic. And that, again, is dangerous. So it's a difficult, difficult subject. But I really don't think the Labour Party is systemically antisemitic.*

Therefore, overall, although stories on Brexit and antisemitism within the Labour Party were prevalent in national media at the time of this research, these issues did

not inspire the discussion and strength of feeling from the participant group as a whole that was anticipated when the topics were included in the interview guide questions. In contrast, the following sections present more detailed and elaborated material on what have been assessed as the main themes that have come out of the interview data, arguably representing issues more important to the activists themselves; they were discussed prominently by participants, often without explicit prompting: democracy, class, and socialism, with strong but often implicit perceptions of both individual and collective identity running underneath to connect these concepts.

7.3.2 Democracy

Nearly all participants expressed ideas around democracy, democratic processes or democratic participation. The frequent reference to democracy is not surprising considering the context of the group's operation within a political party, and the content relating to democracy and democratic process can be broadly grouped into two main areas: democratic processes within the Labour Party, and democratic structures and decision-making within Momentum. Notably, issues around democracy or democratic reform in the UK more widely did not feature at all, suggesting the relative lack of priority this held for activists, which is also consistent with Labour's general position on electoral reform.

As discussed previously, Corbyn and Lansman are both historic supporters of the CLPD, and they ensured Momentum was at the forefront of a campaign to reinstate mandatory reselection within the Labour Party, a debate which was ongoing during the interview period with prominent Momentum involvement, as presented in more detail in Chapter 6. Several participants were interviewed after the issue had been resolved at Labour's 2018 conference, and although it was significant on a national level, it was also not an area of overwhelming importance to most of the participants who were interviewed prior to conference. For example, when asked about open selection just prior to the 2018 conference, Dan was quite relaxed about the issue, explaining that

> *I think I probably favour trigger ballots, in terms of if x% of a CLP's members wish to trigger a reselection process, I think that's fine. I think the reality is that if you get a safe labour seat then you've probably got a job for life. And I think on balance reselection is not without problems because it's people's jobs. [...] There should be a mechanism. What that mechanism should be, I think, is trigger ballots with x%* (Dan).

However, following the changes to the trigger threshold, Tom and Olivia both experienced a trigger ballot and subsequent selection process in their local constituency, although I was unaware they were members of the same CLP until after both interviews had been completed; their contrasting perspectives are worth presenting in detail. Momentum was influential in mobilising local members to vote against the sitting councillor who had been in the position for eight years, thus triggering an open selection process:

> *So, it was, again, Momentum. We had Momentum people in that branch who said you know we aren't very happy with the councillor. [...] and we, they, knew that the selection process was going to start, or that the trigger to saying we don't want the councillor that's been [serving], we want to, like, open it up* (Olivia).

Resident in a neighbouring ward, Olivia was supported by Momentum to compete for selection. A number of local CLPs were going through selection processes at the time, and the approach for deciding who Momentum would put forward as potential candidates was quite informal and undertaken via discussions within the local Momentum branch:

> *And it was, like, well, we're going to be coordinated about this. Who has strengths in each of these areas? Which of our Momentum members who would like to be councillors or could see themselves as a councillor would be best? [...] So there was sort of a strategy of looking at the strengths of the Momentum members who felt they would be good in those wards, and then deciding that's where we're going to go. So that was the decision, and then the Momentum members in that [Labour] branch were like, well, we nominate [Olivia] for the shortlisting and then it would work from there* (Olivia).

The support provided during the process included lists of local Momentum members in the constituency, each of whom were then canvassed to attend selection meetings and vote for Olivia. An influx of Momentum supporters resulted in a much higher turnout than expected at the selection meeting, and Olivia was chosen. However, the process was bitterly contested and not every left-leaning constituency member was appreciative of Momentum's efforts; as Tom recalled, "*it was [the sitting councillor's] turn to be leader of the local Labour Group, but she was moved against because she wasn't Momentum. But she wasn't a Blairite or right-wing*!" As a result of the experience, Tom felt that although he wanted to remain active within

the Labour Party, he "*couldn't go back to that branch*." However, Olivia had a different perspective, illustrating the complexity of the perceived factional struggles that played out:

> *You know, it's no one's God-given right to be a councillor. It isn't something that you feel that you deserve, it's something that you work for. And it is, like, an amazing privilege to have. And I remember when I was selected as the Labour candidate alongside a few others, there was a local newspaper that put out an article saying this is a left-wing take over, this is like, a Marxist whirlwind. [...] And I actually remember, when I was being selected, when I was ringing round, [being told] that the person who was my opposition, the other councillor, had been speaking to people saying - you know, I was 23 when I was elected and I've been in [the local area] for five years - and the people who I was ringing were saying the sitting councillor has told us there's this Marxist 19-year-old who's been [here] for six months and [they are] trying to take my job. And I just remember thinking, this is ridiculous, you know?* (Olivia)

However, the large majority of discussion around democracy during the interviews related to internal Momentum processes and activities, particularly around changes to the Momentum constitution that took place in 2017 relating to its internal democratic procedures (see Chapter 4). Interestingly, there were some notable contradictions between the democratic ideal many activists supported and certain aspects of the practical organisational arrangements adopted by Momentum itself which were arguably anti-democratic in nature. Some members were strongly against the new constitutional arrangements that were put in place, which replaced a system where local and regional delegates participated in decision making, with the online OMOV system. Robert, who had close links with Momentum activists at the national level, recounted what he believed happened:

> *[Nick Wrack, Fire Brigades Union] wrote a constitution which was really democratic and involving all sorts of participatory democracy and involving lots of opportunities to rally and expose policies to the public and so on. Um, and in the face of that, Lansman and Shawcroft, directors of 'Momentum Limited' said, no, we're not having that. <u>This</u> is the new constitution. They managed to get the existing National Committee which was already well past its remit, you know there was a committee that was mainly Lansmanites, but they managed at short notice to arrange a meeting which excluded people like Wrack who would have opposed it. And got a vote to set up the new Momentum constitution which was entirely top-down. So we ended up with this conflict in Momentum, between those which [called themselves] Grassroots Momentum and those, you know, who were following Lansman in wanting to control things centrally,*

> *nationally. And appoint people to work in certain areas... I mean, [it] seemed to me to be an absurdly clear case of autocracy and anti-democratic working* (Robert).

Simon recounted similar second-hand knowledge of the internal conflict within Momentum over the constitutional changes. However, whilst Grace also expressed a negative opinion of the fallout from this, she also admitted that she did not feel strongly about it on a personal level due to preoccupation with her duties as a councillor:

> *So, you know I think it's one of those things that has probably pissed off about... 60-70 people [locally], on the [local] left who were involved who think it was completely undemocratic. And some people who aren't in Momentum now, but are involved in the left, think that Momentum is so undemocratic and don't trust Momentum. I shouldn't really, I should know, but I just don't have time. It's not really… it's not really how you build a social movement I suppose.* (Grace)

In contrast, however, many grassroots members were strongly in favour of the changes, and had a different perspective on the implications of the changes that were made. For example, as Ben commented,

> *I mean I think the mistake [Jon Lansman] made was setting up this delegate-based structure in the first place, [...]. because then once he realised it was the wrong path to go down it was like he had to sort of get rid of it and... you know put one-member-one-vote in place. So he did send out an email and people voted for one-member-one-vote and got rid of the delegate-based system. But, yeah, it did cause a lot of... there was a big split between people like me who wanted one-member-one-vote and people who wanted a delegate-based system. But what was the point of having a delegate based system? I mean we've already got so many in the Labour Party anyway. We've got the LRC [Labour Representation Committee 2004] which is a delegate-based left wing group, so why do you need two of them?* (Ben)

To Ben, the changes saved time by avoiding meetings, and were also potentially more democratic through allowing all members an opportunity to express a view on issues. However, as discussed previously, in practice the system of online voting was very rarely utilised, with interviewees generally unable to recall receiving any invitations to express a view (see Chapter 6).

Padraig was also supportive of changes to Momentum's internal democracy, but for very different reasons. For him, the issues with both the delegate and OMOV systems were directly linked with the perceived role of Momentum as an organisation. He lamented,

> *it shouldn't have opened itself to be like some sort of democratic, like sort of... I'm saying this as a democratic person myself, but it's meant to be a pressure group. It's not designed to be a party within a party. You start going down that path, you're mirroring then a party within a party* (Padraig).

He also linked the issue of democracy to that of internal factionalism and power struggles within Momentum itself:

> *I think I was against, again, that system of sending delegates to conference, 'cause essentially then that becomes an opportunity then for the likes of the SWP [Socialist Workers Party] members of Momentum to get their people elected to positions and essentially just take over Momentum and establish it as this like sort of... uh, party within a party thing again, when it's not. I've said this to people within Momentum, I've said look, you know what's happened to people at the top of Momentum like Jon Lansman, but these people have been put there not by themselves but by the likes of Corbyn. And Corbyn trusts them. And when they say to take a certain course of action, it's not coming from themselves, it's coming from the Leader's Office. Of course, they don't.... they don't see it as that. They see it as again essentially then being told what to do and what to think about things. Which to a degree you can understand the frustration with that, but then it's not designed to be what they think about this open democratic organisation. It's designed as I say to be a pressure group* (Padraig).

Padraig goes on to draw conclusions about some members' personal ambitions, expressing a view that, potentially, initiating any sort of democratic decision-making within Momentum

> *sets off the others at the bottom, thinking that, you know, we should be member-led. That we should be in charge of the organisation and running it. But of course then, I laugh at that argument because it's not then about being member-led, it's about them themselves running the organisation with their egos, being in positions of power. And that's all it's come down to. I couldn't give a... donkey's really about who the person is leading Momentum as long as they have one goal which is to achieve a socialist Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn* (Padraig).

There were other, more technical, critiques of Momentum's internal structures. For example, Robert pointed out what he perceived as a London-centric nature of the new constitution, asking, "*Do you know that in the constitution of Momentum now, the regions, you know the South East and there's the Midlands, and one of the regions is the North of England, Scotland and the Rest of the World! It's amazing.*" This is not an unfair paraphrasing of the constitution in place at the time, as can be seen from the relevant section below

Image 25: Excerpt from Momentum's 2019 Constitution

6. National Coordinating Group

6.1 The business of Momentum will be carried out by a NCG.

6.2 The NCG shall consist of Momentum members who confirm (and can provide evidence on request) that they are current Labour Party members, confirm their agreement to the rules of Momentum, who are nominated and if necessary elected in accordance with Rule 7, in the following numbers and categories:

(i) 4 from each of five divisions - (a) the North West and Wales; (b) the Midlands, and the East; (c) the South East and South West; (d) London; (e) Yorkshire, Scotland, the North (North East & Cumbria) & overseas members - at least two of whom are women and at least one of whom identifies as BAME in each division;

Momentum, 2019d, p.2

Indeed, in addition to combining Northern activists with all international members, arguably this passage also fails to conform to standard UK political geography, as Cumbria is conventionally included within the North West region. Furthermore, the constitution does not stipulate a standard process for selecting representatives from each region to sit on the NCG, and this may have fostered a sense of frustration with some Momentum members who observed that appointments to the NCG appeared to have been made based on personal relationships with the National Office rather than through a transparent and fair process. For example, Simon's local branch of Momentum wished to nominate a particular member to represent their region on the NCG, but felt that "*Momentum selected a candidate who was part of a sort of clique in the top of Momentum and local branches weren't able to have their say."* In developments since Corbyn's departure as Labour Leader, Momentum shows signs of improving the process selecting members of the NCG; however, during the period of time covered by this study, for many activists these perceived failings in terms of internal democracy stood in stark

contrast to Momentum's zealous advocacy of democracy within the Labour Party.

Despite these shortcomings, Momentum experimented with some processes designed to promote a deep engagement with democratic participation in the running of the organisation. Grace shared what she considered an outstanding example of democratic decision-making, which she experienced whilst helping to facilitate Momentum's Member Council that took place on 9th September 2017. As presented in Chapter 6, Grace recalled that the Council "*was the most democratic thing I've ever seen"* (Grace); however, the recommendations from the Council were never published or implemented, and exercise was never repeated. This abandonment of participatory democracy appears consistent with the generally autocratic nature of Momentum's leadership during Corbyn's tenure as Leader.

7.3.3 Socialism

'Socialism' and 'socialist' are terms that were repeated many times both in email communications and other documents from Momentum, and this has arguably intensified over time. For instance, the word 'socialist' was used 78 times in Momentum's 24-page 2021 strategy document (Momentum, 2021f). Socialism was also a frequently discussed topic during interviews with participants, although the importance and conception of the term did vary. For some, such as Dan, the concept of socialism did not feature prominently; instead, their ideas around what they desired for Momentum's legacy was to support Labour to be "*a radical social democratic party*". Others, like Robert, held views much further along the left-right spectrum, wishing to be viewed "*as a revolutionary socialist [...] not a member of any Trotskyist group, but as a Marxist*", and expressing disappointment that Corbyn and Momentum did not succeed in pushing the Labour Party far enough left. Simon shared a view of socialism through a more cultural lens,

> *I've actually never been to a World Transformed event, but I've heard from comrades that it's sort of like Labour Party conference events but more left wing and more energetic. Uh, the general atmosphere is sort of socialism, people are willing to wear their Karl Marx t-shirts there, whereas they're less confident doing that in Labour Party conference* (Simon).

However, reflecting a similar message to official Momentum documents, many participants placed heavy significance on socialism as what they believed to be the

natural ideology of the Labour Party, a representation of true Labour values that had been eroded over time, and, most importantly, as the most appropriate political ideology for social justice and economic fairness. Olivia summarises this position succinctly:

> *I remember having a conversation with one of my friends who's now a councillor as well and we said, you know, we always found it really ironic that on the back of the Labour Party card it says we are, like, a socialist democratic organisation, but it wasn't really presenting any of these socialist policies that we felt the Labour Party needed to have* (Olivia).

The actual membership card description calls Labour a 'democratic socialist party' (Avery, 2021), although it is arguable whether this inversion materially changes the meaning of the phrase.

Serving to create a binary moral dichotomy, the Conservative Party and Thatcherism were routinely cast as villains with socialism portrayed as the polar opposite, and therefore, by extension, an inherently good and positive force in politics. This will be examined in more detail in Chapter 10 as it relates to identity theory, but it also builds on the common Labour Party election tactic of blaming constituents' local difficulties on the Conservative national government that I have witnessed in local canvassing and campaign material across the North West since 2010. However, Momentum goes beyond this message to assert the solution is not just a Labour government, but a *socialist* Labour government. As Olivia explains,

> *we need to reverse years of, like, neoliberalism, of this Conservative agenda that has completely just put the most vulnerable in society at the very bottom and has just left them. And that, for that to happen, there needs to be truly socialist MPs and there needs to be truly socialist councillors. [...] Because at the end of the day, you know, politics affects all of us, your landlord's into it, your boss is into it, it's all around you and it's like Momentum want to bring these people and support them into it so then they can fight for it. And they have these socialist values because it's in their interest, because socialism will be the remedy to, like, all the troubles that they have to fight through* (Olivia).

Many non-economic societal evils such as antisemitism were viewed as antithesis to socialism: to repeat a quote presented above, "*and this was a person who we thought, he's anti-Semitic and if you're anti-Semitic you cannot identify as a socialist*

because being a socialist in the most basic sense is viewing everyone as the same and as equality [sic]*"* (Olivia). Olivia also expressed the view that

> *I mean it's, like, an abomination to think that we were once a party that had MPs that voted for Syrian airstrikes, or, you know, voted about being against gay marriage. That we had MPs that did that. I think that we've come far, but we have got so far to come [sic]. We have a history that even though we were meant to be a left wing party, we have done things that are by no means socialist on any level. So that is the future, that we have a Labour Party that is inherently socialist* (Olivia).

At the same time, what was considered to be the morally correct position on other social issues were routinely ascribed to socialism. Robert listed support for Palestine, fighting for a united Ireland, cancelling Trident, and campaigning for workers' freedom of movement as being inherently socialist endeavours, sharing a conversation he had with Corbyn:

> *I said to him, you know, what's the point of having you as leader, Jeremy? I mean, I think you're great and obviously I'll give you all the support I can, but you know, what's the point of having you as leader if we're not actually putting forward the socialist policies that we all want to fight for? Including those?* (Robert)

However, more often, Corbyn was almost treated as an embodiment of socialism: "*And if we had somebody who was a socialist [i.e. Corbyn] who agrees with it, the policy agenda, here that would make a huge difference*" (Grace). Evidence for this was usually drawn from Corbyn's reputation for voting against the Party whip: "*Jeremy Corbyn betrayed the whip many times under Blair, and, um, previous leaders that I couldn't name. He was [seen by Momentum members as] the only bastion of socialism in the party and we're glad he stuck to his principles*" (Simon). Olivia expresses it this way, contrasting Corbyn with "*MPs*":

> *I've always felt like once we got Jeremy elected and we were campaigning on different issues, like loads of things that were going on in society, we were like, we want to make sure that there was a left wing party. You know, you can have Jeremy Corbyn as leader, [...] you can have his humanitarian and socialist values as the face of the Labour Party, but what does that mean if that isn't trickling down into, um, the MPs and how they can change the lives of people in their constituencies? What does that mean if we aren't having, you know, radical changes in local government? [...] We can*

> *have as many people who identify with being left-wing, but what does that mean if it doesn't translate into actual changes in society?* (Olivia)

Indeed, Momentum emails regularly referred to 'principled, socialist Labour candidates' (e.g. Team Momentum, 2019a) or fighting for a 'socialist Labour government' (e.g. Team Momentum, 2019b), and often addressed readers as fellow 'socialists' (e.g. Team Momentum, 2018). This vocabulary was also often echoed by participants, for example, "*Momentum's a pressure group designed to do one thing which is to achieve the socialist Labour-led government by Jeremy Corbyn*" (Padraig). Often, 'socialist' was treated as directly synonymous with 'left-wing', for example when Olivia expressed a clear opinion about the value and meaning of socialism within the Labour Party:

> *we need to continue this socialist injection that's been pushed into the Labour Party, that it doesn't fizzle out, that it isn't just in name, that we aren't just on the back of the membership card 'socialist democrats' that it's, actually, we are a left-wing party at every single layer of the organisation, that we have a left-wing leader, that we have left-wing MPs, that these left-wing MPs are voting on policies that are anti-war, that are anti-austerity, that they are going to go to Westminster and actually challenge Conservatives [...] 'cause that's the only way you're going to change things.* (Olivia)

However, socialism and the possession of socialist principles were also a source of factional division in the Party. Padraig made a particular and irreconcilable distinction between socialists and centrists within Labour:

> *you have centrists in the party, you have the left in the party as well, like Corbyn. It is a difficult task to try to say that we're going to be this, but we're going to be that as well. You can't be either/or, you have to be one or the other. You have to either be social democratic or a socialist party* (Padraig).

Other participants identified socialism and being socialist as important signifiers associated with factionalism within Momentum itself. Grace found this frustrating, saying, "*It's unbelievable, the red lines that people will draw. Yeah... basically if you disagree with something then you're not a socialist.*" Simon described Momentum's internal factionalism in more detail:

> *I don't want to say the relative right of Momentum, only because there are far too many 'relatives' at play here, but those Momentum members who aren't, sort of,*

> *socialist party or revolutionaries, that sort of thing. Like, the social democrats if you like. Corbyn supporters because he's going to create nice capitalism, nicer capitalism. Those people were like, no, no Momentum's designed to work within the Labour Party and* [saying] *I don't want these radicals joining and distorting our focus from Labour Party activists onto other issues. I don't want to be discussing which socialist faction should have control of Momentum when I want to be pushing Labour Party policy in the world. So there was that conflict, the resolution of which I can't remember* (Simon).

He then went on to conclude that, "*So you get this, in Momentum, this uncompromising view where the left is always right and the right is always wrong. I've just slightly been put off by that*" (Simon). Alex experienced similar ideological conflict within Momentum, and began to see some members' identification with socialism as a source of hubris:

> *I think the other thing at the heart of it, though, is they probably got a bit caught up in their own brilliance and thought, "oh we've got this amazing left-wing message…" 'Cause I think what they tend to think is "oh we're socialists now", you know? And it's ridiculous, such a broad term that it's meaningless. [...] You know, they've all got a different definition of socialist and it becomes something to bash someone over the head with, you know, "you're not a true socialist"! What do you know about socialism?* (Alex)

Robert took a slightly different view, concluding that Momentum itself was sometimes not as socialist or left-wing as it was wished to be portrayed:

> *How left it was, of course [the local Momentum group], you know, is a big question because there was quite a few people who used to come to Momentum meetings who were very... constitutionalist. You know, who weren't comfortable on marches and demonstrations, you know? They played by the Labour Party rulebook all the time. I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad thing, but they weren't committed socialists in the way that I would say [others were]. So it was quite.... I'll try to avoid saying 'broad church'... but Momentum did cover a spectrum, largely on the left.* (Robert)

However, there was general agreement amongst participants that Momentum's pursuit of socialist policy within Labour, however it was defined, was generally positive. As Simon explained, Momentum has "*probably also helped to move conversations in the Labour Party to the left. I mean, it's brought the word socialism back to the Labour Party.*"

7.3.4 Class

In conjunction with socialism, representing working class interests and working class communities was another frequently recurrent theme both within the interview data and Momentum's communications and other documents. For example, in its 2021 strategy document *Socialist Organising in a New Era*, Momentum explicitly links its organisational purpose to supporting the 'working class struggle' throughout the document (Momentum, 2021f, pp. 2, 9, 11, 12, 13), and this represents a continuation of narratives that were common under Corbyn's leadership. The importance of class was reflected in my participant observations, as discussed previously, but it was also prominent in the interview data, with most of the participants expressing a view on the role of working class politics and communities in connection with Momentum's activism. Public discussions and critiques around the concept of 'working class' and the relationship between Momentum, Labour and traditional working class voters became more prevalent in the wake of Labour's GE2019 defeat (e.g. Jones, 2020; Murray, 2022; Pogrund and Maguire, 2020); however, some of my participants offered a preview to what became a much more widespread topic of debate.

A significant number of participants held a view that made fundamental associations between the working class community and the trade union movement, sometimes to the extent the terms were virtually synonymous:

> *I think for a while [...], the Labour Party became very complacent and I think, um, it sort of disconnected itself from working class people. And that happened because during the Blair years we saw a shift to New Labour, and we saw a shift that was away from, you know, its trade union background* (Olivia).

This equivalency between working class interests and trade unions is echoed in Momentum's documentation, for example when identifying potential political allies: 'first and foremost trade unions building working class power' (Momentum, 2021, p. 7). In the interviews, the concept of 'working class' was sometimes directly linked with socialism, as seen in this passage that extends on a quote presented earlier:

> *And I remember like a few of us having conversations that we felt that like during the Blair years that the party had gone very centrist, that it had sort of betrayed its working class roots, and I remember having a conversation with one of my friends who's now a councillor as well and we said, you know, we always found it really ironic that on like the back of the Labour Party card it says we are, like, a socialist democratic*

> *organisation, but we - it didn't… it wasn't really presenting any of these socialist policies that we felt the Labour Party needed to have* (Olivia).

Although Olivia's views on class very closely mirrored the majority of Momentum's published material on the issue, and it appeared generally representative of many newer and/or younger members' views on the subject, more experienced participants also linked support for the working class to socialism. Robert does this through reference to Marxist concepts of capital and oppression:

> *most of the people joining Momentum were genuine Corbyn supporters or to the left of Corbyn, wanting to get involved again in the movement, to see if we could push the Labour Party to the left and really make material changes in the conditions of the working class and marginalised people in the country. You know, that's the goal. It's really to improve the lot of the people who are exploited and oppressed now by capital* (Robert).

