

Briefing Paper 44

Opportunity and influence: the third sector and the 2010 general election

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This paper explores how the different voices and interests of the third sector, political parties and media have shaped and reflected the policy agenda over the course of the 2010 general election campaign and into the early post-election period. Using research methods which combined documentary analysis with qualitative interviews with key policy actors in the third sector, we examined the relative success of different campaigning methods in an election that was unique both in its uncertain electoral outcome and in terms of the relative consensus that political parties expressed at the outset towards the third sector.

The election campaign afforded an opportunity for the political profile of the third sector to be put to the test. Would politicians maintain, and even extend, the profile of the sector in their manifestos and campaigning? Would sector-based agencies be able to use the public forums of campaigning to promote their role and secure the support of the future government to a continued high profile for their work? Would the media and the election commentators see the third sector as a critical election issue? And finally, would the eventual election of the new government lead to any immediate response to the politics and campaigning of pre-election era? These are the questions that we set out to explore in this research project.

The consequence of the relative uncertainty of the election outcome for the third sector was significant. Questions over the future politics and policies for the third sector were potentially more open in the 2010 election than they had been for many years, and it is for this reason that the questions explored in this research will be of interest to policy makers and practitioners across government and the sector. The 'good news' for

the sector in this was that, in practice, all the major political parties did share a positive interpretation of its role in society, and indeed seemed keen to see this growing further in the future – despite political differences, there was consensus on broad support for the third sector.

In addition to documentary analysis of the election, key stakeholder interviews covered three main areas: the methods and techniques used by third sector organisations to campaign on a day-to-day basis; third sector organisations' (TSOs') planning process leading up to and beyond the general election, and how their campaigning changed (or did not) in relation to how the election unfolded; and reactions to new political alignments and anticipated changes in styles of working. These interviews took place between April and July 2010, and consequently picked up on different temporal reference points. Recap interviews were held with some earlier respondents to re-engage with their expectations in relation to the coalition government's agenda.

The full research report is therefore split into three parts:

- The build-up to the general election, a period which commenced with the sector's planning process up to a year beforehand, and which became characterised by the frenetic activity of the early months of 2010.
- Election season, the period from when the election was called, political campaigning began, and relationships between the sector and political parties were transformed by *purdah*, until election day (6th May).
- The post-election period, which began with a period of uncertainty and opened up a new set of political alignments, and with them a new set of opportunities for third sector campaigning

Key findings

Distinctions emerged in terms of TSOs' various **campaigning portfolios**: an extended timeline of political campaigning; campaigning focused on the official election period; opportunistic campaigning; and anti-electoral campaigning.

Political positioning was more difficult than in earlier elections because of the uncertain outcome and required the third sector to direct its attention to all three major parties in a quite unique way. In order to secure their place on the agenda, both politicians and third sector organisations commenced campaigning well in advance of the official confirmation of the election, somewhat blurring the boundaries between election and standard parliamentary activity. Most TSOs operated between the extremes of working in partnership with government and as a catalyst, prioritising and maintaining a critical distance from political representatives.

There was a need to **develop relationships and understanding** in advance of the election. This involved developing quotable relationships (for the purposes of website materials) with third sector spokespeople in the three main parties, as well as identifying key policy makers and ideologues. As part of their pre-election work, a number of third sector organisations published on-line interviews with political representatives, drawing attention to nuances of policy difference for their members.

In the six months' preceding the May election, key players in the **third sector organised a number of summits, conferences and meetings**, in which to build capacity and ensure that their policy aspirations fed into the political parties' planning processes. These included breakfast seminars, parliamentary receptions, and, notably, ACEVO's summits with the three main parties – which, at the parties' own preference, were markedly different in format (the Conservative summit being the largest).

Party conferences also provided an opportunity for the sector to oil the wheels of communication between themselves and the political parties, publicise the content of their manifestos, and stage their own fringe events. Back in September 2009, *Third Sector Online* reported that the sector was regarding the 2010 party conferences more than ever as a critical opportunity for lobbying, and one in which they would be pursuing more targeted personal meetings with Ministers and their Shadows in order to ensure that their

manifesto requests were understood and appreciated.

Purdah and campaigning guidance was seen by some as having an inhibiting effect on dialogue, with the sector concentrated on '*behind the scenes*' as opposed to '*headline grabbing*' campaigning, opening up an area of potential missed opportunity in terms of agenda-shaping. Cautious campaigning during the election was also seen as a reaction to the likelihood of a change in government and reflecting on the Conservatives' lesser sympathy towards third sector. Thus TSOs' campaigning sometimes involved anticipatory self-censorship in order to protect their longer-term interests should a change in power materialise.

Some organisations placed greater focus than others on the **anticipated media scrutiny** of the election to ensure that their policy priorities made it onto the agenda (notably this was a rather different priority from making it into party manifestos). An effective strategy in employing this kind of technique was to target party leaders and then wait for critical mass to filter down. To some extent, the character of organisations was critical in how campaigning worked best.

The production of an **election manifesto** has become fairly standard practice in the sector, and represents the more formalised and measurable end of organisations' campaigning. The majority of TSOs and umbrella agencies published these in the months preceding the election period, leaving some time to ensure that they received maximum publicity. We looked at 13 third sector manifestos published during this time of heightened activity, which varied dramatically in style and content; these represented TSOs' formal setting out of their stalls for the election.

Often infrastructure organisations' best chance of influencing the agenda was to offer a perspective on stories featured during the campaign. Making themselves **available for comment** on politicians' statements and topical issues was another tactic. By contrast, issue-based charities tended to focus more on local press which, covering the work of campaigning MPs in their constituencies, was particularly open to service-orientated stories demonstrating the sector's work.

Responding to the publication of the political parties' manifestos provided another opportunity to contribute to the agenda as it was being formed and several organisations published reactions and summaries on their websites, examining their

relevance to the sector, which were sometimes picked up in the press.

Not all organisations working in the third sector were engaged in election campaigning. One community-orientated organisation we spoke to **actively rejected the idea that they needed to engage with political representatives** around the general election in order to have an influence on the broader policy process. They took a critical stance to formal political structures and refused to engage with political parties prior to the election, and indeed felt that it was the least helpful and most artificial time to be doing this.

One substantive surprise addition to the 2010 electoral debate was the rise of the **