Similar desires for redressing inequalities and perceived mistreatment of disadvantaged groups were also linked to support for the working class by Padraig:

> *It's the same thing in terms of how far does it need to be a social movement? 'Cause that's what the Labour Party really should be. A social movement that is entrenched within the local communities and seen as a go-to thing within the local communities across the country. And seen as a working class party, socially just, social equality driven party again, that you go to* (Padraig).

However, Grace, who was deeply supportive of Momentum's policy positions and who had been actively involved with Momentum at different levels, began to see potential complexities within the idea of 'working class' identity. When asked about how she perceived the general background of the individuals who had taken over her local Momentum branch, she replied,

> *really interesting trying to work out how I categorise them.... it's a really interesting puzzle… actually taking the time to analyse what I think the core block is in Momentum....[...] They're all working class people, there's some diversity, um... it's hard to be objective about it, do you mind if I'm not objective? [...] I was going to say there's a lot of opportunists. Probably would imagine that they [local Momentum leadership] are the same, are all opportunists, trying to build their own platform.*

In general, the greater extent to which participants critically examined the concept of class, the more unsure they became regarding Momentum and Labour's authentic representation of the working class as it manifests in modern society. Alex held especially strong views on this, and elaborated in detail:

> *Well, you know... and it just becomes all this kind of, like, weird thing, but you've got this quite often quite middle class group of people in [Momentum]... I know class has changed a little bit, than what it was like 40-50 years ago, but they're convinced that they're dead socialist with these amazing left wing policies 'cause they're doing nationalisation again, and they're just mystified why most traditional working class groups don't trust them. [...] I think the fact that you live in the kind of echo chamber you don't socially know anybody. [...] I was joking with [another activist] like this. I was like, of course you're a big fan of globalisation, none of the poor immigrants live by you anymore, you know? The only time you see any of them is when they deliver you a parcel. And um... I mean, look... it's confidential anyway, so it doesn't matter. But [a different Momentum activist] is a perfect example of somebody who's concocted a worldview of herself being working class and she's about as middle class as you can get* (Alex).

Ben came to similar conclusions about a potential disconnect between Momentum, Corbyn and the working class, citing his experiences at TWT2017 in Brighton:

> *That was my impression of The World Transformed. I was asking people... obviously Jeremy epitomises that, sort of, liberal sort of person doesn't he? You know... the people in Brighton... I mean, Jeremy is just so on their sort of wavelength as being this vegan… well he's not a vegan, but you can imagine him being one. Do you know what I mean? He's like, just so squeaky clean, just so liberal, just so middle class. And I was saying, but if Angela Raynor is like the leader will you still have that, you know, passion for Angela Raynor? Because she's obviously quite...socially conservative really, isn't she, compared to Jeremy! I don't think Angela Raynor is going protesting for people in Yemen, you know, every weekend or whatever.... Do you know what I mean? [...] it's not the fact that they'll [northern working class voters] trust her, it's more the fact that they don't trust Jeremy Corbyn* (Ben).

Ben's impression of the culture at TWT2017 Brighton directly mirrors my own observations at TWT2018 in Liverpool as discussed in Chapter 6, suggesting that it may be less to do with the culture of Brighton and more to do with the culture of Momentum itself.

Tom also perceived the potential for class identities to present challenges for Labour during elections, commenting that Corbyn has succeeded in "*bringing back*" the liberal middle class who may have been disillusioned, "*but at the expense of working class voters you need to get ahead in first past the post*." Mark explicitly identified what he saw as the middle class nature of many left-wing activists, anticipating some potential challenges in connecting to voters, but he did express cautious optimism for Corbyn's approach:

> *It reminds me of the real, old fashioned left-wing people I knew years ago when I first joined the Party. Comfortably off middle-class people, who had the best of intentions. And that's how I see Jeremy Corbyn. How it would work out, we will only wait and see. I can only hope. He's the best chance we've got. [...] It was how it was back in the '60s and '70s was that. Exactly the same [as now]. But yes, you had your grassroots activists and they were generally supported by the masses. Found it difficult to relate, party members, some of them found it difficult* (Mark).

Similarly, Alex criticised other Momentum members' understanding of class based on his observations of a cultural disconnect when undertaking deep canvassing with older, more traditional working class voters. As early as 2018, Alex was observing the class-based political and cultural conflict that would eventually be blamed for Labour's devastating losses in GE2019, and his elaborations are worth recounting at length:

> *It's that whole appropriation thing. It's like, they're convinced they're working class, they think they've got these socialist credentials but, I think they don't tend to realise that the average working class person, someone like from my mum and dad's age, tend to be a little conservative on some issues. And tend, often, to look at much more pragmatic things. They don't want utopia or anything like that, they just want decent wages and... a hospital. [...] It just makes perfect sense, that. It's a culture war. It's not about you, your socialist credentials that you convince yourself you have. It's just that you're not talking the same language and they don't trust you anymore. [...] When you talk to Momentum people they're convinced they've got these left-wing socialist policies and so when they go knocking on doors, whether it's sort of like younger sort of people on zero-hour contracts who maybe are more working class or older sort of like more conservative left-wing voters, they think well we've got these amazing policies, well why don't you trust us? But what they don't see, I think, [is that] they're blatantly some kind of hipster student type or something like that, who talks very differently to them, is clearly not from their kind of background* (Alex).

Ben echoed Alex's impressions of the impact of this cultural divide, sharing observations from canvassing during GE2017 and relating this to an experience of feeling mistreated by fellow Momentum members over his opinions on class:

> *I looked at the definition of bigotry, and it was basically just having no respect for or not listening to other people's point of view. And this is what they [other Momentum members] were doing to me! [...] The conclusion I came to after that incident was that - my theory is on how politics is, when Momentum is doing all this door knocking and canvassing and stuff - obviously they're really good at getting people [who are] like them out to vote, but what happens is, the flip side of that coin, is that because they can be so bigoted on the doorstep, they motivate other people to vote for the Conservatives. 'Cause, if you can imagine, you're this socially conservative pensioner, some young student turns up on your door and starts lecturing you about immigration, that just motivates you to go out and vote for the Conservatives* (Ben).

Post-election, many emphasised the role of class on voting behaviour, particularly Momentum's leadership (e.g. NCG, Jan 2020) and other commentaries such as Labour Together's 2019 General Election Review and Owen Jones's (2020) account. My research suggests that earlier positive engagement with the experiences of grassroots activists who observed class-based divides might have improved the effectiveness of Momentum and Labour's GE2019 campaign. Additionally, a relative lack of interest around the important national issues of Brexit and antisemitism may also have contributed to a sense of disconnect, particularly with working class voters. Furthermore, the contrast between some participants' experiences of the voters' perception of working class culture and the view taken by Momentum nationally during GE2019 represents another potential manifestation of the organisational divide between the National Office and some local groups. The issue of class, including the divergent understandings between some Momentum activists and ordinary voters of what it means to be working class will be discussed further in Chapter 9.

7.4 Concluding Remarks

Underpinning the above themes is a construction of identity linked to individual and collective political ideology, and, by extension, perceptions of class. Indeed, insights into the broad overarching concepts of class and identity encapsulate the main findings from this research, and are the filter through which the analysis and preliminary theorising is viewed. Participants themselves foresaw the impact of class identity in Labour's 2019 electoral defeat, and this has been identified in hindsight by

analysts and commentators. The descriptions of the organisational culture within Momentum during GE2019 presented in the following chapter provide the foundation for a deeper exploration of the role of both class and identity in Momentum's interactions with the electorate and the experiences of its members. Chapter 8 will present and discuss my observational data from the GE2019 campaign, and Chapter 9 will outline Momentum's reactions to the result as well as analysis of key aspects of Momentum's campaign, a more in depth discussion of the role of class and a brief discussion around Momentum's legacy and trajectory after Corbyn. Following this, Chapter 10 will draw together all of the observations and analysis through an application of identity theory to this project's data and findings, and outline the ways in which I believe the empirical evidence from this research could inform an extension to applications of identity theory within the context of both social movements and political parties.

Chapter 8: The 2019 General Election (GE2019)

8.1 Anticipating GE2019

In keeping with Corbyn's permanent election footing, preparations for GE2019 began well before it was officially called. As early as July 2019, I was invited to a local video recording session organised, which was specifically in preparation for the next general election. The session involved the use of a local private recording studio which activists had access to through friendship networks. Activists from both Labour and Momentum were invited to drop in and be filmed, being asked to keep to the following script:

> *I am _____ . I am voting for Jeremy Corbyn because _____ .*

The original intent was for the very short recordings to be edited into a longer video for use during the anticipated general election. However, subsequently, a decision was made to keep the clips short so participants could post the videos to their own social media accounts and disseminate them through their personal networks. This decision was based on the belief voters would be more influenced by someone they knew and trusted, and Momentum promoted this approach more widely amongst members (see Section 8.2.6). Some participants used their names, others referenced their professions, for example teacher or retired nurse. The reasons provided for supporting Corbyn reflected the common narratives that had developed during the course of Corbyn's leadership; representative responses completing "*I am voting for Jeremy Corbyn because…"* included:

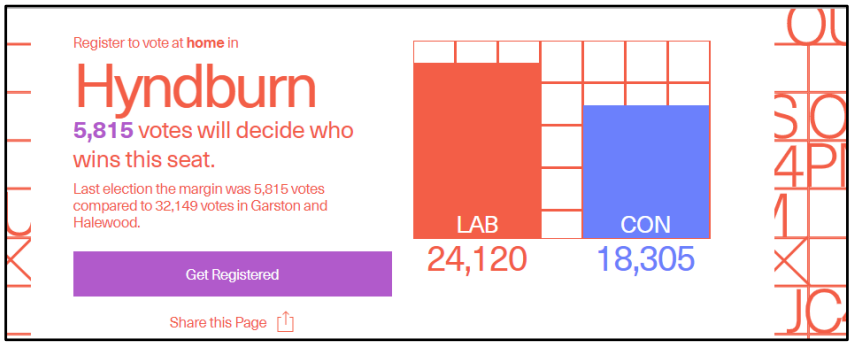
> *…he is on the right side of history.*
>
> *… he has integrity.*
>
> *… he is everything you want in an MP and a Prime Minister.* (fieldnotes, 26 July 2019)

In general, the approach for this campaign material appears to be much more presidential in nature, focusing on Corbyn himself rather than voting Labour.

Nationally, on 16 September Momentum launched the univotes.co.uk tool to help university students make tactical decisions about where to register to vote based on Labour's margins. Students were asked to input the postcodes for their home

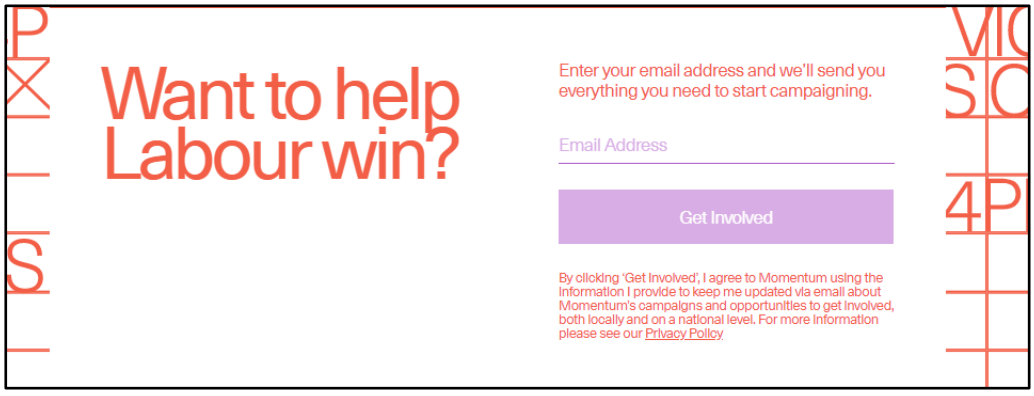
address and university accommodation. Echoing the optimistic, more aggressive strategy for the campaign, students would receive a recommendation for where to vote based on which seat was more marginal. I used the tool, with my Liverpool address and the postcode of my previous home in Lancashire and was given the following result:

Image 26: Screenshot from univotes.co.uk #1



Although a date had not yet been set for the election, and the political flux during autumn 2019 was considerable, it made sense to take advantage of the beginning of the university term to ensure that the student vote that Momentum targeted was organised and focused on the marginal areas in accordance with the general strategy. Furthermore, Momentum also used the tool as an opportunity to expand their supporter database; just underneath the results was a prominent message asking users to supply their email to Momentum in support of Labour:

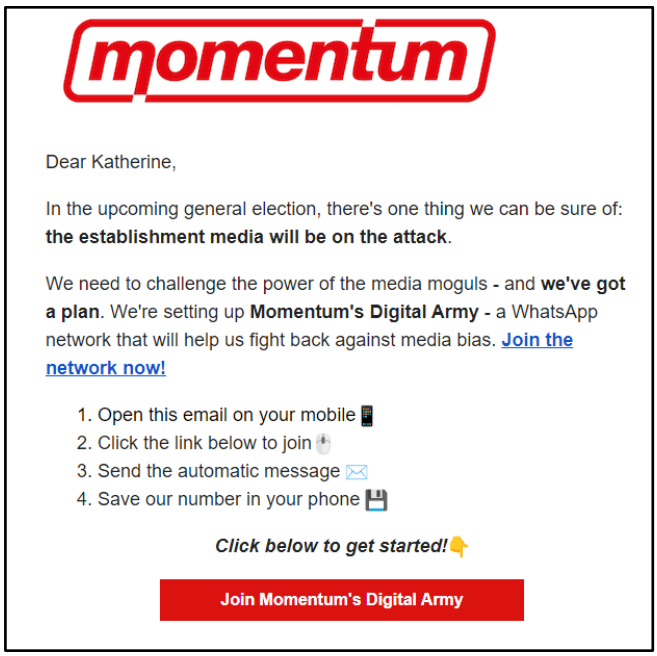
Image 27: Screenshot from univotes.co.uk #2



On 4 October Momentum launched 'Momentum's Digital Army', a Whatsapp group designed 'to challenge the power of media moguls'. As a non-user of Whatsapp, I did not sign up for the Digital Army, although it appears to simply be a network to facilitate communication between Momentum and activists, as well as amongst

activists themselves. That is, the Digital Army itself did not seem to be directly contributing identifiable 'action' to the campaign.

Image 28: From email 'This is how we beat the media barons 👇', dated 4 October 2019


momentum

Dear Katherine,

In the upcoming general election, there's one thing we can be sure of: **the establishment media will be on the attack**.

We need to challenge the power of the media moguls - and **we've got a plan**. We're setting up **Momentum's Digital Army** - a WhatsApp network that will help us fight back against media bias. **Join the network now!**

1. Open this email on your mobile 📱
2. Click the link below to join 🖱️
3. Send the automatic message ✉️
4. Save our number in your phone 💾

Click below to get started!👇

Join Momentum's Digital Army

In addition to the Digital Army, on 15 October, Momentum announced via its e-newsletter, *The Organiser,* various election teams which members could join: a Research Team, to research 'opposition candidates in marginal seats'; a Texting Team; a Calling Team; a Data Entry Team; a Support Team, to assist in responding to queries from activists by email, Facebook and a LiveChat facility; and a Voter Registration Team, some of which were 'already up and running', presumably by Momentum staff.

Image 29: From *The Organiser* e-newsletter #12


The Organiser

The Organiser #12: Pre-Election Special!🗳️

Happy October! I'm [redacted], this it the Momentum Organiser, and this month I bring you the news that - yep, you guessed it - **we're about to face a general election**. The next few weeks are going to be some of the most important of our lives, and we've got to throw everything we've got at beating the Tories, getting Labour into government and transforming the country for the many. Buckle up for your pre-election lowdown.

****Got a friend who you think would be interested in receiving our monthly email? Tell them to sign up here.****

Grassroots activists were offered the opportunity to join these additional teams once the campaign officially began. Potential volunteers were not aware yet at this stage, but an online platform called Slack was already being utilised to organise and coordinate activities online, combined with systems of GoogleDrive spreadsheets and other files; the teams and digital systems will be described in more detail below.

A personal focus on Corbyn, and sometimes key allies, was also reflected in a rally I attended in Liverpool in October 2019, shortly before the election was announced. White Stripes chanting of "*Oh, Je-re-my Corbyn*" took place at several points, as did "*Oh, Di-ane Abbott*" and "*Oh, An-ge-la Raynor*" (fieldnotes, 19 October 2019). The Liverpool Echo described the event as a potential 'starting pistol for an inevitable general election campaign' (Thorp and Rampen, 2019, n.p.), and indeed, this more presidential, American-style feeling set a tone for Labour's forthcoming campaign. On 11 October I received an email from 'Team Labour' inviting me to RSVP for a rally with Corbyn in 'Central Liverpool' on Saturday 19 October with the venue TBC on Friday 18 October. Despite the fact it was the first and the only email invite I received, I was informed that the free tickets 'were going fast'. This was an excellent opportunity to hear Corbyn speak as part of my research, having missed him at TWT2018, so I immediately sent my RSVP. I received an email confirmation in less than an hour, informing me that an electronic ticket and venue information would be forthcoming. The event was interesting on the face of it for a number of reasons.

Firstly, not releasing details of the venue suggested an air of secrecy about the rally, although I considered that this may have also been related to uncertainty around the size of the crowd. In any case, it made planning public transport travel arrangements ahead of time difficult. Secondly, the extent of my involvement with the Labour Party only included receiving email notifications. I was not a full member or even a registered supporter, and yet I was invited to this event. At no point during the registration process was I asked about Labour Party membership, indicating a desire for the event to be open and public whilst at the same time restricted by ticketing arrangements. Finally, it was interesting that the rally was scheduled to take place in the evening on Saturday 19 October; this had been a significant date in the political calendar for some time, being set for potentially pivotal Brexit debates and a vote. When it became clear that the vote would go ahead, the time for the rally was changed from 5.45pm start to 7pm, presumably to allow time for speakers to travel to Liverpool following the extraordinary Saturday session of Parliament.

The location for the rally was eventually confirmed as the Central Hotel Liverpool, and the room appeared to be a music venue with a dance floor downstairs, theatre style seating in the balcony and bars on both floors where attendees could purchase drinks. Music featured prominently before and during the event, with both recordings and live performances between speakers. I arrived early and was given a choice of placards to use during the rally, including Ban Fracking, End Homelessness, Free Social Care, £10 per hour Minimum Wage, Scrap Tuition Fees, and A Final Say on Brexit. As the venue filled over the course of an hour and a half, I found myself counting the number of non-white faces in the crowd; there were places I could not see from where I was sitting, but I only got as far as four, and two appeared to be security staff. I estimated that around 500-600 people could fit in balcony seating, with a similar number on the lower floor (fieldnotes, 19 October 2019); the venue capacity has been advertised as 1200 (Skiddle, 2023), and it was reportedly full (Thorp and Rampen, 2019). The picture below posted on Twitter by MP Dan Carden, who introduced speakers at the event, is representative of my observations as part of the crowd.

Image 30: Corbyn Rally, Liverpool, 19 October 2019

Carden, 2019, n.p.

Again, the lack of ethnic diversity is consistent with my other observations, and those of Mejias and Banaji (2020) and Bassett Yerrell (2020). However, later that

night, Angela Raynor would tell the crowd that Boris Johnson's "*dog whistle racism*" was not wanted "*up north*" and that activists should continue to have conversations with "*UKIP-y Brexity people*" to fight racism (fieldnotes, 19 October 2019). The majority of the crowd appeared unlikely to have ever suffered racist behaviour or abuse, and this observation can also be connected to an analysis of the collective identity of Momentum as representative of Corbyn-supporters more generally.

Another instance of potential dissonance centred around the then mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, who was to eventually resign in disgrace amid a criminal investigation around local corruption. His involvement in suspicious property deals and planning applications has been widely discussed anecdotally by local residents for years, and his arrest and resignation in 2020 came as no surprise to many. However, as the first speaker of the evening, he enjoyed genuine applause from the crowd minutes before Hillsborough and Unite organiser, Sheila Coleman, told the audience how important it was to motivate the "*right people*" to enter politics.

Angela Raynor contributed to Corbyn's anti-establishment image by admitting that she "*lied at [her] selection meeting. Would I ever break the whip? No, of course not…*" This was reinforced by repeated reference to mainstream media attacks, for example by both Carden and Corbyn. Corbyn included a short and slightly 'awkward' discussion of the history of the Holocaust, in a clear attempt to try and address the accusations of antisemitism that had been so damaging (fieldnotes, 19 October 2019). He also took the opportunity to reiterate his international outlook, suggesting Labour was a "*movement that always looks beyond our own shores, as our work is everywhere: Syria, Yemen, Turkey…*". Corbyn recalled his own speech at the Stop the War rally in Hyde Park in 2003 where he predicted the war in Iraq would have consequences, promising that "*we won't go down that road again*." As I expressed in my introduction, events and activists seemed to have a collective nostalgia for the early days of Stop the War, although it was unusual for this to be communicated so explicitly.

However, the overarching theme to the speeches was an expression of extreme optimism at the prospect of an imminent general election. Carden enjoyed wild cheers when he opened the event with a suggestion that "*the next election is coming*" and that they would "*need to kick the Tories out of government*" to establish the "*first real socialist government.*" Anderson continued, saying that we were at "*a pivotal point in history [and could] win MPs across the country.*" Raynor echoed the

refrain by insisting "*we are going to win! [and] the Tories are shitting themselves!*" She confessed to the crowd that she felt it was "*so nice not to feel like a Jehovah's Witness on the doorstep*", referring to radical left wing content anticipated to be in the manifesto. However, she left it to Corbyn to present specific headline policies such as a national education service, "*redress[ing] the balance between north and south*" with reference to the miners' strikes, and a national investment bank. He also adopted a highly optimistic tone, saying that "*we will come together as a movement,*" that "*the mass media won't do it, we'll do it ourselves [and] create a spirit of confidence*" (fieldnotes, 19 October 2019).

Throughout, the crowd was obliging, enthusiastic and responsive. Placards were waving constantly, chants were loudly supported whenever prompted and theatrical "*Boos*" were supplied at the mention of Johnson, free trade with the US and Iain Duncan Smith. Speakers were generally polished and highly energised, with tactical use of carefully chosen music at specific points in the event. Overall, the feel was of a managed and scripted pantomime, which was enhanced by the indoor venue, and the event was certainly directed at heightening excitement and energy in anticipation of a national campaign.

8.2 GE2019 Campaign Period

8.2.1 Introduction

A general election was indeed imminent, and events leading up to the vote to call a general election were complicated and inextricably tied to the issue of Brexit. Corbyn himself was reportedly mired in discussions around the choices for and implications of the party's position on Brexit (Murray, 2020). Detailed accounts of the political circumstances giving rise to the election are present elsewhere (e.g. Cowley, 2021); however, on 29 October 2019, following a rejection of Johnson's Brexit timeline the previous week, Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of an early General Election, which was set for 12 December 2019. Caring for a young family, and also fitting in part-time teaching around my study, I did not have the personal capacity to commit significant time to campaign activities such as canvassing. However, as seen below, Momentum's more novel work took place exclusively online. As explained in Chapter 3, I was invited to participate in all of Momentum's online activities with no background checks or requirement for membership either of Momentum or Labour; the only requirement was to electronically sign GDPR and non-disclosure agreements. Organisers freely admitted this open approach as well as the fact that it could result in "*spies*" infiltrating their election activities (fieldnotes,

15 November 2019). The following account of GE2019 from an activist's perspective, then, is primarily based on what I experienced during online campaign-related activities; this online organising appeared to represent the large majority of Momentum's direct contribution to the campaign on a national level.

8.2.2 Strategy and Tactics

From the observations above, the intention appears to always have been to run a GE2019 campaign that built upon the more optimistic strategy Corbyn and his team preferred in GE2017. As soon as the election was called, Momentum (2019b) published its 'Plan to Win' on 30 October, outlining its approach to the campaign. During the campaign period, the plan was freely and publicly available via Momentum's website as a pdf document; although it appears it has since been taken down, I retained a downloaded copy as data.

Image 31: Momentum's Plan to Win

The plan detailed three areas of their strategy for the campaign (Momentum, 2019b, pp.1-3):

1. We need to build people power.
2. We need to target marginals.
3. We need you to step up.

Momentum explicitly claimed to be employing approaches imported from the United States, explaining to activists that 'this time we're going to be taking a volunteer-

driven approach to our campaigning called “distributed organising”, based on the experiences of the Bernie Sanders campaign in the US’ (Momentum, 2019b, p.3). The approach involves grassroots volunteers taking on a much bigger role in undertaking organising activities, in Momentum’s case through becoming ‘Labour Legends’. These individuals agreed to take on extra responsibility to organise carpools to marginals, phonebank parties, and voter registration street stalls, as well as running ‘huge online volunteer teams’ and ‘trainings for first-time activists’ (Momentum, 2019b, p.3). A list of planned activities and contributions from Momentum form a large portion of the document, with many embedded links to websites for readers to follow and sign up for different activity areas; the content is summarised in the table below.

Table 6: Momentum’s Planned Activities for GE2019, from its Plan to Win

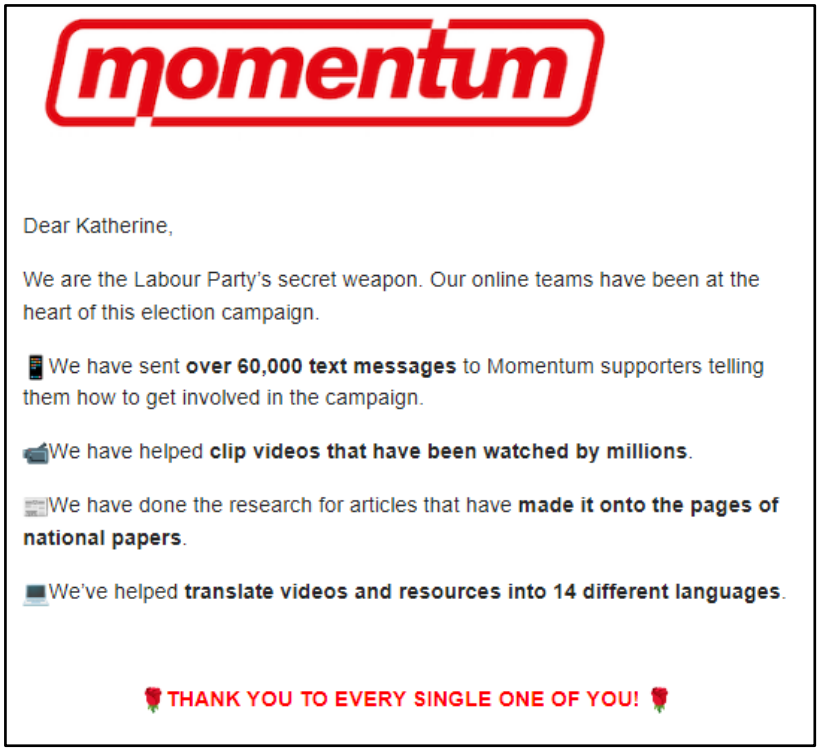
Activity Area	Momentum’s Contribution	Members’ Contributions
Launch MyCampaignMap	Create and maintain online platform; email RSVPs and contact details of attendees to event organisers; promote on Facebook and Whatsapp.	Upload details of locally organised events; attend local events.
Run phone bank parties	‘Provide you with resources, training and promotion so you are able to organise your own events’; prioritise encouragement for these events in areas outside of marginals.	Organise and run phone bank parties; attend local parties.
Register thousands to vote	Launch and promote univotes.co.uk; offer one-to-one support to organise local registration drives; Facebook advertising; flyers, posters and stickers in marginals.	Run local voter registration events, e.g. street stalls.
Reach millions with viral videos	Hire additional staff to produce videos; create a ‘viral video response unit’; increase Facebook advertising; promote the ‘Videos for the Many’ network.	Create your own viral video content.
Build online volunteer teams	Set up and facilitate online teams, aimed at those with work/caring responsibilities.	Volunteer in the teams.
Launch digital and creative networks	Promote and support a creative network to maximise social media impact	Unclear, but presumably to share the material that is produced.

Build a digital army	Connect activists through a Whatsapp group.	Use personal social media accounts to amplify key messages.
Train thousands of activists	Offer online training and resource guides for canvassing.	Access the training and resources to build confidence.
Run campus tours	Run mobilising events at universities and colleges.	Unclear, but presumably to assist with organising local events.
Recruit core activists	Recruit volunteers to dedicate at least a week full-time to the campaign.	'Step up and contribute large amounts of time,' booking time off work if needed.
Publish an open strategy	Make the campaign strategy publicly available; send regular email briefings; hold 'weekly public conference calls.'	Access and support the plan; attend public strategy calls.

(Momentum, 2019b, pp.3-4)

Momentum's national focus was almost exclusively online, with grassroots activists being asked to drive the vast majority of the physical, on-the-ground activities. This does not necessarily represent a significant deviation from pre-existing divides in activity between local groups and the National Office. However, the way it was presented felt like a clear pronouncement that Momentum staff would spend the campaign in the office on computers, whilst grassroots activists would be outside in the December weather. Indeed, my observations of this more hands-off approach to campaign activity have been explicitly confirmed by Momentum staff; as Joe Todd, Momentum's head of communication, commented, "a dominant logic is that we want to employ staff not to do things, but to enable volunteers to do them" (Loucaides, 2019, n.p.). Most notably, the plan also introduces Momentum's main slogan for the campaign: 'This time around, **you are Labour's secret weapon. It's only by stepping up your commitment that we'll win'** [original emphasis] (Momentum, 2019b, p. 3). Momentum staff appeared to disregard the inherent contradiction between the deliberate, well-broadcasted attempts to maximise the publicity of their election strategy and activities, and the claim that activists are a 'secret weapon'. The phrase 'Labour's secret weapon' was repeated regularly throughout the campaign, both during organising calls and in emails, for example the email from which I took the quote for the title of this thesis:

Image 32: From email ‘Thank you - it’s time to shift gears!’, dated 27 November 2019



momentum

Dear Katherine,

We are the Labour Party’s secret weapon. Our online teams have been at the heart of this election campaign.

📱We have sent **over 60,000 text messages** to Momentum supporters telling them how to get involved in the campaign.

📹We have helped **clip videos that have been watched by millions**.

📰We have done the research for articles that have **made it onto the pages of national papers**.

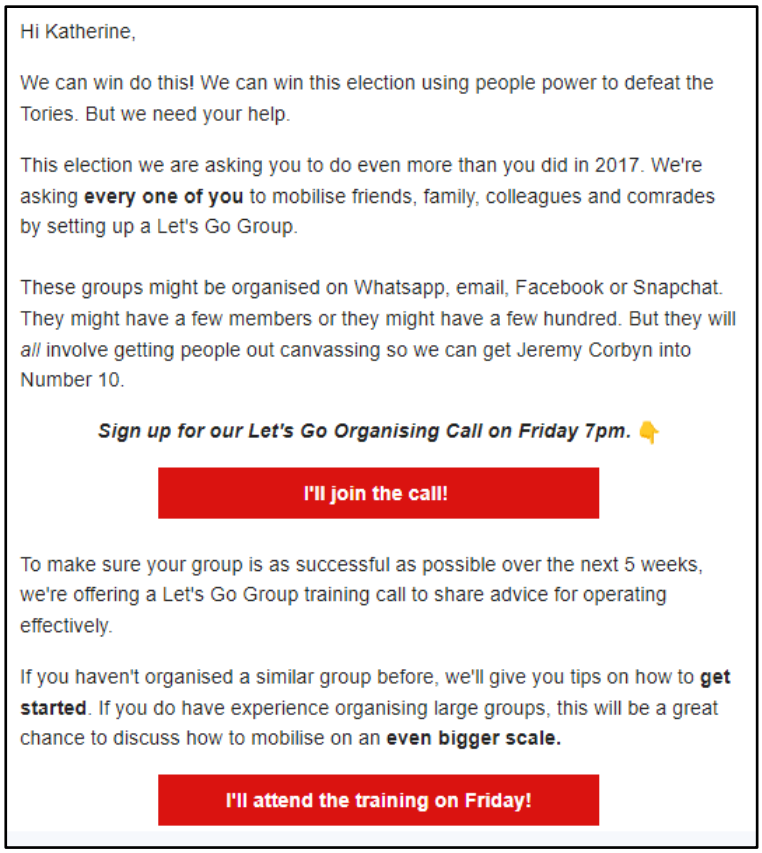
💻We’ve helped **translate videos and resources into 14 different languages**.

🌹THANK YOU TO EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU! 🌹

Other themes connected campaign-related discourse and communications. The intense optimism displayed pre-election continued, and Momentum staff in the National Office appeared to cultivate an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation. One staff member summed up what appeared to be the pervasive attitude: “In 2017, most people didn’t really think we could win. Whereas this time, we can definitely win” (Loucaides, 2019). Another recurrent narrative that surfaced towards the middle of the campaign was the claim that Labour had only lost GE2017 by 2,227 votes. The reasoning behind this was not explicitly provided, but appears to arise from an examination of the marginal seats that were lost to the Conservatives in GE2017 and a summation of the number of votes it would have taken to win enough of those seats to control Parliament. This narrative was used to encourage activists to focus on maximising voter turnout in marginals, especially amongst young people, as well as to provide evidence to support optimism for victory in GE2019.

As soon as the election was called Momentum invited members via email to an online Zoom call aimed at training them to set up Let’s Go groups :

Image 33: From email “Let’s Go! Organiser Training Call 📞’, dated 31 October 2019



Hi Katherine,

We can win do this! We can win this election using people power to defeat the Tories. But we need your help.

This election we are asking you to do even more than you did in 2017. We're asking **every one of you** to mobilise friends, family, colleagues and comrades by setting up a Let's Go Group.

These groups might be organised on Whatsapp, email, Facebook or Snapchat. They might have a few members or they might have a few hundred. But they will *all* involve getting people out canvassing so we can get Jeremy Corbyn into Number 10.

Sign up for our Let's Go Organising Call on Friday 7pm. 👇

I'll join the call!

To make sure your group is as successful as possible over the next 5 weeks, we're offering a Let's Go Group training call to share advice for operating effectively.

If you haven't organised a similar group before, we'll give you tips on how to **get started**. If you do have experience organising large groups, this will be a great chance to discuss how to mobilise on an **even bigger scale.**

I'll attend the training on Friday!

Activists who wished to be part of a Let’s Go group filled in a Google form, and Whatsapp was used to coordinate the group’s activities around doorstep and telephone canvassing. I attended the training call that took place on 1 November, and noted that the organisers said that an invitation to the call was sent to those who had already registered a Let’s Go group “*plus a few select others*” (fieldnotes, 1 November 2019). Interestingly, I had not signed up a group and had hardly done anything through the course of my research to come to the specific attention of any of the staff at Momentum’s National Office. There was nothing in the email invite to suggest it had not been sent to all supporters, and as such the suggestion that I was part of this “*select*” group felt like a sales ploy. Indeed, many of Momentum’s online conference calls during GE2019 resembled American-style infomercials, and this will be discussed further below.

The content of the training session was almost exclusively around encouragement to use technology to set up and facilitate the groups rather than the activities the groups were intended to undertake. Post-covid, it is easy to forget how new video conferencing was for many people during GE2019; I observed some older members getting very frustrated with the technology of the call itself, let alone the tools they

were being encouraged to use to set up their Let's Go groups, and many were undoubtedly put off by this. The technology must have been new to Momentum staff as well, as there were various technical difficulties such as setting a participant cap too low at 100 people. Participants could only interact within the text chat and were excluded from contributing to the voice/video call itself; this was a consistent feature across all the calls I joined, and made sense considering the high numbers of grassroots participants. Discussions in the text chat ranged from requests for 'key messages' to push over social media, links to online content and explanations for platforms such as Discord, to discussions around ways to approach canvassing. In terms of actual content or information from Momentum during the call, there was very little provided apart from general encouragement to utilise tools such as Whatsapp. As someone unfamiliar with Whatsapp, I did not come away from the call any clearer about what I was actually being asked to do. The general impression I had was that there was an assumption either that if people connected via social media, physical campaign activities such as canvassing would naturally follow, or that participants would already be part of organised, active local groups which coordinated on-the-ground activity. In either case, there appeared to be a significant gap in understanding and culture between activists who were tech-savvy and those who were not; this theme will be revisited below.

Another notable change from GE2017 was a perceived reduction in focus on persuasive canvassing by Momentum, although this is consistent with the tactic's more effective use outside of election periods when time resources are less stretched. Momentum's Plan to Win does mention persuasive canvassing techniques and states on its website summary of GE2019 that around 1500 were trained in persuasive canvassing through the Let's Go events (Momentum, 2021b). However, judging from the reports that both Momentum and Labour's Community Organising Unit submitted to Labour Together's analysis of GE2019, it appears that a large part of the persuasive canvassing activity may have been passed over from Momentum to the Labour Party employees working in the Unit. Both organisations' summaries of their election activity contains reference to the Unit training 'over 7500 party members and supporters in persuasive canvassing' (Labour Party Community Organising Unit, 2020, p. 1), whereas Momentum contributed directly to training around 1,300 activists (Momentum, 2020); this clearly suggests that the Unit largely took over from Momentum in terms of coordinating the deployment of this tactic at the grassroots level. This perceived shift may be supported by the fact members of Momentum staff, such as Beth Foster-Ogg, had taken up positions in the

Community Organising Unit by the time GE2019 began. Additionally, Momentum staff did not mention persuasive canvassing once during the online campaign calls I observed; in contrast, it was Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) canvassing that was repeatedly emphasised during these calls (e.g. fieldnotes, 1 December 2019). Therefore, a process of specialisation seems to have taken place, with Momentum focusing the large majority of its direct efforts on online activities.

In terms of canvassing strategy, choosing target seats was reportedly not as coordinated as might have been expected, for reasons that differed slightly from GE2017: Momentum staff reported that factional conflict was far below levels experienced in GE2017, and did not impact noticeably on the campaign from their perspective (Loucaides, 2019). According to Murray (2020, p.183), rather than the outright hostility reported from sections of the party, it was primarily lack of cohesion within the campaign leadership that resulted in 'confusion' around targeting. Arguably, this lack of strategic coherence was also present in Momentum's new My Campaign Map tool, which was the successor to My Nearest Marginal. Rather than directing activists to target marginal seats, My Campaign Map was virtually identical in nature to the Stop the Coup protest map discussed in Chapter 6. Activists and groups could upload details of all local campaign related events via a link to a Google form accessed from the map website; events included traditional activities like canvassing, but also many others such as phone-bank parties, rallies, social activities and campus events (Momentum, 2021b). Momentum staff indicated that there would be a 'broader scope for campaigning advice, guiding canvassers to their most important marginal rather than their nearest' (NCG, 2019b). However, it is unclear how target priorities were communicated via My Campaign Map, which seemed to simply show all activities and events in the vicinity of the postcode that was entered. Based on how the tool was constructed and the way information was presented, it seems likely that activists were given a much wider breadth of activities to attend without an effective overarching strategy to focus their attention. Beyond the actual map tool itself, activists were also sent one email during the campaign with suggested priorities based on their local area:

Image 34: From email ‘Here’s where you’re needed most this weekend’, dated 1 December 2019

Other tactics were extended during GE2019. Similar to phone-banking parties, activists were encouraged to organise debate-watching parties during the televised leader debates, and to flood social media with live pro-Corbyn and pro-Labour commentary; this also took place in the National Office (Loucaides, 2019). The use of celebrities to promote organising calls and other activities was also expanded. In addition to new faces such as Ash Sarkar, Owen Jones appeared to continue to be a regular representative of Momentum on the ground. He features prominently in Momentum’s (2021b, n.p.) summary of its GE2019 campaign on its website:

Image 35: Owen Jones campaigning in GE2019

Finally, there were also notable improvements in terms of Momentum’s generation of social media content. A significantly increased budget allowed Momentum to hire

additional staff, providing additional resources for the direct creation of viral videos as well as editing and disseminating the best videos contributed by grassroots members through VideosBytheMany. VideosByTheMany was a drive to encourage activists to record their own videos about why they are voting Labour to circulate within their communities; it seems likely that Ben's videos discussed in the previous chapter were part of this scheme, although he did not mention it by name at the time. According to Momentum almost 300 videos were created by grassroots activists, and were viewed around 2.5million times (Momentum, 2020). In addition to its own Facebook and Twitter pages, which were beyond the remit for this project, Momentum staff also reportedly ran Corbyn's own pages (Loucaides, 2019). An analysis of Momentum's social media content, and a comparison with the Labour Party's could form the basis for future projects.

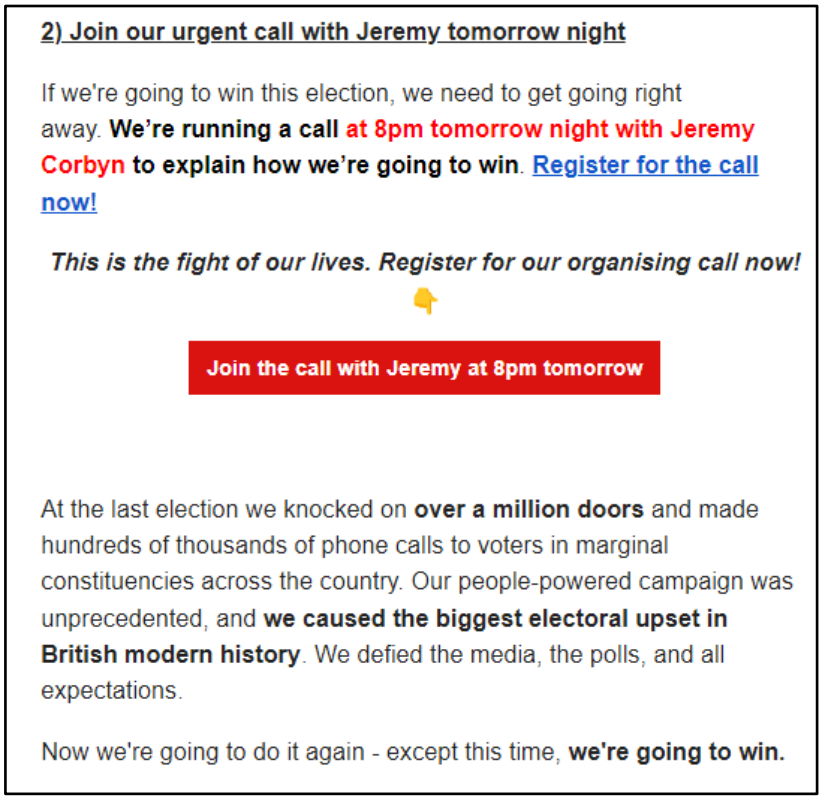
Overall, in terms of traditional on-the-ground campaign activities, Momentum appeared to act primarily as a signpost to local constituency networks and events. In contrast, Momentum staff expended significant time and resources organising digitally, and any direct promotion or facilitation of door-knocking and other physical activities generally arose from encouragement for members to join a Let's Go group or complete the online My Plan to Win (see Section 8.2.5). With hindsight, this shift in organisational focus for Momentum helps justify my decision to focus observations during GE2019 on online campaign activity and events. Indeed, when visiting Momentum's National Office during the GE2019 campaign, Loucaides (2019, n.p.) observed staff 'mostly glued to their screens.' This is consistent with Momentum's overall position established prior to the election period: Momentum staff made it very clear that 'all efforts will push activists towards LP [Labour Party] activism' as opposed to activities organised by Momentum itself (NCG, 2019b, p.5).

8.2.3 Online Organising Calls

Momentum's online organising with grassroots members for GE2019 appears to have begun as early as 23 October, with a recruitment drive for their newly expanding Research Team and training via an online Zoom call. As touched on previously, Zoom was such a new programme, at that point I did not yet understand how it worked and missed the opportunity to attend. I noted that I 'might have signed up for this, but the form only asks for an email and says that it is an event in London rather than a phone call' (fieldnotes, 22 October 2019); in fact, the link from the email was what is now easily recognisable as a standard invitation to a Zoom call.

At Momentum's NCG meeting on 27 October, staff shared their general election plan, including information about all of their online teams and a plan of action for the first two weeks of a campaign that was ready to be implemented immediately once the election was called (NCG, 2019b). As soon as the election was announced on 29 October, Momentum emailed all members with details of their fundraising drive (see Section 8.2.6) and an invitation to an organising call with Jeremy Corbyn on 30 October:

Image 36: From email 'BREAKING: GENERAL ELECTION CALLED', dated 29 October 2019



2) Join our urgent call with Jeremy tomorrow night

If we're going to win this election, we need to get going right away. **We're running a call at 8pm tomorrow night with Jeremy Corbyn to explain how we're going to win**. **Register for the call now!**

This is the fight of our lives. Register for our organising call now!

👇

Join the call with Jeremy at 8pm tomorrow

At the last election we knocked on **over a million doors** and made hundreds of thousands of phone calls to voters in marginal constituencies across the country. Our people-powered campaign was unprecedented, and **we caused the biggest electoral upset in British modern history**. We defied the media, the polls, and all expectations.

Now we're going to do it again - except this time, **we're going to win.**

This time, I decided to input my email address and see what would happen; I was guided through registering with Zoom and downloading the client. The experience of joining the call was so novel at the time, I took a screenshot of the 'please wait for the host' message. At its peak, there were approximately 2,000 participants, and Momentum subsequently claimed it was 'the biggest conference call in British political history' (email 'LAUNCH: Our Plan to Win', dated 30 October). The call lasted around an hour, and had a distinctly infomercial feel. Three staff from Momentum acted as presenters, welcoming participants to the call, introducing contributors and interspersing the proceedings with regular requests for donations. One particular guest speaker, Ash Sarkar, was introduced as a YouTube and blogging "*star*", and is also an editor at Novara Media. Throughout, anticipation was

heightened for Corbyn's appearance which was scheduled for the end of the call, although his eventual contribution felt anticlimactic and was relatively 'inarticulate' compared to his speech at the rally I attended (fieldnotes, 29 October 2019). Key messages were that activists were encouraged to set up Let's Go groups, and that Momentum had published their campaign Plan to Win on their website, presumably in support of the NCG's belief that 'making as much information available to activists from the beginning helps activists feel involved in the campaign and improves their abilities' (NCG, 2019b, p.6). Momentum's Plan to Win slogan about participants being 'Labour's secret weapon' was repeated and reinforced. It was challenging to watch the fast-moving chat as well as listen to the call, but I did notice a handful of people posted to the chat at various points, sharing that they were autistic and wanted to get involved, but had anxiety; for example, one asked "is there anything I can do that doesn't involve talking to people?" (fieldnotes, 30 October 2019). Momentum staff consistently and regularly praised participants' commitment, clearly designed to build enthusiasm and confidence.

A full list of the public Zoom calls I attended is found in the Appendix, but each call had a similar style, with between one and three Momentum staff members presenting the discussion, usually with additional guest speakers. For some subsequent calls, I was able to save chat text to be able to concentrate on the call and review the text at a later time; however, this facility was not always made available. Momentum's weekly strategy calls followed a very similar format each time, with variation around the featured speakers. In addition to the repeated 'secret weapon' theme and the consistent, sometimes belligerent, optimism towards the campaign, another theme for these calls was the difficulties with technology. As mentioned above, some participants struggled with using Zoom and I witnessed a few actively leave calls with frustration. Problems with capping the number of participants were also frequent, along with poor sound quality and unreliable connections for guest speakers. For example, when John McDonnell participated in a call on 1 December via his smartphone from his kitchen, many complained in the chat about not being able to hear him, as well as some asking other contributors to speak slower. That same call also included many requests for the participant cap to be raised and chat comments reporting technical problems with Dialogue, the application used to undertake phone canvassing (fieldnotes, 1 December 2019).

I attended similar online calls hosted by the Labour Party itself, for which invitations were sent to all individuals on Labour's email update list. The similarities are

unsurprisingly considering that several members of Momentum's digital staff had moved to the Labour team (Loucaides, 2019), and many were presented by Owen Jones. The Labour Party call I attended on 4 December was typical, including many soundbites and what appeared to be 'highly scripted' content from Jones, with similarities in many 'vocal inflections' compared to Momentum staff in their calls (fieldnotes, 4 December 2019). Overall, the technology was poorer in this and other Labour Party calls with more problems with late starts, bad sound, and fewer Zoom options as compared to Momentum. Labour's calls felt more like chat shows than infomercials, without the regular requests for donations. However, the exaggerated optimism was also present. For example, Angela Raynor told participants that "*we are going to win, much better than 2017*". Jones insisted that participating in the election would be the "*most important thing you will do in your entire life*" [original emphasis] (fieldnotes, 4 December 2019). In general, the impression was that the Labour campaign team was seeking to copy Momentum's programme of online calls, but perhaps with less expertise or a smaller allocated budget.

These calls were certainly innovative at the time and extended considerably on online tactics employed during GE2017, contributing to the youthful, tech-savvy image of Momentum. As the campaign progressed, I and many others who persevered became increasingly comfortable with the technology, although as noted above it is clear that the use of Zoom was exclusionary for some. A predictable pattern emerged for content during the weekly strategy calls, and towards the end of the campaign period there was an observable general downward trend in participant numbers; however, this may have been attributable to activists beginning to spend larger amounts of their time on other activities, such as canvassing or phone banks. Additional content from calls I attended will be presented in conjunction with other areas of the campaign in the discussions below.

8.2.4 Online Teams

On 15 October, via its e-newsletter *The Organiser*, Momentum announced various election teams which members could join, including the Digital Army (previously launched), a Research Team (to research 'opposition candidates in marginal seats'), Texting Team, and Calling Team, in addition to the Data Entry Team and the Support Team (to assist in responding to queries from activists by email, Facebook and a LiveChat facility) which were 'already up and running', presumably by Momentum staff (email 'The Organiser #12: Pre-Election Special 🍰', dated 15 October 2019). Supporters were able to click embedded links in the newsletter to

sign up to volunteer on most of the teams, even at this early stage. The teams were further promoted through a recruitment email on 9 November and a Recruitment Call on 13 November. In addition to the teams outlined in *The Organiser*, the Recruitment Call introduced a Translation Team, 'to translate Momentum material to other languages for voters who might not know English' (fieldnotes, 13 November 2019). This seemed interesting, as Momentum staff did not identify any specific groups of non-English-speaking voters that they wished to target, and only issued a broad request for anyone who knew a second language to come forward; one individual on the chat humorously offered to translate the material to Latin. Momentum reported information was eventually translated into 14 different languages (see Image 32 above). However the practical use of this seems uncertain considering that refugees, asylum seekers and others without official status, as well as EU nationals, were not permitted to vote in the election (Henley, 2019).

Due to my position as researcher and non-member, I did not feel comfortable representing Momentum and Labour to potential voters through activities such as telephone or text canvassing. The Support Team and Data Entry Team were not recruiting at this stage, so I chose to volunteer to contribute to the Research Team following the Recruitment Call. All the teams were managed through an online program called Slack, which was overseen by Momentum staff, under a workspace called 'momentumvolunteers'. The process for joining has had several stages, some of which seemed repetitive. For example, I recalled signing the data and non-disclosure agreements three or four times, using slightly different forms to record my agreement. There was also at least two different formats for registering as a volunteer: one online via a link from the recruitment conference call, and one via a link from #research on Slack that seemed to be a Google form. As a result, I thought I may have registered as a volunteer more than once. This appeared to be a symptom of several different people organising things their own way and a lack of overall management of the process, coupled with diligence in terms of ensuring that the official parts of the process had been completed (fieldnotes, 14 November 2019).

Once the data protection and non-disclosure agreements were signed digitally, volunteers were invited to register with Slack and were given access to the 'channels' for each team. Members and non-members were admitted with equal ease with no further checks or other process. For people unfamiliar with Slack, even those like myself who were otherwise comfortable with common office IT systems,

the platform could be quite confusing and difficult to navigate. From the chat text on 13 November, there was a broadly even mix of people expressing the opinion that Slack is “easy” and those who were “confused” (fieldnotes, 13 November 2019). It also arguably required intense and time-consuming engagement from users in terms of keeping up with social media-style message boards for users to feel involved and included in the online teams. However, the system did have the benefit of facilitating participation equally across the country, and indeed the world, as some volunteers shared that they were resident in countries such as Canada, France and Greece (fieldnotes, 13 November 2019).

Initially, I found Slack ‘incredibly over facing and difficult to understand’ and was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of forum posts (fieldnotes, 14 November 2019). There was an option to receive email alerts when there was a post to your team’s channel, either individually or with periodic summaries. If I had agreed to receive alerts for all the posts I estimated this would have been almost constant, and even the less regular summary emails resulted in up to a dozen emails each day, with a total of 180 Slack email notifications between 14 November and 20 December when I left the workspace. However, I eventually noted that in terms of completing the assigned tasks ‘all the relevant information could be accessed without reading through all the posts’ (fieldnotes, 14 November 2019). Slack was so unfamiliar to me that I spent the first day exploring and trying to understand the platform. I managed to find a copy of the Research Team Manual, although it is worth noting that the short Recruitment Call I attended certainly did not give me enough information to feel ‘trained’:

Image 37: Research Team Manual

Momentum, 2019c, p.1

After a few hours studying the manual and the existing spreadsheets that were shared through Google, I felt comfortable enough with what was being asked of me to contribute. On 15 November, I volunteered to review material from a particular

rival candidate, having been asked to '[look] out for dehumanising content, or [map] how a candidate's previous take on an issue now contradicts their current position' (Momentum, 2019c, p. 1). To do this, I chose a task that showed 'available' on the shared, live 'Assignment tracker' spreadsheet and changed this via a drop down menu to indicate the task was 'in progress'. Each task had a short brief for the candidate being researched as well as a link to the content the volunteer was being asked to review, in my case historic Twitter posts. The task itself was simple and boring, involving scrolling down and reading all the historical Tweets and filling in a report form for each I judged to meet the above criteria. Once I was finished, the task was marked as 'done' and the live tracker spreadsheet completed to indicate how many reports had been filed relating to that task. I had found the process of navigating between numerous live spreadsheets and forms so complicated that I felt lucky I had chosen a subject who had a short Twitter history and had not made any potentially objectionable comments for me to report. My unfamiliarity with Slack and lack of pre-existing connection to anyone else on the research team created a feeling of isolation, and even if I had been participating for reasons other than research it is unlikely that I would have undertaken any further tasks. I noted that all of the Momentum staff that I had seen on Zoom calls to date appeared under 25 years old, and that I imagined 'most of the older, less tech-savvy volunteers [would] have long since been put off' (fieldnotes, 14 November). Indeed, the relatively young age of Momentum staff overall has been observed by others, with Loucaides (2019, n.p.) describing Momentum's staff base of around 60 people during GE2019 as being 'mostly in their twenties.' However, according to Momentum (2020), their Slack workspace had around 4,000 volunteer users at its height.

8.2.5 Other Tools

In addition to the online volunteer teams, Momentum introduced a number of new online tools during GE2019. My Campaign Map, VidesosByTheMany and the Let's Go teams have already been discussed; in addition to these Momentum also deployed other tools including My Plan to Win, MyPollingDay and the Labour Legends program. The Labour Legends scheme asked activists to volunteer to commit weeks at a time to take an active role leading local on-the-ground campaign activities. These volunteers were directed to priority seats or areas where activist numbers were smaller or which were geographically remote; Momentum reported that 500 Legends were recruited during the campaign (Momentum, 2020).

My Plan to Win was launched with a Zoom call on 1 December featuring John McDonnell, as a corollary to Momentum's Plan to Win document. It appeared on this occasion that staff were unable to increase the participant cap past 1,000; many more undoubtedly were unable to connect to the call. The tool itself was an online site where activists could populate an election calendar with tasks they committed to undertake each day in the run-up to polling day. Activists were given a list of tasks to choose from and asked to complete three actions each day, one 'big', one 'medium' and one 'small':

Table 7: My Plan to Win Actions

Big Actions	Doorstep canvass in a marginal seat Book as much time off work as possible Take a road trip to a marginal seat Attend a phonebank party Organise a phonebank party Paint your town/campus Red with posters, flyers and stickers Spend 2 hours phone canvassing a marginal seat
Medium Actions	Call 5 people you know and ask them to vote Labour Start a Let's Go group Post about your Let's Go group Message 10 friends and ask them to vote Labour Attend a university event Share a VideosByTheMany selfie video about why you're voting Labour
Small Actions	Ask 5 friends to make their own Plan to Win Donate to Momentum Share you Plan to Win Put a Labour poster in the window Join the Digital Army Join Momentum's activist alerts Post on social media about why you are voting Labour Spend 20 minutes telephone canvassing a marginal seat

The tool guided activists through planning their activity during the final few days of the campaign, and one task from each column had to be selected to complete each calendar day. The following series of screenshots illustrate the process:

Image 38: My Plan to Win screenshot #1

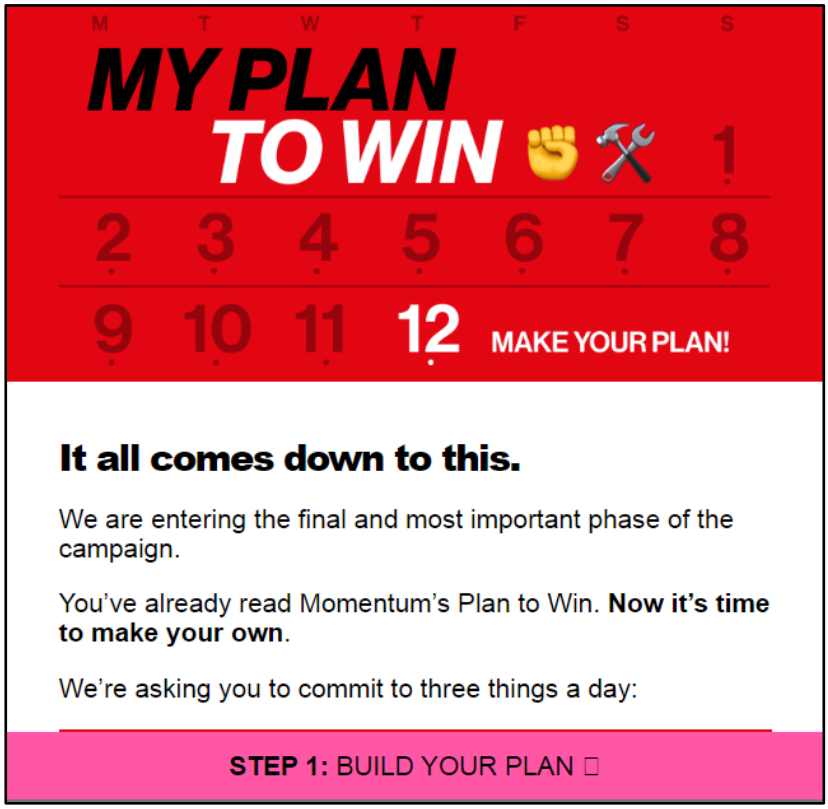
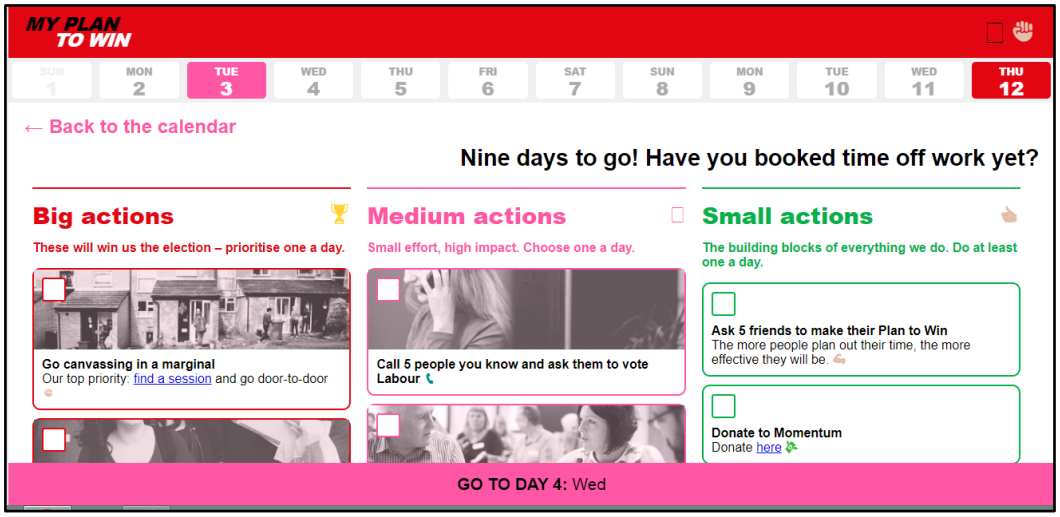


Image 39: My Plan to Win Screenshot #2

Image 40: My Plan to Win Screenshot #3

Image 41: My Plan to Win Screenshot #4

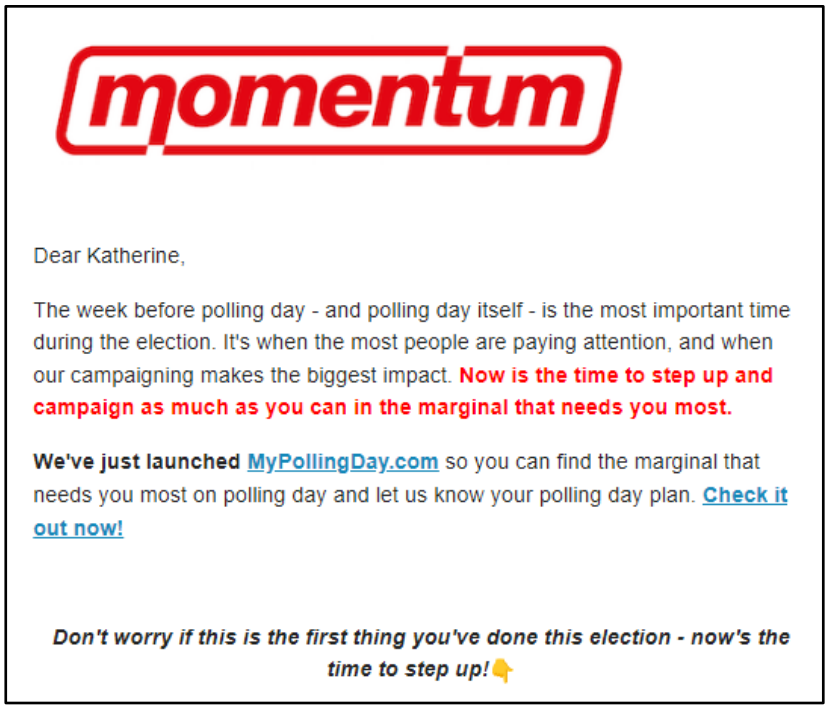


The commitment Momentum was asking of activists was considerable, and I wondered whether individuals who were unable to commit or follow through on the full range of actions might feel a sense of failure. Indeed, one individual who attended the launch of My Plan to Win commented in the text chat that “I don’t have 5 friends” to complete a small Plan to Win action, and another posted “my days vary. I can’t commit to actions in the way that’s being asked” (fieldnotes, 1 December 2019). The expectation that activists would have the time to complete these tasks each day appears consistent with the character of some volunteers who worked full-time at Momentum’s National Office: as Max Shanly (2020, n.p.), a former member of Momentum’s original National Committee, observed, ‘these are people who got into their positions only because they had the financial means that afforded them the opportunity to devote endless unpaid hours to a project based in central London.’

There were regular posts to the chat box throughout the call from Momentum staff asking participants to complete their plan along with a link to the page. However, some participants who clearly attempted this during the call expressed frustration because the tool added actions to the wrong day or around not being able to easily delete a task once it had been added if they changed their mind or had made a mistake. Other participants had joined the call from a mobile phone rather than a laptop or PC and would have had to leave the call to access the online tool.

Alongside My Plan to Win, Momentum also launched MyPollingDay a week before election day, inviting email recipients to access it:

Image 42: From 'MyPollingDay.com - plan your polling day! 🗳', dated 4 December 2019


momentum

Dear Katherine,

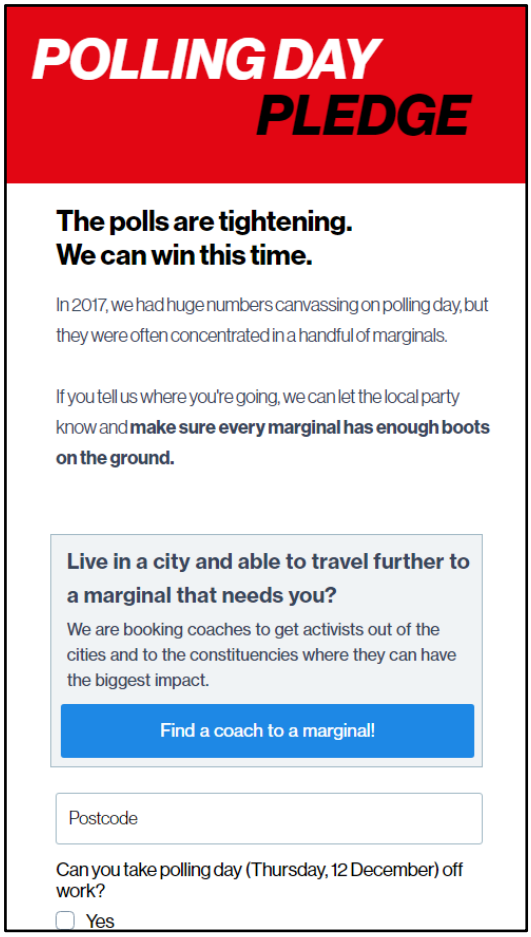
The week before polling day - and polling day itself - is the most important time during the election. It's when the most people are paying attention, and when our campaigning makes the biggest impact. **Now is the time to step up and campaign as much as you can in the marginal that needs you most.**

We've just launched MyPollingDay.com so you can find the marginal that needs you most on polling day and let us know your polling day plan. **Check it out now!**

Don't worry if this is the first thing you've done this election - now's the time to step up!👇

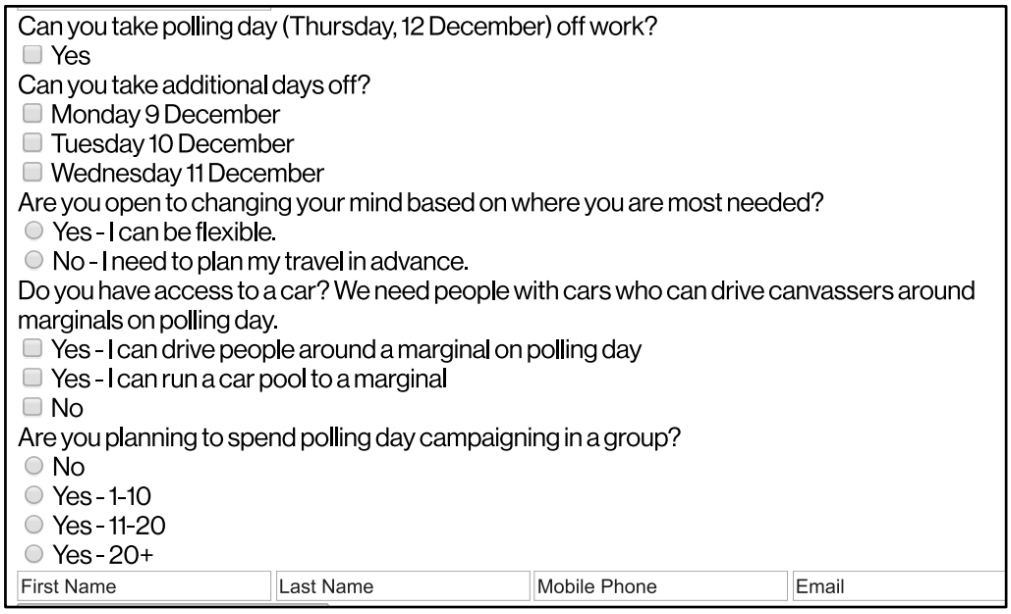
This tool focused activists' planned election day activity on targeting priority marginals and also included a survey form on the site that activists were asked to complete, pledging their time on 12 December:

Image 43: Screenshot of MyPollingDay.com #1



The survey in full:

Image 44: Screenshot of MyPollingDay.com #2

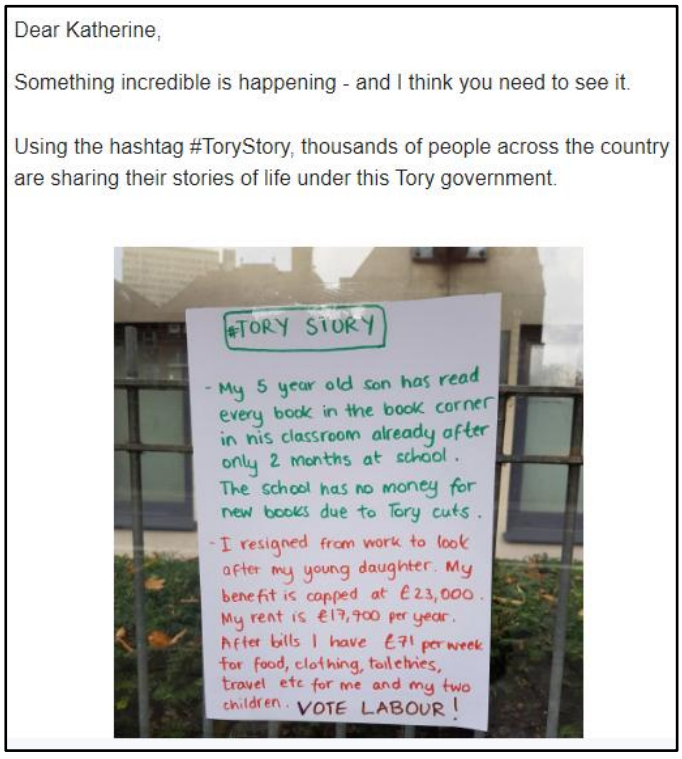


Overall, the My Plan to Win and MyPollingDay tools were interesting innovations, clearly aimed at securing commitment and action as well as potentially gathering valuable data on volunteers. Additionally, they will have been useful to some activists in terms of organising their activity, and certainly helpful in coordinating election day canvassing. However, the level of commitment being asked, particularly as part of My Plan to Win, was very high, especially for individuals who worked or cared for a family. This tool, therefore, came across as being aimed at students or young people with few responsibilities or those who were fortunate and dedicated enough to take significant time off for election activities. Despite these limitations, Momentum reported that the My Plan to Win tool and the Polling Day Pledge contributed to 6,370 people committing to take time off to support the campaign (Momentum, 2020).

8.2.6 Fundraising

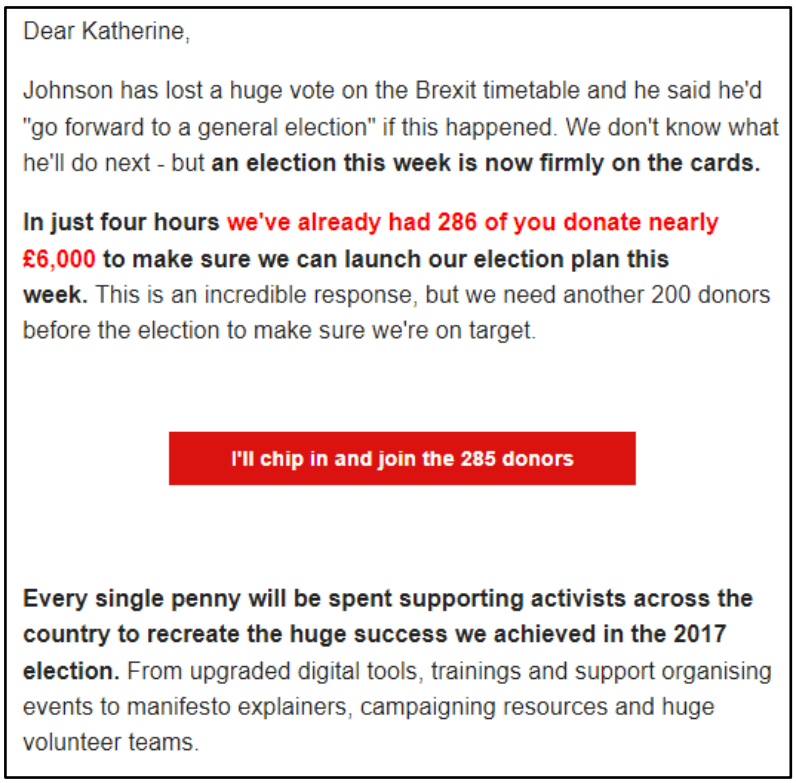
As with other areas of its campaign, Momentum both continued and built upon its GE2017 fundraising activities. Regular requests to 'chip in' continued to appear in emails to supporters, a huge volume of which were sent during the election period. Overall, these emails were extremely similar in nature to those presented in Chapter 6, for example through sharing a story or video designed to elicit an emotional response followed by a request for a small donation:

Image 45: From email 'You need to see this…', dated 7 November 2019



The email then went on to request a £3 donation ‘to keep our campaign growing ever bigger.’ The use of heavy peer pressure also featured, both in the run-up to and during the campaign, for example:

Image 46: From email ‘UPDATE: huge defeat for Johnson’, dated 22 October 2019


Dear Katherine,

Johnson has lost a huge vote on the Brexit timetable and he said he'd "go forward to a general election" if this happened. We don't know what he'll do next - but **an election this week is now firmly on the cards.**

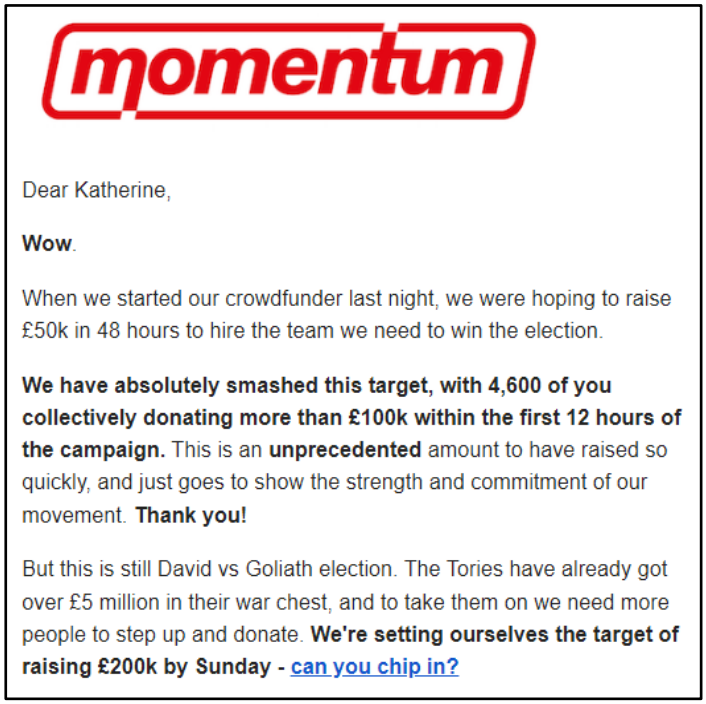
In just four hours we've already had 286 of you donate nearly £6,000 to make sure we can launch our election plan this week. This is an incredible response, but we need another 200 donors before the election to make sure we're on target.

I'll chip in and join the 285 donors

Every single penny will be spent supporting activists across the country to recreate the huge success we achieved in the 2017 election. From upgraded digital tools, trainings and support organising events to manifesto explainers, campaigning resources and huge volunteer teams.

Building on these tactics, Momentum introduced fundraising drives with identified target goals, beginning with the day of the commons vote to hold an election when they announced a 48-hour crowdfunding fundraising drive to kick-start campaigning. The target was £50,000; this had been agreed and prepared well in advance by Momentum staff, ready to be activated immediately as soon as the election was called (NCG, 2019b). This drive was remarkably successful, with double the target raised in only 12 hours:

Image 47: From email ‘This is incredible’, dated 30 October 2019



momentum

Dear Katherine,

Wow.

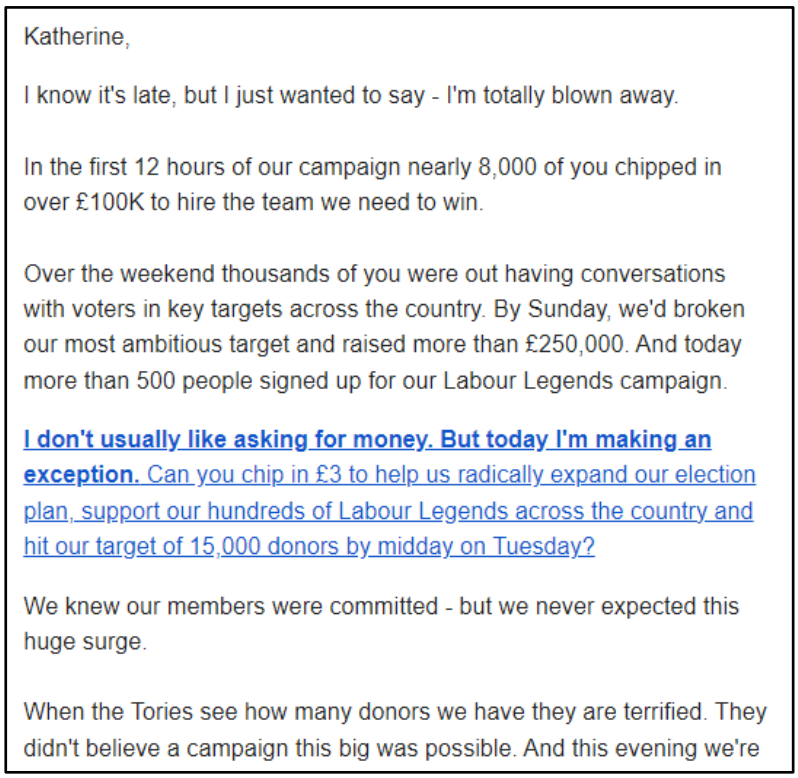
When we started our crowdfunder last night, we were hoping to raise £50k in 48 hours to hire the team we need to win the election.

We have absolutely smashed this target, with 4,600 of you collectively donating more than £100k within the first 12 hours of the campaign. This is an **unprecedented** amount to have raised so quickly, and just goes to show the strength and commitment of our movement. **Thank you!**

But this is still David vs Goliath election. The Tories have already got over £5 million in their war chest, and to take them on we need more people to step up and donate. **We're setting ourselves the target of raising £200k by Sunday - can you chip in?**

As a result, Momentum revised the target up to £200,000 in the first five days of the campaign, and it was again exceeded with a reported £250,000 raised. Despite this, in the same email reporting the success, further donations were solicited:

Image 48: From email ‘I’m blown away…’, dated 4 November 2019



Katherine,

I know it's late, but I just wanted to say - I'm totally blown away.

In the first 12 hours of our campaign nearly 8,000 of you chipped in over £100K to hire the team we need to win.

Over the weekend thousands of you were out having conversations with voters in key targets across the country. By Sunday, we'd broken our most ambitious target and raised more than £250,000. And today more than 500 people signed up for our Labour Legends campaign.

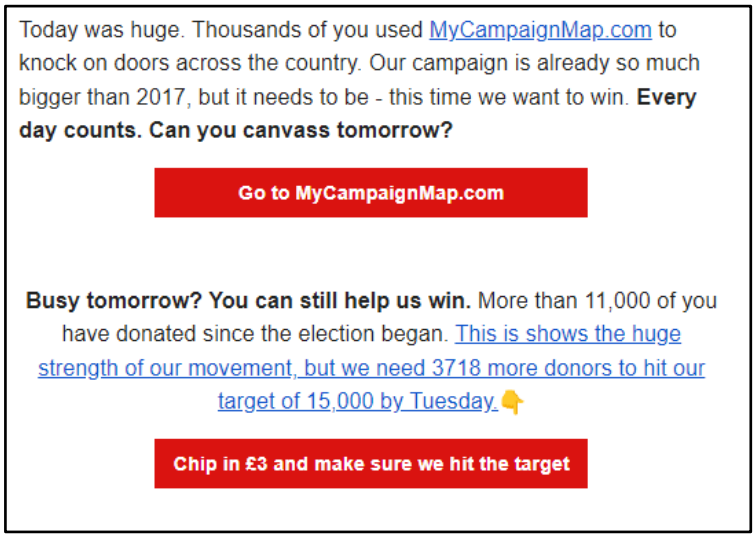
I don't usually like asking for money. But today I'm making an exception. Can you chip in £3 to help us radically expand our election plan, support our hundreds of Labour Legends across the country and hit our target of 15,000 donors by midday on Tuesday?

We knew our members were committed - but we never expected this huge surge.

When the Tories see how many donors we have they are terrified. They didn't believe a campaign this big was possible. And this evening we're

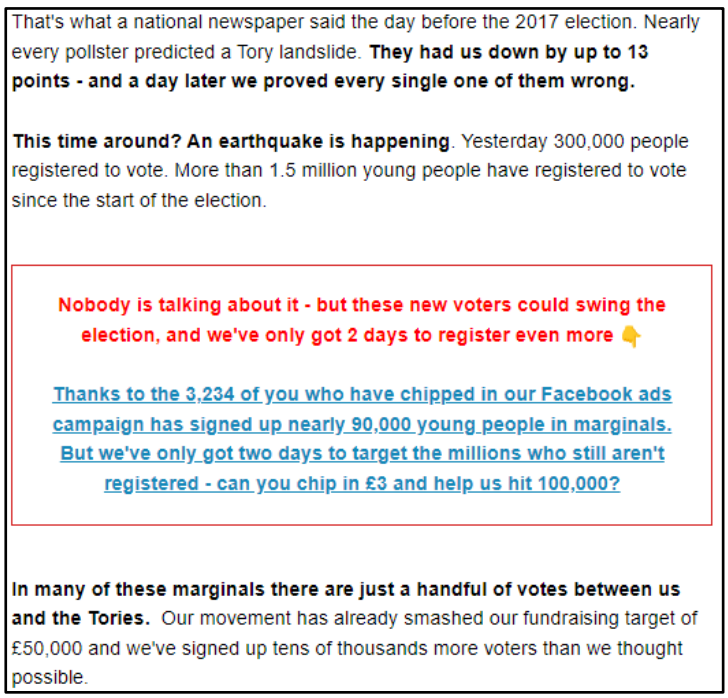
From this point, Momentum moved away from a specific monetary target to focus on a target number of donors. This tactic is clever: individuals might be expected to look at the large amounts of money Momentum has already raised, and the fact they have twice exceeded their targets, and wonder why additional funds were needed. Momentum could also avoid having to repeatedly revise targets to keep pace with donations at the same time as generating useful peer pressure as the number of people donating grew. Activists were again often given the option of donating instead of taking direct action, for example:

Image 49: From email 'Wow 😍', dated 9 November 2019



Twelve hours before the self-imposed deadline to reach 15,000 individual donors, Momentum reported only 387 more were needed. It is unclear whether Momentum reached their target as no further updates appear to have been sent. Instead, on 17 November Momentum shifted focus to voter registration, which is not regulated in the same way as party-political campaigning (e.g. Loucaides, 2019). An initial £50,000 target was set to fund targeted Facebook advertisements encouraging young people to register to vote in the eight days before the registration deadline. When the target was achieved a few days before the deadline, Momentum continued to ask for donations:

Image 50: From email ‘Biggest Tory landslide since Thatcher’, dated 24 November 2019



That's what a national newspaper said the day before the 2017 election. Nearly every pollster predicted a Tory landslide. **They had us down by up to 13 points - and a day later we proved every single one of them wrong.**

This time around? An earthquake is happening. Yesterday 300,000 people registered to vote. More than 1.5 million young people have registered to vote since the start of the election.

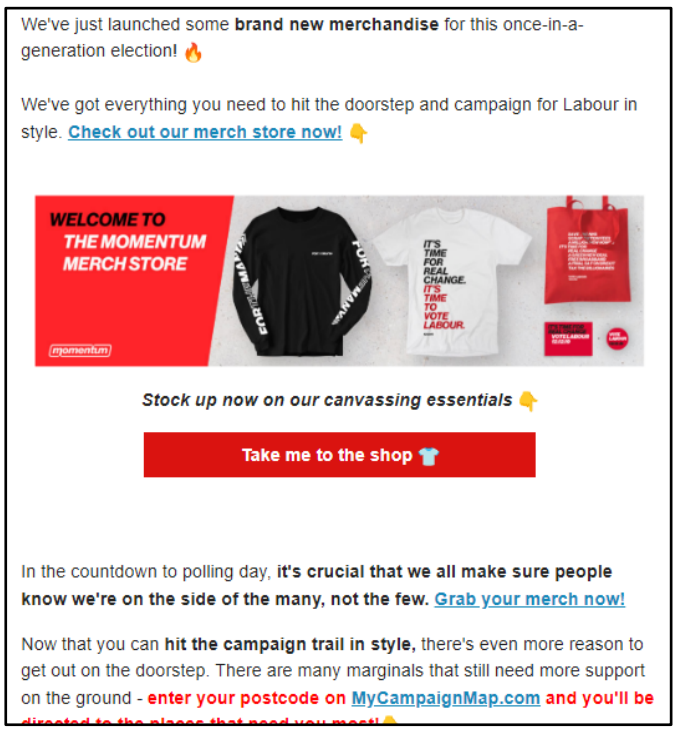
Nobody is talking about it - but these new voters could swing the election, and we've only got 2 days to register even more 👇

Thanks to the 3,234 of you who have chipped in our Facebook ads campaign has signed up nearly 90,000 young people in marginals. But we've only got two days to target the millions who still aren't registered - can you chip in £3 and help us hit 100,000?

In many of these marginals there are just a handful of votes between us and the Tories. Our movement has already smashed our fundraising target of £50,000 and we've signed up tens of thousands more voters than we thought possible.

The target was revised to £100,000 in the few hours before the voter deadline; Momentum reported this was achieved and claimed it directly resulted in an additional 123,000 people registering to vote. In addition to direct donations, Momentum launched a range of its own merchandise which activists were encouraged to buy through a direct email:

Image 51: From email ‘LAUNCH: Election merch! 🔥’, dated 23 November 2019



We've just launched some **brand new merchandise** for this once-in-a-generation election! 🔥

We've got everything you need to hit the doorstep and campaign for Labour in style. **Check out our merch store now!** 👇

Stock up now on our canvassing essentials 👇

Take me to the shop 👕

In the countdown to polling day, **it's crucial that we all make sure people know we're on the side of the many, not the few.** **Grab your merch now!**

Now that you can **hit the campaign trail in style,** there's even more reason to get out on the doorstep. There are many marginals that still need more support on the ground - **enter your postcode on MyCampaignMap.com and you'll be**

Activists were also encouraged to purchase Labour and election-themed Christmas cards to send out early to friends and family:

Image 52: From email 'If you do one thing this Christmas… 🎄', dated 30 November 2019

People are more likely to be persuaded to vote Labour by people they know and trust. But having conversations with your family and friends about why they should vote Labour can sometimes be hard.

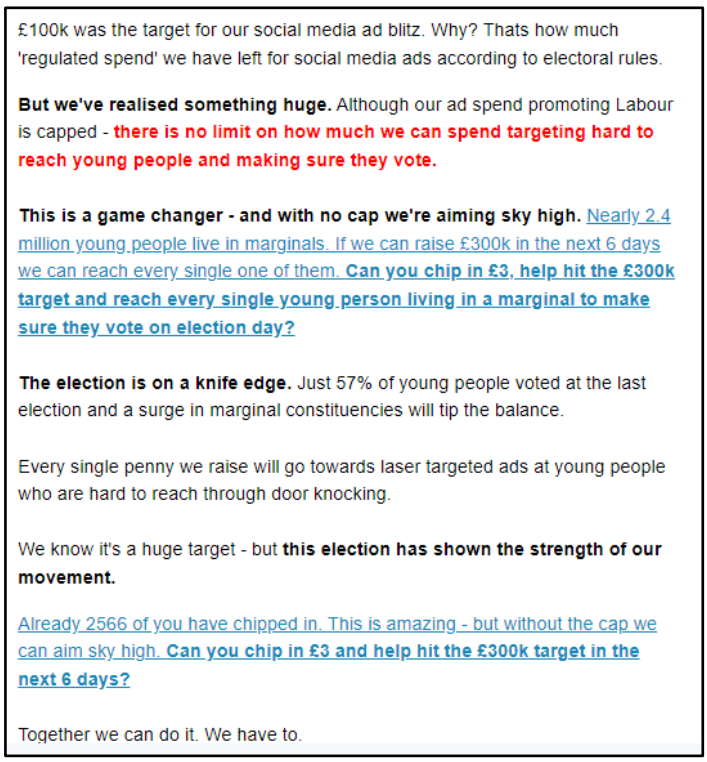
That's why **we need you to send Christmas cards to your family and friends explaining why you'll be voting Labour on 12 December**. Click here to order Momentum's Christmas Cards now!

Persuade your friends and family to vote Labour this Christmas 👇

Check out Momentum's Christmas cards

Another fundraising target of a further £100,000 for Facebook advertising was set on 4 December, aimed at encouraging young people to use their vote on polling day. This figure was achieved, and Momentum sent a request to contribute to a new target of £300,000:

Image 53: From email 'We've realised something huge…', dated 5 December 2019



£100k was the target for our social media ad blitz. Why? Thats how much 'regulated spend' we have left for social media ads according to electoral rules.

But we've realised something huge. Although our ad spend promoting Labour is capped - **there is no limit on how much we can spend targeting hard to reach young people and making sure they vote.**

This is a game changer - and with no cap we're aiming sky high. Nearly 2.4 million young people live in marginals. If we can raise £300k in the next 6 days we can reach every single one of them. **Can you chip in £3, help hit the £300k target and reach every single young person living in a marginal to make sure they vote on election day?**

The election is on a knife edge. Just 57% of young people voted at the last election and a surge in marginal constituencies will tip the balance.

Every single penny we raise will go towards laser targeted ads at young people who are hard to reach through door knocking.

We know it's a huge target - but **this election has shown the strength of our movement.**

Already 2566 of you have chipped in. This is amazing - but without the cap we can aim sky high. **Can you chip in £3 and help hit the £300k target in the next 6 days?**

Together we can do it. We have to.

The final update received on this drive was that £200,000 had been reached on 10 December, two days before the election. The total amount of money raised by Momentum in connection to this campaign is impossible to calculate based on the incomplete information provided to supporters through emails, but it is certainly eye-watering compared to GE2017. In terms of party political campaign funding, Momentum raised at least £250,000 before moving onto donor number targets, which generated an untold further amount in support of Labour's campaign. Once these drives finished, Momentum switched to non-partisan fundraising through a voter registration drive raising at least £100,000, and one to encourage voting on the day raising at least £200,000. Momentum clearly learned lessons from GE2017 regarding regulated election expenditure, and secured official authorisation from Labour for their spending which allowed such ambitious goals.

Even higher amounts have been reported; for example, Momentum's head of communication Joe Todd indicated part-way through the campaign that Momentum had already raised £500,000 and expected that they could raise over £1 million by the end of the election period (Loucaides, 2019). According to The Electoral Commission (2023), Momentum Campaign (Services) Ltd spent just over £500,000 during GE2019 on activities related to Labour's campaign, not including the non-partisan social media advertising Momentum funded during the election period. Overall, Momentum's budget for GE2019 is in an entirely different league compared to the previous general election, and on the basis of these numbers Labour's defeat must have been especially disheartening for National Office staff and volunteers. The following chapter will discuss the reactions to and potential contributing factors for Labour's devastating electoral defeat.

Chapter 9: Reactions to and Analysis of GE2019

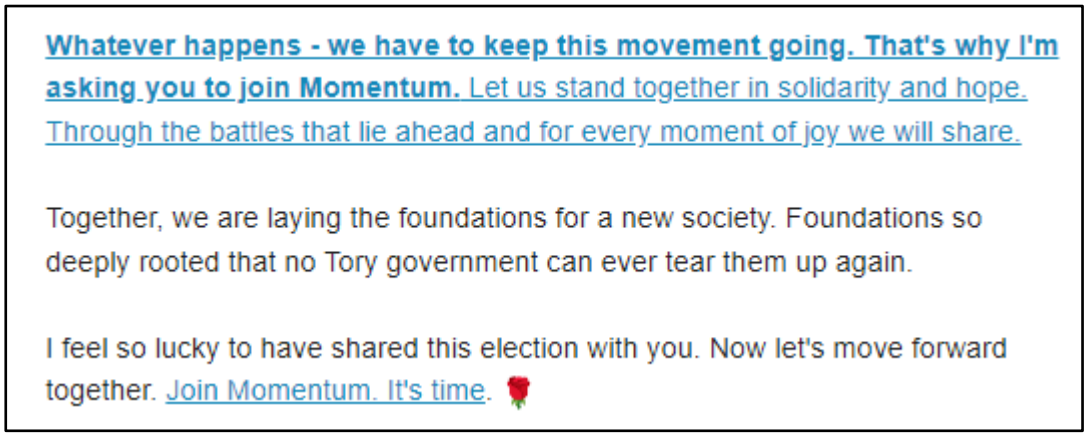
9.1 Introduction

Many analyses of GE2019 abound, and most accounts understandably focus on national-level politics (e.g. Jones, 2020; Ford, et al., 2021; Pogrund and Maguire, 2020; Murray, 2022). A general consensus seems to be that voter attitudes on Brexit contributed significantly to Labour's losses, and that the party had too many policies, with confusion around themes and slogans during a campaign that should have been tighter run; many also cite Corbyn's poor reputation with voters and unfavourable media coverage (e.g. Jones, 2020; Murray, 2022). A few authors, such as Payne (2021), attempt to build a more micro-level understanding of the electorate, and my data from GE2019 complement these accounts. This section begins with observations of immediate reactions to the election result drawing from Momentum emails, NCG minutes and attendance at the post-election Zoom call hosted by Momentum staff, with John McDonnell and Ash Sarkar. The constraints of this thesis has meant there is significant room for deeper examinations of Momentum's strategy and tactics during GE2019 in future work. However, this chapter continues with a brief analysis of three main themes this research identified associated with GE2019, drawing both from participant observations and my experiences as a British citizen and registered voter resident in the UK throughout the campaign period, before finishing with an assessment of Momentum's short-term legacy.

9.2 Momentum Reactions to the Election Defeat

The first email message from Momentum during GE2019 that did not reflect wild optimism was sent by National Coordinator Laura Parker at almost 9pm on 12 December, just over an hour before polls shut. Whereas all previous correspondence and discussion was framed towards anticipating a general election win and a Corbyn-led Labour government, she highlighted in bold '**However tonight goes, it's clear something special is happening**.' Although the subject of the email could be interpreted in different ways, the message itself was a lyrical depiction of positive and generalised campaign experiences, ending with an impassioned plea to join Momentum:

Image 54: From email ‘Things feel different’, dated 12 December 2019



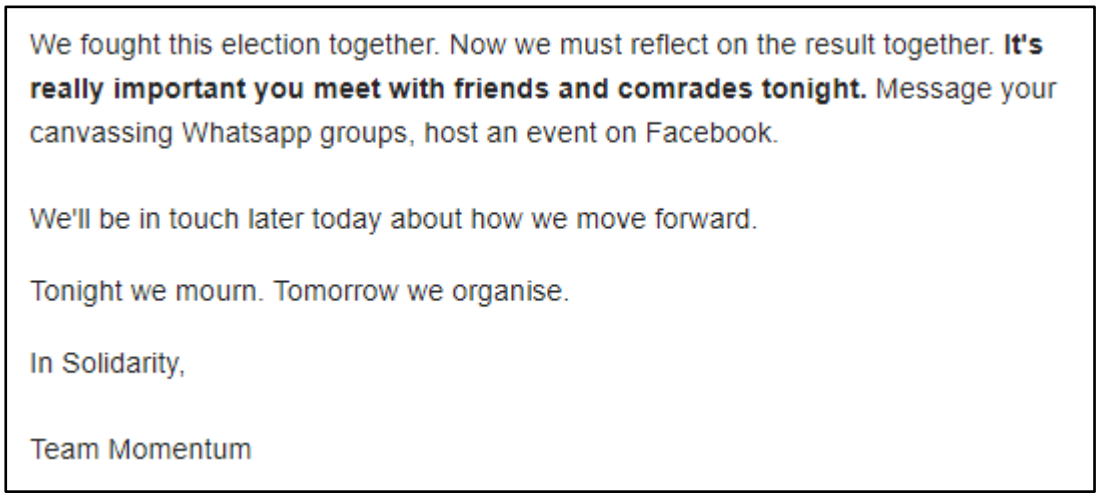
Whatever happens - we have to keep this movement going. That's why I'm asking you to join Momentum. Let us stand together in solidarity and hope. Through the battles that lie ahead and for every moment of joy we will share.

Together, we are laying the foundations for a new society. Foundations so deeply rooted that no Tory government can ever tear them up again.

I feel so lucky to have shared this election with you. Now let's move forward together. Join Momentum. It's time. 🌹

Less than 90 minutes later, Momentum sent another email, telling activists that they ‘should be proud’ but that exit polls were ‘not what we’d hoped for.’ The email summarised three headline positive points from the election period, including the size and scale of the ‘people-powered’ campaign, the popularity of the manifesto and that ‘together we have built something remarkable: **a movement of hope, solidarity and determination**’ (email ‘You should be proud’, dated 12 December 2019), again ending with an invitation to join Momentum. The next day, a more emotional email from Momentum empathised with feelings that activists were assumed to share: ‘last night hurt. It shook us to our core.’ It again summarised aspects of the campaign to take pride in, but ended with a suggestion implying activists would be falling apart:

Image 55: from email ‘Be together tonight’, dated 13 December 2019



We fought this election together. Now we must reflect on the result together. **It's really important you meet with friends and comrades tonight.** Message your canvassing Whatsapp groups, host an event on Facebook.

We'll be in touch later today about how we move forward.

Tonight we mourn. Tomorrow we organise.

In Solidarity,

Team Momentum

In contrast to the shock at the extent of Labour’s loss amongst Momentum staff, some authors have reported that there were reputable predictions available early in

the campaign indicating a heavy defeat for Labour (e.g. Payne, 2021). At one strategy call, a participant posted, “opinion polls look grim. What’s your take on it?” but all responses were disparaging of poll accuracy (fieldnotes, 24 November 2019). Regardless, Momentum staff appeared to have a genuine sense of surprise and disbelief at the result. Intense emotions were plainly displayed in the post-election Zoom call on 15 December. Interestingly, more people registered to attend this call than any other I attended throughout the campaign, with more than 3,000 people at its height. A tearful member of Momentum’s staff who had led many other calls during the election, asked participants, “*we want to know: how are you looking after yourself?*” (fieldnotes, 15 December 2019). She indicated that at the National Office there were “*lots of tears*” and that they were “*deeply upset*.” Some explanations were suggested for the result, such as Brexit, and there was general consensus that climate change and the green agenda should have been more prominent during campaigning. There were some recollections of experiencing voter negativity towards Corbyn whilst canvassing, although this was emphasised much more strongly than it had been at any point during the campaign period itself. John McDonnell suggested that Momentum was “*a real movement now.*” Overall, the tone of the call could not have been more diametrically opposed to the high-energy buoyancy of the campaign calls.

Momentum’s first NCG (2020) meeting following the election defeat included discussions around the role of Brexit, the loss of the working class vote, references to the legacy of Thatcher and the decline of trade unionism, and suggestions that local grassroots community organising needed to continue to build foundational support amongst voters for the future. Momentum’s publicly available contribution to Labour Together’s Election Review was also shared with the meeting. The report emphasised Brexit and the role of a sustained media crusade against Corbyn, resulting in a poor personal reputation amongst the electorate. Momentum spent the first part of the report presenting a lengthy positive account of its activities and achievements in the campaign, before moving on to criticisms of Labour. In particular, Momentum suggested Labour’s social media campaign was ineffective and underpinned by inadequate digital infrastructure, which is supported by some of my observations above. They also cited problems with lack of support and bureaucratic issues for local campaigns, as well as ‘controversies over targeting’ (Momentum, 2020, p.10).

Overall, the submission communicated a perspective that Momentum ran an effective campaign but were held back by Labour, whose efforts were found wanting. The closest the authors of Momentum's submission might have come to criticism of their own efforts is an observation that 'there is an urgent need to develop and engage party members outside of metropolitan areas, [and] it is clear that the ground campaign has the potential to be a crucial weapon in future elections' (Momentum, 2020, p.1). One reading of this could be that it is suggesting more on-the-ground activity is needed and Momentum's own London-based, digitally-focussed campaign may not have been enough. However, it could also be read as a suggestion that Labour's coordination and support of door-knocking and other activities should have been better and more consistent across geographical areas. Regardless, Momentum staff overall appeared defiant and closed to self-criticism. The following observations and analysis look at three themes that arose from my experience of the election.

9.3 Consumer Culture and Professionalisation of Activism

The advice and support from American activists based on their experiences with Bernie Sanders's campaigns was publicly acknowledged both before and during Momentum's GE2019 campaign. This has been discussed previously, but as someone who grew up in the United States, the influence of American consumer culture on Momentum's approach both to online organising calls and fundraising was palpable. Whilst this approach appears to have been remarkably successful in terms of generating income, the impact on the general culture and feel of Momentum's activities is notable.

There is a wider pattern around the importation of American innovations in community organising, for example the aforementioned emulation of Obama's campaign by Miliband's M4C, and even the Asset-Based Community Development approach that was adopted by the NHS (Jewell, 2016). However, despite pointed references to Alinsky (Bond and Exley, 2016), the tactics brought to Momentum by Bernie Sanders veterans appear to focus much more on applying sales techniques rather than employing true community organising. The infomercial flavour of strategy calls and the monetisation of activism promoted via fundraising tactics add to the Americanisation of Momentum's activity, building on persuasive canvassing discussed in Chapter 6. In terms of tangible contribution to the GE2019 campaign from the National Office, Momentum's productive activity seemed to consist primarily of creating and sharing viral videos as direct and indirect advertising, and

funding other direct social media advertising: that is, essentially marketing the Corbyn/Labour brand. Arguably, Momentum's aggressively monetised approach to GE2019 is at odds with its claim to be socialist in character, and is reminiscent of political actors whom former Corbyn advisor Murray (2022, p.227) describes as those who 'seek the extension of market principles into all aspects of life.' However, this overt adoption of innovative techniques from the United States seemed to also complement the group's emphasis on social media and digital organising, contributing to its overall youthful, tech-savvy image. Indeed, the American flavour present in Momentum's campaign activities often seems to have been aimed at younger people. For example, Olivia was particularly interested in American left wing activism, and specifically expressed admiration of congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Local Momentum groups characterised by younger membership also seemed to engage more actively in collaborating with and emulating American counterparts (e.g. Bassett-Yerrell, 2020), as compared to those dominated by more traditional Labour activists (e.g. Robert, Mark).

Another observation is around what could be characterised as a professionalisation of activism, which mirrored the business-like attitude towards fundraising. Firstly, the organisational nature of Momentum itself has consistently remained highly corporate, lending this image to both its campaign activities and overall organisational nature. Grace observed this, referring to Momentum as "*a very corporate organisation*" when discussing the process she had to follow to email members as a data manager for her branch. Also, Mackova, et al. (2020, p.169) note, 'while [other comparable grassroots groups] do not have their own offices and their members work for the organisation in their leisure time, Momentum could be said to be quasi-professionalised.' Indeed, as mentioned previously, its employee base had reached as many as around 60 members of staff during GE2019 (Loucaides, 2019). Furthermore, Momentum's role in providing a platform for prominent members to take the professionalisation of activism to a new level can be directly observed through several examples. Former National Coordinators Emma Rees and Adam Klug co-founded a political consultancy organisation with US and EU branches called The Social Practice, along with Momentum's former head of communications Joe Todd, co-founder of UK Uncut Jo Beardsmore and two veterans from Bernie Sanders' campaign, Becky Bond and Zack Malitz (The Social Practice EU, 2023a). Consultancy services are summarised as 'engaging volunteers and building people-power at scale for campaigns, political parties, candidates, trade unions and movements' (The Social Practice EU, 2021b, n.p.). At the time of

writing the group was still actively operating and had supported organisations including the UK Trades Union Congress, Green New Deal, Make Amazon Pay and Progressive International, amongst others (The Social Practice EU, 2021b).

Additionally, as mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, Beth Foster-Ogg joined *Jeremy for Leader* as a teenager and was always within the inner circles of Momentum in London (Nunns, 2018). She served as Momentum's training officer before moving to Labour's Community Organising Unit during GE2019. Since that time, she has continued to speak at TWT (e.g. The World Transformed, 2022c), has worked for Amnesty International and is now working at The Centre for Progressive Change as a Community Organiser and Trainer (Centre for Progressive Change, 2023a). The Centre offers training for national organising campaigns and activists, and although some free material is available from their website, accessing the formal training programme costs from £160 on a self-taught basis (Centre for Progressive Change, 2023b) to a potential £320 to attend a group programme (Centre for Progressive Change, 2023c). Foster-Ogg also serves as a Senior Advisor for Rees and Klug's The Social Practice EU (The Social Practice EU, 2021b).

As outlined elsewhere, many other Momentum staff members found paid positions in the Labour Party, particularly relating to the GE2019 campaign in Labour's communications and digital teams as well as positions in the LOTO team. Others began their activism long before Momentum, but have since progressed their careers significantly on the back of their experiences: Michael Chessum, for example, went on to become a National Organiser for Another Europe is Possible and has extended his reputation as an author. It could be argued that these approaches and activities are simply utilitarian in terms of maximising effectiveness within what is still a fundamentally capitalist society. However, for those who hold strongly to socialist or other left-wing ideologies, the dissonance between Momentum's corporate national character and political ideals is notable, as is the personal gain for individual activists who have capitalised on their involvement with Momentum. The phenomenon of professionalisation of activism can also be linked to identity theory (Kiecolt, 2000), through the establishment of strong and entrenched personal identities as 'activists', and this will be explored further in the next Chapter.

9.4 Activist Bubbles

The issue of activist bubbles was examined at length in relation to GE2017 in Chapter 5, and it appears a lack of acceptance of and critical engagement with this problem led to bubbles continuing into the GE2019 campaign. Issues around a lack of diversity in terms of age also seem to have continued and intensified (Loucaides, 2019), possibly in part due to the advances in digital technology that was utilised during the campaign. One strategy call participant summarised what many older activists would have experienced: “I have social skills it’s tech skills I lack although my sons are tech savvy” (fieldnotes, 1 November 2019). For another telling example, a participant in the VideosByTheMany call with Ken Loach commented, “I’m too old for this (24) but I'm told you can upload here…” (fieldnotes, 6 November 2019). If a 24-year-old feels too old to keep up with the technology, it is no wonder that many older activists struggled. Whilst many local activist groups may have avoided excluding older members through prior networks and relationships, a disconnect from the national campaign will undoubtedly have impacted on some members’ experiences. Certainly, the numbers of older activists online visibly declined through the election period, and the youthful, tech-savvy image of Momentum was cemented and entrenched. Technology and Americanism appear to have heavy influences in the culture at Momentum National Office, in turn impacting on the collective identity of Momentum as an organisation and contributing to its reputation amongst the electorate. Chessum made similar observations of Momentum’s leadership team, albeit much earlier than 2019: during Momentum’s early development, he claimed that although some of the leadership had substantial experience as activists, most of the grassroots activists were younger and ‘regarded the storming of Millbank, the pensions dispute and Occupy as ancient history’ (Chessum, 2022, p.144). This compares with my younger participants’ backgrounds, many of whom also did not seem to have significant history as activists; from observations of Momentum staff during GE2019, it seems many of these young, new activists may have dominated Momentum’s employee base. The youthful character of Momentum’s national office may have also contributed to difficulties appreciating the perspectives of older members of the electorate.

Furthermore, Momentum’s Digital Army was set up to counter negative press through member social media networks. However, the effectiveness in reaching beyond bubbles using social media is at best uncertain. For example, although based on an American context, Eady, et al. (2019) found that in general people who are more extreme in their political ideology are more likely to be actively engaged

with political content on social media, as compared to those who held less strong views, a group that would arguably include the voters most likely to be persuadable. In addition, they found evidence to suggest that there was a high prevalence of over 80% of social media users who operated in bubbles, as defined by non-engagement with content on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Avril (2018, p. 254) also observes the 'echo chamber effect of digital tools and platforms,' and Pogrund and Maguire's (2020) account further supports the existence of activist 'bubbles'. This correlates strongly with my observations and those of some of my participants (e.g. Ben, Simon and Alex) regarding a tendency towards closed-mindedness amongst left-wing activists. Others have experienced this directly, such as Shanly (2020) who reported being excluded from Corbyn's first leadership campaign after he expressed dissenting views. Sibley (2023) has also contributed evidence potentially supporting an exclusionary culture on the left, prompting individuals to move from left-wing to right-wing activism. A culture of 'you're either with us or against us' and no-platforming reactions to opposing viewpoints amongst left-wing activists lends circumstantial evidence in support of social media bubbles; if activists do not wish to engage with contrasting views in person, they will presumably be equally unwilling to engage with users who hold opposing views on social media. Therefore, Momentum's Digital Army may likely have been preaching to the converted rather than actively combatting dominant media narratives amongst the wider electorate.

9.5 Class and Brexit

The subject of modern class dynamics is far too broad to discuss in one small section of this thesis. However, even a brief analysis of GE2019 would not be complete without acknowledging the divergence between the general culture within Momentum and the section of voters that have been identified as critical in terms of explaining Labour's losses in GE2019, often broadly characterised as Northern Leave voters. The issues around activist bubbles and reluctance to engage with opposing views discussed in the previous section provided barriers for many activists in terms of understanding what Brexit represented to many Leave voters, particularly those who are collectively referred to as 'traditional working class'. In the context of GE2019, Brexit did appear as a key locus for class divergence, and as such can be utilised in illuminating contrasting socioeconomic perspectives; a full examination of the complexity of the Brexit question for voters and exploration of the conceptual points of divergence between the internationalist left and 'traditional working class' Leave voters must be developed elsewhere. However, it is helpful to

briefly expand on issues around class, as they relate to Momentum activists' understanding of 'working class' voters.

As illustrated in Chapter 7, the dominant understanding of 'working class' amongst Momentum members seems to draw from two distinct conceptualisations, which are occasionally relied upon simultaneously, and often utilised at different times according to the applicability to the current context. One framing of what it means to be working class is through equivalence with the trade union movement. Other times, working class is defined through reference to socialism or a more nebulous concept of socioeconomic justice: as Olivia put it, "*the most vulnerable in society*" and "*the group of people that are sort of left behind*." This second formulation is often presented with a particular focus on ethnic minority communities. Activists should not be blamed for struggling to conceptualise the modern nature of a socioeconomic phenomenon that continues to provide the subject for substantial academic debate. However, as demonstrated through the course of this thesis, the character and culture of Momentum is arguably distinctly middle-class in nature, and the above conceptualisations demonstrate a lack of appreciation of divergent experiences of class. Arguably, this contributed to Momentum activists' failure to connect with a substantial section of the electorate, in turn contributing to the loss of support from 'working class voters' widely suggested as a significant factor in Labour's GE2019 losses. This section will briefly critique the framings summarised above, followed by suggestions regarding the relevance of Brexit within this context.

Defining 'working class' in direct connection to the trade union movement might be convenient rhetorically, at the same time as placing useful emphasis on potential political allies. However, in creating a conceptual equivalence between the working class and trade unionism, many groups are summarily excluded: those who work in non-unionised sectors or on precarious zero-hour or agency contracts, the self-employed, full-time carers, those reliant on benefits or are disabled and unable to work, as well as those who are retired. Ironically, Owen Jones's (2016) 'chavs' most certainly would not qualify. Needless to say, a significant proportion of these groups likely self-identify as working class. Furthermore, although this understanding of the working class may have been markedly more relevant in the past, the decline of trade unionism means that it no longer accurately reflects modern society. To illustrate, a professor earning a base salary of over £100,000 on the picket line in front of a beautifully manicured university lawn arguably has little in common with the grimy working class existence the Sleaford Mods both experienced and portray

through their music (Aubrey, 2023, n.p.): ‘why am I second to the mess out there? / of a landscape starved of real care’ (Sleaford Mods, 2020). This framing of class, therefore, presents a second challenge in application to modern society: the cultural and experiential disconnect between two distinct socioeconomic groups, both claiming to be working class. On the other hand, defining ‘working class’ as those who are “*left behind*” or disadvantaged by capitalism is potentially less exclusionary of groups with legitimate claim to working class identity. However, this broad and vague definition sacrifices practical usefulness as a conceptual tool, and its sole emphasis on economics again ignores the cultural aspect of what it means to be working class in Britain.

Brexit may indeed be a cleavage point between different classes of voters, but common explanations for why it impacted badly on Corbyn may not illuminate the full picture. Rather than Corbyn’s equivocal position on the issue, what arguably concerned many Leave voters, and turned them away from Labour, was a lack of regard for the importance of their main motivation for voting Brexit in the first place: the impact immigration and migration on working class communities (Payne, 2021; Skelton, 2021; Sobolevska and Ford, 2020; Winlow, et al., 2017). Corbyn’s, and Momentum’s, internationalism was in direct conflict with Leave voters, and perceptions that Corbyn would act in opposition to their interests on this area of policy became more entrenched as time went on. Brexit may have been the sharp edge of the conflict, but I argue that it is a symptomatic manifestation rather than the crux of the problem. If Momentum’s arguments about the lamentable state of political education in the country are correct, it is hardly surprising many ordinary voters were unable to articulate the complexity of their grievances in any other way except referencing Brexit when put on the spot. Many in Labour on both left and right seemed uninterested in truly understanding why they supported Brexit: left-wing Leavers had their own reasons and so lacked motivation to engage, and Remainers were generally content to brand people as ‘bigoted or stupid’ (Payne, 2021, p.ix). The problem with Brexit was that although it galvanised many to voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo, in an expression of political and democratic conviction on a scale unheard of in modern Britain, it distracted from the fundamental reasons why ordinary people felt compelled to grab the referendum opportunity with both hands. Focusing on the Leave/Remain dichotomy is an understandable simplification, but it also makes it very easy to avoid grappling with the serious grievances communities held which led many working class people to vote for Brexit.

These concerns can be directly related to Rousseau's concept of the social contract, that ‘the purpose of the state was the protection of those people to which it owed its being’ (Cranston, 1968, p.26). Far from being outdated, until and unless the state system is replaced, it remains entirely appropriate to expect citizenship to have value and meaning, and for there to be a reciprocal relationship between state and citizen. When viewed in this context, anti-migrant sentiments could legitimately arise from a feeling of betrayal based on the perception that the state is failing in its primary duty by prioritising support for non-citizens. Development of this argument could form the basis for future work. In any case, this research suggests that greater conceptual clarity and genuine effort to appreciate divergent perspectives is needed if Momentum wishes to assist Labour to reconnect with working class voters.

9.6 Concluding Remarks: Momentum’s Legacy

Regardless of how enthusiastically Momentum’s national staff praised their achievements during GE2019, the fact remains that Momentum suffered an abject failure in regards to what was widely regarded as their primary organisational goal: achieving a Corbyn-led Labour government. Not only did Corbyn suffer a heavy electoral defeat, he subsequently resigned as leader, and Starmer has withdrawn the Labour whip and barred him from running as a Labour candidate (Bloom, 2023). In the current circumstances, there appears to be essentially no future prospect of achieving the organisational goal Momentum was established to pursue. As a result, Momentum has been forced to undergo a period of fundamental redefinition, but there are areas where the group’s activity and organisation under Corbyn had and continues to have an impact. Brief comments on Momentum’s general trajectory in the first few years post-Corbyn and its short-term legacy within Labour are offered here.

The aftermath following Corbyn’s departure was unexpectedly dominated by the covid pandemic and series of national lockdown periods, the first of which began a few days before the announcement of Keir Starmer’s succession as Leader in April 2020; Momentum suffered prolonged restrictions in activity along with the rest of the country. Nevertheless, in conjunction with a public statement by Jon Lansman that he would not stand, the long-awaited election for NCG positions was announced in May 2020. Momentum activists promptly formed into two ‘time-limited’ internal factional groups: Forward Momentum and Momentum Renewal (Rodgers, 2020b, n.p.). In brief, the Forward Momentum slate promised a break from the current

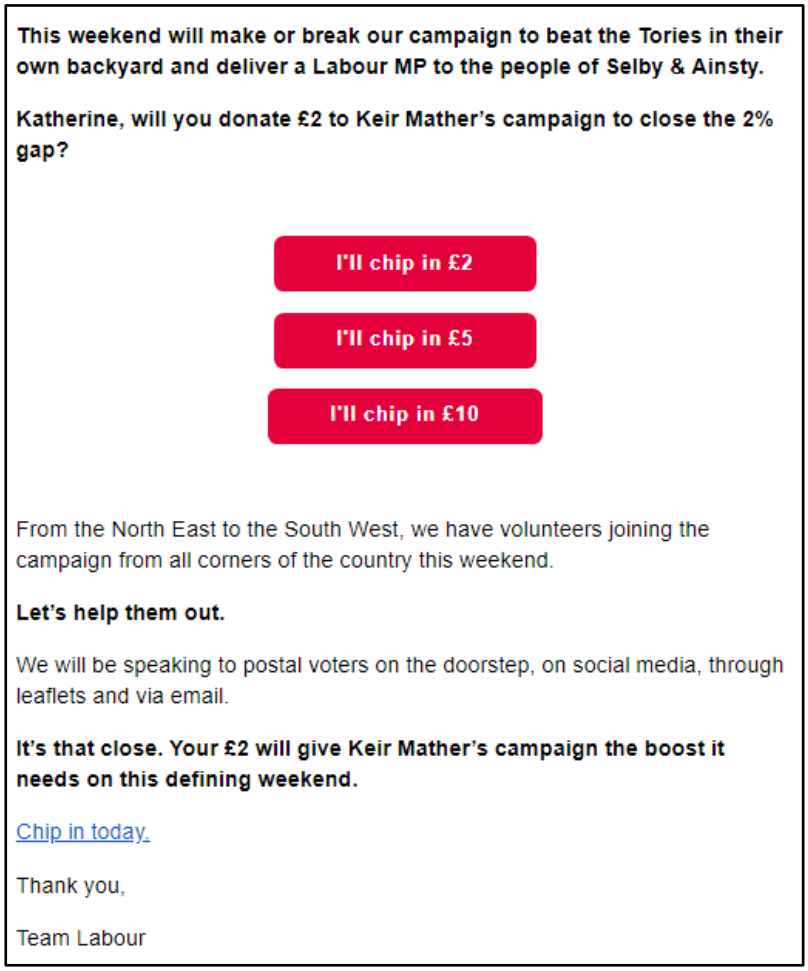
leadership and, endorsed by the Fire Brigades Union, won the large majority of seats and put forward two co-chairs to replace Lansman. Momentum's internationalist character was reinforced through the choice of 'Bedford-born New Yorker' and member of the Democratic Socialists of America, Gaya Sriskanthan, alongside Fire Brigades Union regional organiser Andrew Scattergood (Rodgers, 2020c, n.p.). Although he stepped down as chair, at the time of writing Lansman still retains control of member data through Momentum Information Ltd (Companies House, 2023a).

It was spring 2021 before the new leadership published a strategy document outlining the organisation's priorities during the post-Corbyn era. Some content of this document has been discussed already, but it arguably represents the clearest and most detailed outline of Momentum's organisational identity and purpose that had been published to date. In particular, Momentum (2021f, p.5) is specifically defined as 'a socialist and anti-racist organisation committed to a fundamental and irreversible shift in wealth and power to the working class in all its diversity.' In addition to a renewed focus on socialist principles and working class advocacy, Momentum leadership outlined projects including a continuation of support for democratic reform and the selection of socialist candidates within the Labour Party, as well as promoting a Green New Deal. Other projects included building links with trade unions as the primary vehicle for connecting with the working class and continuing to support extra-Parliamentary campaigns. Most crucially, plans involved the immediate implementation of a 'refounding' exercise, a programme of consultative activities in support of reforming Momentum's constitution and internal democracy (Momentum, 2020, p.18). In the midst of the Refounding programme, and for apparently the first time since the 2017 constitution was adopted, Momentum held its bi-annual NCG elections on time in 2022. Again, internal factional jostling ensued with a group called Your Momentum, representing the successor to Forward Momentum, vying with Momentum Organisers, who advocated for a more left-wing, 'power-based' approach (Neame, 2022b, n.p.). In a reversal compared to 2020, Momentum Organisers secured a majority. The current leadership has implemented significant democratic changes including a 'primary' allowing members to vote for the motions to be backed by Momentum in advance of Labour's annual conference (Momentum, 2022). In June 2023, the conclusion of Momentum's Refounding process was announced, including a new constitution and additional mechanisms for member involvement (Momentum, 2023d).

Despite these positive changes, Momentum's membership has struggled to flourish to the same extent as under Corbyn. It was reported in 2022 that membership levels had fallen by a third from its peak, mostly due to left-wing members leaving Labour under Starmer's leadership (Adu, 2022). Former National Coordinator, James Schneider, suggested that rather than continuing to be forced to '[fight] its corner in the Labour Party', Momentum should reconnect with wider leftwing movements and causes within the UK and beyond (Adu, 2022, n.p.). Others have also observed activists being subsumed into Labour's internal bureaucracy and democracy, away from movement activism (e.g. Chessum, 2022; Catherine, Grace, Olivia). Lansman is quoted as questioning Momentum's legacy in relation to the unsuccessful attempt to reintroduce open selections (Chessum, 2022, p.189). Chessum (2022) also criticises the fact there were no notable social or workers' rights movements during Corbyn's leadership, suggesting a lack of progress on this front as well. However, arguably, this was to be expected; Corbyn's tenure as leader, with its optimistic promises of left-wing change, will have served as a political safety-valve for many, removing the impetus to initiate extra-Parliamentary movements.

However, beyond the disappointment in terms of ideological impact, Momentum has had tangible stylistic influence on Labour's communication strategy and tactics. As Loucaides (2019, n.p.) reported, Momentum's 'head of digital' Harry Hayball moved to Labour's digital team before GE2019, along with many other staff from Momentum's National Office. Emil Charlaff, a member of Momentum's GE2019 digital team, has been quoted commenting, 'and so we're working with our team there, basically [...] They've taken a lot from here. They've got our current video templates, they've got all our learning from the interim period' (Loucaides, 2019, n.p.). Momentum's digital legacy appears to have persisted, most likely through this exchange of staff. For example, Labour has recently adopted Momentum's fundraising tactics, as can be seen by the format of two emails sent in connection with the three Parliamentary by-elections in July 2023:

Image 56: From email '£2 for a 2% swing', dated 1 July 2023



This weekend will make or break our campaign to beat the Tories in their own backyard and deliver a Labour MP to the people of Selby & Ainsty.

Katherine, will you donate £2 to Keir Mather's campaign to close the 2% gap?

I'll chip in £2

I'll chip in £5

I'll chip in £10

From the North East to the South West, we have volunteers joining the campaign from all corners of the country this weekend.

Let's help them out.

We will be speaking to postal voters on the doorstep, on social media, through leaflets and via email.

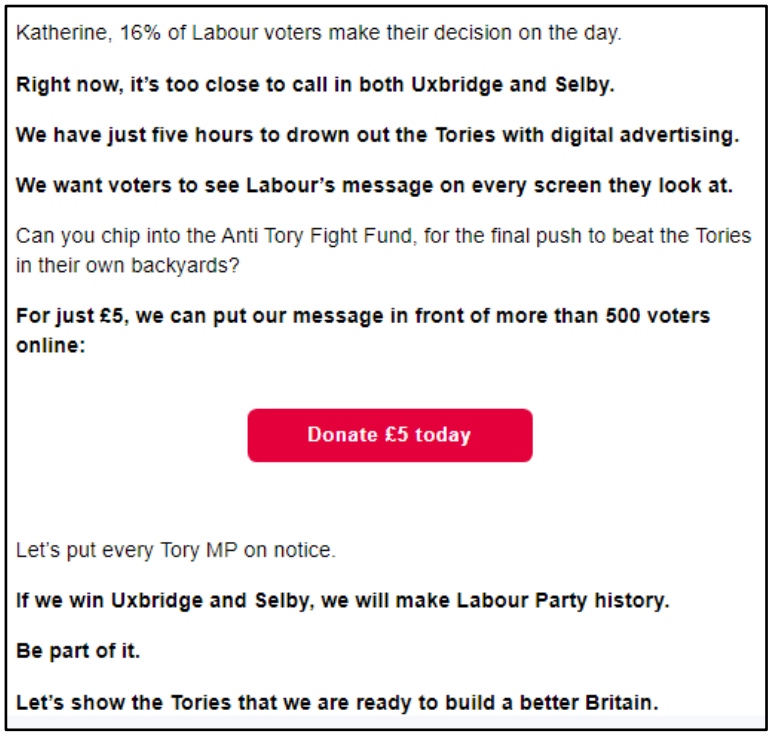
It's that close. Your £2 will give Keir Mather's campaign the boost it needs on this defining weekend.

Chip in today.

Thank you,

Team Labour

Image 57: From email '🕰 Five hours to go. Can you donate £5? 🕰', dated 20 July 2023



Katherine, 16% of Labour voters make their decision on the day.

Right now, it's too close to call in both Uxbridge and Selby.

We have just five hours to drown out the Tories with digital advertising.

We want voters to see Labour's message on every screen they look at.

Can you chip into the Anti Tory Fight Fund, for the final push to beat the Tories in their own backyards?

For just £5, we can put our message in front of more than 500 voters online:

Donate £5 today

Let's put every Tory MP on notice.

If we win Uxbridge and Selby, we will make Labour Party history.

Be part of it.

Let's show the Tories that we are ready to build a better Britain.

Despite ideological differences, Starmer's team appear to be benefitting from the experience and enterprise of former Momentum staff. As Momentum continues to redefine itself outside of the Corbyn context, it remains to be seen whether it manages to discover a movement identity or if it is subsumed within the structures of Labour Party factionalism. The final chapter will close this thesis with an application of social identity theory to the themes and observations presented in relation to Momentum from 2015-2019.

Chapter 10: Synthesis and Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have had a distinctly empirical focus in keeping with the ethnographic nature of this project. To conclude this thesis, however, this chapter will provide a more theoretical synthesis of themes and data, focusing on the role of identity in understanding Momentum and its interactions with other actors within the British political landscape. Following this analysis, limitations and future research directions will be presented followed by concluding remarks and reflections on the project to draw the paper to a close.

10.2 Synthesis: The Role of Identity

10.2.1 Introduction

As presented in Chapter 2, identity theory suggests that there are three main levels to a person's identity: personal, social and collective. Again, an individual might hold any number of social identities relating to the roles they undertake during interactions with others or different groups to which they belong, whereas collective identity relates to a shared sense of 'we' common to an identifiable group. To reflect the social context of this research, my analysis will focus on social identity and collective identity, firstly by presenting the plurality of pertinent social and collective identities observed within the data. This section will continue by relating the work of key authors to my empirical data, and conclude with some suggestions as to the application of identity theory to Momentum's reputation and member interaction with the UK electorate.

10.2.2 Social and Collective Identities within Momentum

Through the course of data analysis, certain identity characteristics came to the fore as relevant in defining what it meant to activists to be part of Momentum and the Labour Party. These aspects of social identity contributed to perceptions of the collective identity associated with Momentum as an organisation, as well as the collective identity ascribed by activists to Labour. One key aspect of social identity expressed by participants was related to the priority placed on membership of different organisational entities. Some members defined themselves as primarily Momentum members, whereas for others their Labour Party membership was more fundamental in terms of their identity. For example, this appeared to contribute to clear differences in identity between the two archetypes of local branches as described in Chapter 4: those with pre-existing, established left-wing groups

(Labour) and those predominantly composed of newer Labour members (Momentum). Interestingly, Dan, not a member of Momentum, expressed the view that "*primarily we're all Labour Party members*", whilst some activists including Olivia appeared to put their membership of Momentum before Labour membership, and others, like Padraig and Catherine, seemed to consider themselves primarily trade unionists. These distinctions appear to relate directly to the idea of identity strength (e.g. Huddy, 2001, 2002); many activists were members of Momentum, Labour *and* a trade union, but the hierarchy of weight given to each membership in terms of identity varied. The impact of differing identity emphasis on activist perceptions and interactions could be examined in much greater detail.

Another key aspect of the social identities expressed by participants included having left-wing political ideology. For Olivia, as many of the participants, there was a clear sense of overlap between socialism and/or left-wing politics and identity, with identifying as 'socialist' forming a vital part of their own social identity as well as the collective identity of Momentum. Olivia frequently used explicit language when referring to identity characteristics, for example suggesting that individuals can "*identify as a socialist*", but overall, implicit in-group/out-group identity comparisons (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) were prevalent in both observations and interviews. Indeed, it could be argued that ideology-based social identity underpins the factional conflict within the Labour Party, and so this is perhaps not surprising considering Momentum's roots in the wider Labour Left. Often connected to ideology is the role-based identity as 'activist'. Again, although Olivia was most explicit in her description of how she took care to retain her identity as an activist despite her position as elected councillor, many Momentum members appear to have constructed deeply held identities as activists; for example, many nationally prominent members have built careers in teaching others how to practise activism (see Chapter 9).

In addition, individual identities relating to class were expressed, often in conjunction with demonstrating congruence with identity aspects linked to socialism, Momentum or the Labour Party. For example, Alex recalled a fellow activist identifying as working class, even though in his assessment she was "*as middle class as you can get*", reflecting 'a tendency for the contemporary middle classes to reject direct middle-class identification'' (Savage, et al., 2010, p.63). Accepting a middle-class identity would also have arguably positioned her in an out-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) compared to her perceptions of Momentum and Labour, and therefore she may have amended her own social identity to reduce this potential cognitive

dissonance (Kiecolt, 2000). In this case, it appears that identity may have provided a distorting filter, affecting this activist's perception and understanding of class as it is experienced by others; this disconnect was also apparent through my observations of TWT2018 as presented in Chapter 6. Misunderstandings about other activists' conceptions of their own class identity, and also that of voters, can be directly related to the conceptual lack of clarity around what it means to be working class as briefly discussed in the previous chapter. Blurring of lines between categories and the prevalence of self-identifying based on how one *wishes* to be considered rather than on the basis of specific and verifiable characteristics could also be complicating factors. It seems that tangible attributes such as official membership of an organisation can provide a much less ambiguous and problematic foundation for social identity as compared to more abstract identity characteristics such as class or ideology, particularly when it comes to establishing clear and agreed-upon in-group/out-group delineations. Furthermore, this research's findings suggest that divergent in-group/out-group definitions can provide a site for potential discord, such as between Momentum and working class voters, or Ben and fellow activists (see Chapter 7).

Perceptions of Momentum's collective identity extend on the above aspects of social identity, but also include additional elements. As well as being socialist in character, Momentum's National Office cultivated an identity as being youthful: 'in the case of Momentum, the social media team played an important role in projecting a youthful identity' (Mackova, et al., 2020, p.172). Being anti-establishment was also a recurring feature, for example as manifested through consistent contrast with the 'mainstream media'. Another fundamental aspect of Momentum's collective identity was its internationalism, which is most visible through its close, public and celebrated collaboration with left-wing groups and activists from Europe and America. The further link between the working class and internationalism is also encapsulated in the words of Momentum member, author Paul Mason (Pope, 2016b), in claiming that 'a truly global working class is being created' (Mason, 2007, p.xi). Finally, as discussed at length, Momentum also strove to establish itself as a movement organisation, appealing to the movement activism background of many of its members. As argued previously, treating Momentum as a movement fails to adequately capture the core function of the majority of activities undertaken by its members, namely promoting the Labour Party and Corbyn between and during elections, whereas treating it as a purely party political organisation fails to capture the commonly held worldview of many of its members. In existential terms my data

suggests that, when viewed objectively, two distinct and concurrent identities of Momentum can be observed: Momentum-the-movement, which represents a constructed and largely unrealised ideal, and Momentum-the-factional-group, which is more grounded in practical and structural reality. Further examination and analysis of the ramifications of this paradox and dichotomy could form the basis of future work.

In addition to influencing the collective identity for Momentum, in direct reflection of their established position within Labour Party factionalism, Labour Left veterans appeared to have successfully communicated to many young activists that Labour's 'true' collective identity is to be socialist/left-wing. Other authors, such as Gilbert (2021, p.886), have also noted the importance of identity within the factional conflict: the legacy of Bennism through Corbyn, Lansman and other veterans of Labour's left wing ensured that Momentum activists continued the belief that 'the entire New Labour project and even the tradition of the soft left [...] constituted reprehensible attempts to dilute the identity of the party and divert it from its historic destiny.' As reported in Chapter 7, Olivia echoed this perspective, adamantly explaining that

> *We have a history that even though we were meant to be a left-wing party, we have done things that are by no means socialist on any level. So that is the future, that we have a Labour Party that is inherently socialist.*

Indoctrinating younger activists into this worldview makes sense in the context of wider factional rivalries in that it advances left-wing interests in the fight for power within the Party by bringing in new recruits who are unquestioningly supportive of their position. However, the authenticity of this representation may be arguable, as evident from the continuing fierce ideological differences between Labour's internal factions. It appears there is room to argue that little has changed within the party since Wainwright's *A Tale of Two Parties* (1987). More detailed examination of these identities as they are expressed by members, and the contrasts between competing perspectives and understandings, could form the basis for further study.

10.2.3 Applying Identity Theory

Although identity theory has been applied to the study of social movements for decades, the dichotomy observed concerning Momentum's organisational nature suggests an opportunity to explore an interesting theoretical perspective bridging the application of identity theory across two areas of study, social movements and party

politics, supporting the need to simultaneously capture the constructed realities of Momentum members in relation to in-group members (Momentum and Labour's 'left wing'), out-group members (e.g. Conservatives or Labour's 'right wing') and also the electorate as the outsider group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Through the course of familiarising myself with social identity theory and its applications to the study of social movements, certain authors' work emerged as particularly relevant to the findings from this project. This section will highlight some existing work that is supported by this project's empirical data, followed by a brief discussion of how this research relates to selected literature on the application of identity theory in the field of politics. The next section will develop this discussion further through consideration of the applicability of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) classic social identity theory to Momentum's interactions with the electorate.

This research's data and findings have several areas of overlap with ideas presented in McAdam's (2003) chapter that advocates moving beyond structural analyses of movements. He draws extensively from prior writing to develop a more concrete model for activist recruitment, examined through the lens of identity theory. Specifically, he argues that rather than being structural networks that motivate individuals to join a movement, it is more likely to be a potential activist's interpersonal relationships with others who may initiate a recruitment attempt, coupled with appeals to salient aspects of identity they know the potential recruit to possess. Crucially, McAdam also argues that it is important to have both the presence of positive influences, such as a belief that participation might deepen or improve friendship with the recruiter, and the absence of negative influences, like a fear that participation will reduce one's social standing. For Grace, she was personally invited to an early phone-banking event in London, and participation was salient with her general worldview. After the event, she experienced the potential for increased social standing through interactions with high profile left-wing authors and other influential figures which cemented her interest in supporting Corbyn's first campaign and subsequently Momentum. McAdam (2000, p.287) also highlights a belief in the tendency for 'individuals [to] act routinely to safeguard and sustain the central sources of meaning and identity in their lives,' which clearly manifested in the success narratives around GE2017. In terms of moving beyond recruitment to practical action, McAdam identifies the importance of either a threat to or opportunity for the advancement of members' collective interests as a key motivator; in Momentum's case both conditions were met through the binary factional conflict within Labour, and the wider democratic rivalry with the Conservatives.

Organisational groups are then either created (Momentum) or appropriated (the Corbyn-led Labour Party), before 'innovative contentious action' takes place (McAdam, 2000, p.291-293); for Momentum this took the form of heavy emphasis on digital organising that was often edgy or satirical in nature.

As opposed to the processes for member recruitment and requirements for action, Snow and McAdam (2000) focused more on the vehicles for establishing connections based on shared identity. In particular, the two vehicles for 'identity convergence', or 'the [coalescence] of a movement and individuals who already identify with it' (Snow and McAdam, 2000, p.48), are supported by this project's data. 'Identity seeking' (p.48) can be seen through the large numbers of newer activists who were inspired by Corbyn's politics as being reflective of their own beliefs, to the extent that they joined either his leadership campaigns or Momentum as an active expression of their previously-established personal politics, potentially such as Olivia, Emma or Grace. Alternatively, 'identity appropriation' may also have taken place, either through the cultivation of a movement-identity which assisted with 'bloc recruiting' (p.48) activists from other networks or through connection with the Labour Party which attracted existing left-wing Labour activists. In both cases, an intrinsically strong correlation between the personal/social identity of potential activists and the perceived collective identity of Momentum provided the basis for recruitment of large numbers of members, requiring relatively little 'identity work' to lay a foundation for salience (Snow and McAdam, 2000, p.54). Furthermore, 'identity extension' (p.50) arguably took place for some members, who may for example have moved from activism in other groups, to association with Momentum, to elected positions within the Labour Party (Padraig, Olivia, Grace, Catherine).

For many, left-wing political ideology, membership of Momentum and support of Corbyn appeared to have a moral aspect rooted in desires for social justice and defined in relation to the binary opposition between Momentum and 'right-wing' groups such as Conservatives or Blairites. Internationalism as an aspect of both social and collective identity also carried value-laden judgements that frequently resulted in fierce criticism of opposing viewpoints (see Chapter 8). Gekas (2000) argues that in a modern context, social movements offer an opportunity to express what he terms 'value identity', in some ways occupying a similar role to religion. He explains that value-based identities are 'less situation-bound' than other aspects of identity, and more intrinsically linked to culture rather than social structure or group membership (Gekas, 2000, p.94), which can be observed with the exodus of many

left-wing activists from Momentum under Starmer's leadership (Adu, 2022). Huddy (2002, p.829) also emphasises the importance of finding a 'normative fit' between a potential recruit and organisation. Gekas (2000, p.101) further cites 'identification with and persuasion by a charismatic leader', which could be applied to Corbyn's relationship with activists as described previously (Ward and Guglielmo, 2021). Lastly, the main motivating factors supporting members' self-concepts that Gekas suggests for underpinning movement participation can also be seen in the data:

- Self-esteem, as enhanced by feeling like one is part of a positive social force (e.g. Ben, Alex, Simon, Olivia, Grace, Catherine)
- Self-efficacy, which relates to belief that one is capable of acting as a change agent (e.g. relating to a main reason Robert ceased active involvement with Momentum)
- Authenticity, which describes a congruence between personal, social and collective identity and behaviour (e.g. relating to Ben's and Alex's experiences of cognitive dissonance, as well as Tom's negative opinion of Momentum)

Finally, Kiecolt's (2000) work emphasises the tools that can be employed to develop, support and solidify collective identities. With particular relevance to Momentum, the use of narrative was often used to reinforce collective identity as socialist, as well as the narratives around the history and nature of Labour as a left-wing party, which underpinned the righteous attitude adopted by many in relation to increasing left-wing influence within the Party. Additionally, Kiecolt (2000, p.123) calls attention to the importance of texts, both in the role of codifying common narratives and acting as a vehicle to 'create and reaffirm' collective identities. For Momentum activists, many sources performed this function, ranging for instance from Owen Jones, Hilary Wainwright, Naomi Klein and other contemporary left-wing authors, to left-wing news outlets like Novara Media, or even existing social media networks amongst members. The use of these texts to sustain Momentum's collective identity may also be connected to the existence of activist bubbles. Kiecolt's processes of identity establishment and reaffirmation link to Snow and McAdam's work (2000, p.49), whereby once an individual joined Momentum, there was often a degree of 'identity amplification' during which the salient elements of identity, such as being internationalist, left-wing or activist, were entrenched and even enhanced over time.

Huddy (2001, p.127) presents arguments both for and against the applicability of identity theory to politics, emphasising a desire for identity theory to provide a greater impact on 'the quantitative study of political behaviour in general.' Oakes (2002) rightly argues that there has been significant application of social identity theory to areas that could be seen to have connections to politics. However, Huddy's (2002) refinement of her observations to emphasise the explicit application of identity theory to the field of political studies also appears to carry weight. Overall, although this project has maintained primary focus on social movement theory, the research projects I have encountered in the field of political studies seem to display a general tendency for political science research to be focused on theory (e.g. Rye, 2014) or analysis of quantitative data (e.g. Huddy, 2001; Clark and Lipset, 2011; Greene; 2004), as opposed to qualitative or experimental research. In turn, I can see a connection between this tendency and the highly quantitative nature of democratic elections and campaign strategy. This contrasts with the more qualitative approaches that appear to often be employed within the field of social movements (e.g. Kiecolt, 2000; McAdam, 2003). Although the use of quantitative social research in the field of politics appears to remain dominant, there has been some development of more qualitative approaches, including the use of ethnography in political studies (e.g. Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017; Tilly, 2006; Wedeen, 2010). Although research into identity theory can of course be both more quantitative and theoretical (e.g. Tajfel and Turner, 1979), arguably reflecting the more medical nature of the field of psychology as compared to sociology, there is space to expand the application of these theories to politics through qualitative research with individuals, complementing and enriching the emerging subject of political ethnography. This project could underpin further theoretical and empirical research in relation to identity theory that has the potential to materially add to academic understanding of political and social activism, as well as voter behaviour as expounded upon below.

10.2.4 Voters, Momentum and Identity

As presented throughout the thesis, I found particular interest in the disconnect experienced by Momentum members around conceptions of class, especially impacting on interactions with socially conservative, working class voters, and social identity theory offers some potentially useful theoretical tools for examining this. In particular, Scheepers and Ellemers (2019, p.131) use the example of football fans to illustrate Tajfel and Turner's theories around social identity: you can be a supporter of one team ('in-group'), supporter of a different team (various rival 'out-groups') or,

alternatively, someone disinterested in football who does not follow any team ('outsider'). This third category is often irrelevant in relation to the study of in-group and out-group identities, and indeed there may be little motivation for in-group or out-group members to engage with outsider groups in most contexts; in the above scenario for example, football fans rarely conduct recruitment drives aimed at non-supporters. Whilst acknowledging the well-established and respected position Tajfel and Turner's concepts enjoy within the field, I suggest that linguistically 'out-group' and 'outsider' are very similar in nature and can therefore be easily confused. In general, this does not seem to have posed theorists significant trouble as most seem to focus primarily on in-group/out-group relations, with few devoting time to studying and discussing interactions with outsider groups. However, as my discussions revolve around precisely that, I will utilise the term 'no-group' to avoid any potential confusion, with this being understood as conceptually identical to Tajfel and Turner's 'outsider' group. The following discussion presents some of my initial thoughts on the relevance of Tajfel and Turner's social identity model to Momentum's relationship with the UK electorate.

Most research on identity and social movements seem to focus on identity as a generally positive force in terms of movement recruitment and activism, and under standard circumstances, members of in-groups and out-groups may not necessarily be affected by the attitudes of no-group members. However, with only an estimated 1.7% of the UK electorate holding membership of any political party (Burton and Tunnicliffe, 2022; Office of National Statistics, 2021), the voting public is overall predominantly made up of no-group members in relation to Momentum and the Labour Party. Yet, engagement with this large body of no-group members during election campaigning is central to both in-group and out-group activities within the party-political context. Therefore, social identity potentially becomes a force influencing why and to what extent individuals identify with a particular group, and whether and how this impacts on voting behaviour. For instance, individuals may be supportive of the aims of a party without identifying with it strongly enough to join, for example as expressed by voting for Labour without becoming a member. In this context, like in the case of social movements, it could be that whilst creating an excessively strong and exclusionary identity is a potentially powerful tool in recruiting and retaining dedicated activists (Snow and McAdam, 2000), at the same time it could foster varying degrees of animosity amongst sections of no-group members (potential voters) for whom identity salience is low. Regardless of the intrinsic merit of aspirations, or indeed the relative dedication and enthusiasm of

even a large supporter base, if enough of the public struggles to align with their social identity this would arguably present a barrier to attaining a critical mass of sympathetic support. In Momentum's case, being a political organisation, their lack of success was demonstrated starkly in the GE2019 losses; different to true social movements, support for Corbyn, and Momentum by extension, was officially measured using the electoral system, providing tangible evidence of public dislike.

Social identity theory can also be applied to construct potential suggestions regarding why large sections of the working class in particular withheld support for the Labour Party in GE2019. Advocacy of working class interests is enshrined in Momentum's goals, and many activists seemed inclined to include 'working class' as part of their own social and collective identity. However, as discussed, different and sometimes incompatible understandings of 'working class' can be found, resulting in difficulties in connecting with members of this theoretical subgroup of the electorate. Conceptual disagreements between activists and certain voters over what it means to be working class could have had significant impact on the relative identity salience between those voters and Momentum, and by extension the Labour Party: difficulty arose when many voters perceived a vast chasm between their own identities and those of the activists during campaigning and canvassing (e.g. as recounted by Alex and Ben).

Finally, voting for a particular politician or political party arguably requires a much lower level of commitment than is necessary to become a member of a movement or organisation. Attitudes from some Momentum activists implied an attitude akin to *recruiting* or *converting* voters to the Corbyn and Momentum 'Project' (Pogrund and Maguire, 2020; fieldnotes, 18 March, 2018), which reflects a historical assumption that 'the act of voting was seen [...] as an expression of identity and commitment' (Mair, 2013). However, as we have seen, many habitual Labour voters chose to support Conservative candidates in GE2019 (e.g. Payne, 2022); therefore, this quasi-religious identification with some, and aversion to other, political parties may no longer be as important in informing voting behaviour. Voters do not need to be activists, so perhaps a lower level of commitment or subscription needs to be achieved, lower even than that of the 'supporter' category that Momentum utilised. Arguably, voter commitment need only start with a short walk to the polling station and end with a tick in the party's box on election day, involving less loyalty and ongoing engagement than even signing up to an email list. In this way, examination of Momentum activists' experiences potentially provides a different perspective than

that commonly adopted by theorists in the application of identity theory to the field of politics (e.g. Huddy, 2001), through adapting identity theory explanations around movement activist recruitment to the lower commitment threshold required to convince voters to support a particular politician or party. Theoretical development of these ideas are intended to form a key part of my short-term future research, to be connected to concerns over the ongoing democratic deficit and lack of political engagement amongst large sections of the electorate (Mair, 2013).

10.3 Limitations to the Research

Although embarked upon without preconceived notions regarding the nature of knowledge to be developed through this project, there are certain notable limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, with the heavy focus on social media and online organising, my decision not to engage with this meant that a significant amount of potentially illuminating data has not been actively considered in the analysis within this thesis. However, alongside the personal reasons for exclusion outlined in Chapter 3, considering the vast amounts of data that this research generated I believe that this decision was justified as detailed consideration of social media content would have made the project unmanageable. Additionally, the other main limitation relates to my decision not to become a full member of Labour and Momentum during the project. This resulted in my not being privy to local meetings, member-only communications and local organising via social media. It is acknowledged that this represents significant aspects of the experiences of grassroots Momentum members, although had I sought full membership of Momentum this would have correspondingly excluded me from experiences based on the lower commitment level of 'supporter'. In this way, it could be argued that this choice represents a legitimate research decision rather than a limitation as such. Overall, I believe the large amount of rich data and analysis generated by this project more than compensates for the above design limitations, and that the existence of these limitations may also serve the benefit of supporting the great number of potential future projects and space for additional research, as presented in the next section.

Another, less technical, limitation to the project arises from the risk for personal bias in my analysis and discussion. As presented at various points in this thesis, I have employed a number of tactics as faithfully as I have been able to account for this, including triangulating my findings with observations and opinions from participant contributions, as well as opinions and observations offered by Momentum-

connected authors and prominent Momentum members, such as Bassett Yerrell (2020), Chessum (2022), Murray (2022) and Schneider (2020), to name just a few. Furthermore, much of the content under discussion within this research is political in nature, and therefore also inherently subjective. No doubt there will be individuals who take different views, and it would enrich the academic discussion of Momentum to engage in ongoing debate and discourse. Above all, I have sought to increase the understanding of others through this project, and I am confident that my presentation and analysis of the data has served this purpose.

10.4 Future Research Trajectories

As an exploratory ethnography, a large number of future avenues for research arising from this project have been identified throughout the preceding chapters; as indicated in the introduction, these are collated here. Overall, some projects have emerged as primary interest for future work:

- In the short-term, I intend to prepare a journal article examining Momentum's activity under Keir Starmer's leadership of the Labour Party.
- I would welcome an opportunity to engage in greater theoretical development of the hypotheses I have constructed in relation to in-group/out-group/no-group interactions with the electorate in a democratic context as outlined above.
- Of equal interest is a further ethnographic investigation to build on this project, focused on a left-wing organisation, and other similar projects focused on right-wing groups such as Sibley (2023), through research with non-voters. Such a project would aim to explore the reasons why individuals disengage from democracy, or the democratic process of elections, and potential comparisons/contrasts with the reasons others become increasingly politicised, as well as contribute additional empirical data in support of my theoretical consideration of in-group/no-group relations.
- I also intend to construct a more complete discussion of the role of class identity in Momentum's interactions and reputation with the electorate, extending on the analysis in this thesis and links to Rousseau's (1968) social contract.

In addition, many other potential topics and research questions have been identified through the course of this project; this extensive list is likely not to be exhaustive:

- a discourse analysis of Momentum emails and comparisons to Labour communications;
- an examination of the veracity of Momentum members' conceptions of the Labour Party and its history;
- research into other local Momentum campaigns regarding councillor reselection to provide a comparison with this project's data;
- a more detailed examination and analysis of persuasive canvassing, particularly in comparison to sales techniques;
- an analysis of Owen Jones's role in Momentum, as well as other celebrity figures;
- a deeper exploration of Momentum's role in increasing youth activism rather than young voter turnout;
- an investigation into local use of social media by Momentum branches, including how Liverpool compared to other local branches;
- a more quantitative analysis of Momentum's use of Facebook and Twitter during GE2019;
- a more complete examination of American influences and consumer culture within Momentum;
- is it possible to build a 'true' social movement in Western capitalist, corporate culture?;
- are comparisons between Momentum and Militant fair?;
- a discourse analysis around the conflation of terms and understanding of concepts, for example 'social movement' versus 'community organising', 'working class' versus 'trade union' or 'socialist' versus 'left-wing';
- a discourse analysis of the concept of 'Corbynism', for example an extension on my observations around authors' personification of the term;
- analysis of the wider applicability of Miliband's predictions for the future of class struggle in Britain as outlined in *Divided Societies* (1989);
- in-depth application of other sociological theories and authors to the data, such as Boudieu, Alinksy, Adorno and Freire;
- a philosophical, discourse-based examination of the distinction between *building* and *growing* a movement; and
- comparisons between culture and member background in different local Momentum branches.

Although Corbyn's Momentum represents a relatively short period in British political history, the breadth of possible future research projects suggests great potential for

significant further output and contribution to academic literature arising from this project.

10.5 Concluding Remarks and Reflections

In calling itself a 'movement', Momentum created a 'change agent' narrative. However, it operated entirely within an established system, even if it drew energy, resources and membership from groups and individuals who professed to be anti-establishment. Leaders and those with power in the organisation (e.g. Corbyn and Lansman) drew Momentum members closer and closer into the Labour Party, and used rhetoric to build a strong collective identity and encourage activists to continue expending their time and energy to support the Party as well as the wider left-wing faction. Unfortunately, however, Momentum has so far been less effective in relation to the pursuit of political and economic change that many, if not all, of its grassroots members desired. Many of the more radical change agent members appear to have left Momentum (e.g. Chessum), and many others have been co-opted into Labour through entrenchment in factional conflict and elected or paid positions. It could be that Momentum never truly had the potential for systemic change that many believed it did; ironically, it has arguably served as a pressure-release to diffuse left-wing anger and frustration with the system whilst at the same time allowing left-wing Labour activists to benefit from the time and energy of the activists in pursuit of their own interests, which are sited in the historical context of the factional struggle for power in the party (Gilbert, 2021). In this sense, it could be that the only 'winners' are the system itself through a diffusion of political dissent, and those who have been personally benefited through the reward of roles or careers within the Labour Party, Momentum or other organisations. Interview participants who were cognisant of the dissonances discussed in this thesis or rejected co-option appear to have left the organisation post-GE2019.

Furthermore, the cultural and class identity that was inherent in Momentum's membership base and organisational reputation may have actively sabotaged the potential to connect with large and politically significant sections of the electorate. It seems that, in the current societal context in Britain, for a socialist or anti-capitalist movement to aspire to tangible systemic change, it is important to recognise and counteract cultural cleavages within identity politics through active management at its inception in order to maximise the chances of building truly large-scale networks of allies from across society. Furthermore, any formal affiliation with players that already hold significant power in the system should be viewed with extreme

suspicion; as Ferguson (2017) observed in the case of Militant, entryism can have the effect of watering down a movement's revolutionary character. However, in a wider sense, any attempts to increase the politicisation of voters must take into account that some will inevitably hold diverging ideological beliefs, and therefore the benefit to any particular party will be mixed. Furthermore, low voter turnout arguably benefits the larger UK parties as this inevitably sets the bar lower in the first-past-the-post electoral system. Therefore, I argue that the pursuit of genuine interest in reversing the democratic deficit is best conducted in a non-party-political context.

In terms of my own journey, as may be evident from my critique of Momentum throughout this paper, participants and other members have so far been unsuccessful in recruiting me to either Labour or Momentum. Additionally, the case study of Momentum has also unfortunately failed to restore my faith in modern left-wing activism, and I experience added despair in observing such clear trends of Americanisation amongst certain left-wing activist networks. In coming to these conclusions, I am beginning to develop my own identity as a researcher that seeks to emulate Bourdieu's

> 'anti-political politics' model where [...] the intellectual [does] not assume an administrative position within government or function as a kind of 'counselor to the prince' or to any political party, but is a permanent anti-establishment critic of the establishment, whether it is left or right, against injustice (Swartz, 2010, p.56).

Approaching my future research in this way also potentially lends itself to exploring Freirean approaches to community development (Freire, 1993; Jewell, 2016) that attempt to bypass power structures and work directly and collaboratively with those who experience societal injustice, particularly members of groups who have been let down and abandoned by left-wing politics and activism. This project, I hope, will provide the foundation for developing an academic career that contributes meaningfully to an ongoing struggle against societal injustice, free from the constraint of party loyalty or specific political ideology.

Appendix: Summary of the Data

A.1 Interviews and Participant Biographies

Table 8: Interviews

Date	Pseudonym	Notes/Records
17 Aug 2018	Dan	Audio plus transcription
8 Sept 2018	Robert	Audio plus transcription
29 Dec 2018	Alex	Audio plus transcription
29 Dec 2018	Ben	Audio plus transcription
4 Jan 2019	Mark	Audio plus transcription
8 Apr 2019	Padraig	Audio plus transcription
23 Jun 2019	Olivia	Audio plus transcription
13 Jul 2019	Simon	Audio plus transcription
9 Aug 2019	Grace	Audio plus transcription
11 Sept 2019	Catherine	Handwritten contemporaneous notes
26 Sept 2019	Tom	Handwritten contemporaneous notes
1 Oct 2019	Emma	Email response to interview questions

Dan left Labour in 2003 over the Iraq War, but rejoined the Party in 2015 when Corbyn took over as Leader. He became extremely active in his local CLP, but never had "*the time to be a member*" of Momentum despite feeling that the organisation's, and Corbyn's, ethos and policy had considerable overlap with his personal political convictions. He remained active throughout the duration of data gathering, and post-GE2019.

Robert left Labour during "*the Blair 'desert years*'" along with other left-wing activists in his local area. He rejoined the Party "*when Corbyn was showing promise*" and joined Momentum very early on as well, with active involvement in his local Momentum and CLP branches. However, from as early as 2017 he began to lose faith in Momentum's and Corbyn's lack of progress in transforming the Labour Party, and although he remained a local officer within his Momentum branch, the importance of activism within both Labour and Momentum became much less than activities undertaken within the wider left wing political network on local issues in his area. Robert left the Labour Party when Starmer became Leader.

Alex was involved in his local Labour Party historically, but this lapsed during a period of time living away from the area. He was interested in Corbyn's politics and so when he moved back, he recommenced activism in the Labour Party, just before GE2017. However, his Momentum membership was linked more to friendship networks rather than his own interest, and he expressed more scepticism both relating to Corbyn and Momentum compared to most other participants. Alex remained active in his local CLP and Momentum up to and during GE2019, but let membership of both lapse in summer 2020.

Ben joined the Party following GE2015, initially to vote for Chukka Ummuna in the leadership election, but became inspired by Corbyn after hearing one of his first public interviews and subsequently participated in many *Jeremy for Leader* activities during the campaign. He went on to be very active, primarily within Momentum and with digital campaigning. He held a position in his local Momentum group, but lost motivation following the devastating defeat in GE2019 and let membership of both Momentum and Labour lapse in spring 2020.

Mark had many years' service as a local Labour councillor prior to joining Momentum, and joined mainly as an expression of his generally leftist political views, with activity continuing to be primarily related to the Labour Party itself and his elected position. Mark remained a councillor and his activity remained the same following GE2019.

Padraig joined Labour during Corbyn's 2015 leadership campaign and was involved with initial phonebanking and other *Jeremy for Leader* activities before Momentum was officially established. However, he eventually became frustrated with internal conflict within his local Momentum branch. By early 2019 he was concentrating most of his activism within the TU movement and the Labour Party itself, holding various positions within both.

Olivia had a history of activism and took part in many early leadership campaign activities and the formation of her local Momentum branch. In addition to being active in her local Momentum group, she received significant support and guidance from Momentum to replace a sitting councillor as Labour candidate in 2019 after Momentum members initiated a vote in their local CLP to begin a reselection process. Olivia was still serving her first term as councillor when data collection

finished, and has been quickly elevated to senior positions within her local Labour Group.

Simon was 15 years old when he joined Labour following Corybn's election as Leader, and joined Momentum a few months later as it was coming to more prominence within the party. He held a position in his local Momentum group as well as other Labour Party positions, but became disillusioned with factionalism within the party as well as internal politics within Momentum itself. He ceased activism within Momentum in 2017 and reduced his Labour Party activity as well from early 2019 in order to concentrate on education.

Grace was invited to join one of the first phonebanking events in London during Corbyn's 2015 leadership campaign, and her activism within Labour and Momentum grew quickly and dramatically. She held a position in her local Momentum group and was involved with some national Momentum events, including the Members' Council in 2017, before receiving support from Momentum to become selected as a candidate for Labour in the 2018 local elections. Grace was still serving her first term as councillor when data collection finished. She was put forward to be a Parliamentary candidate for GE2019, but was not selected.

Catherine had been active in the TU movement and joined Corbyn's initial campaign for Labour Leader very early on. She was influential from the start in helping establish her local Momentum group. She went on to become involved in many activities linked with Momentum's National Office as well as her local branch, and was also supported by Momentum to become selected as a Labour candidate in the 2019 local elections. Catherine was still serving her first term as councillor when data collection finished.

Tom had strong political convictions and a history of grassroots participation in Labour Party activism, particularly around General Election campaigning, years before the establishment of Momentum. However, he never joined Momentum; although considering himself left-wing politically and supportive of the general direction of party policy post-Corbyn, he expressed being put off by the factionalism associated with Momentum, especially in his local CLP, and an inability to "*warm*" to Corbyn as a politician and public figure. His general level of activism did not change significantly post-GE2019.

Emma joined Labour after Corbyn's election as Leader in 2015, but also benefited from practical information and resources from Momentum to become selected to run in the 2019 local elections as a Labour candidate. She identified Momentum as being her "*springboard*" into party political activism and regularly attended events put on by local branches. Emma was still serving her first term as councillor when data collection finished, and also subsequently pursued an ambition to become a Parliamentary candidate for Labour for GE2019, but was not selected. She resigned from the Labour Party in 2022 over policy differences.

A.2 Participant Observations

The following table provides a list of participant observations that took place during the course of this project.

Table 9: Participant Observations

Date	Event
18 Mar 2018	Political Education Event on 'Deep Canvassing' (local Momentum branch)
Sept 2018	The World Transformed, Liverpool (Sat and Sun, various events)
26 Jul 2019	Video Recording session "I'm voting for Corbyn because…" (local Momentum branch)
31 Aug 2019	Prorogation Protest Rally (Liverpool), participation encouraged via email by National Momentum
19 Oct 2019	Corbyn Rally (Grand Central Hotel, Liverpool)
30 Oct 2019	Momentum: Launch of election campaign with Momentum staff, other supporters and Jeremy Corbyn (short appearance) - Zoom call
1 Nov 2019	Momentum: Let's Go Group training with Momentum staff - Zoom call
6 Nov 2019	Momentum: Videos By the Many with Momentum staff and Ken Loach - Zoom call
13 Nov 2019	Labour: Strategy Call with John McDonnell and others - Zoom call
13 Nov 2019	Momentum: Online Teams Recruitment Call with Momentum staff - Zoom call
14-15 Nov 19	Volunteering with Momentum's online Research Team
15 Nov 2019	Momentum: Research Team Training with Momentum staff - Zoom call
24 Nov 2019	Momentum: Strategy Call with Laura Parker and Momentum staff - Zoom call
1 Dec 2019	Momentum: Strategy Call with Momentum staff and John McDonnell - Zoom call

4 Dec 2019	Labour: Strategy Call with Owen Jones, Mark Steel, John McDonnell, Angela Raynor - Zoom call
15 Dec 2019	Momentum: Post Election Conference Call with Momentum staff and John McDonnell - Zoom call
various during GE2019	Slack platform, research team activities, various internet tools for election campaign

A.3 Documentary Data

Emails

Table 10: Emails

From	Number	Description
Momentum (national)	276	Various emails received as a registered supporter including invites to conference calls, links to promotional videos and other material, statements and communication to members, etc.
Liverpool Momentum	26	From Liverpool Branch of Momentum mostly relating to information about local events.
Labour Party	113	Gathered for the purpose of comparison with Momentum email communication.
Slack (Momentum's online platform for GE2019 work)	Over 175	Various updates with posts to the Slack forums some from other volunteers and others from Momentum staff. I restricted notifications from Slack so as not to be overwhelmed and so did not receive the full number of possible notifications each day.
The World Transformed (TWT)	~50	Various emails from TWT around their organisation and events, which have very close links with Momentum as well as significant activist crossover.

Publications

Table 11: Momentum-related Publications

Title	Number	Description
The Organiser	9	Momentum's email newsletter to activists
The Clarion	18 issues	Momentum's online news site which published regular pdf issues for a period of time

Momentum NCG Minutes	12	Minutes from Momentum's National Coordinating Group meetings which are publically available from their website from the first meeting until the meeting in Jan 2020 (which included initial NCG reactions to GE2019). One set of minutes from March 2019 remains unavailable via Momentum's website and I have been unable to obtain a copy.
Various	~30	Various documents published as online webpages or pdf by Momentum nationally or local groups on topics such as general information about Momentum, election activity guidance, guides on Labour Party processes, strategy documents, etc.

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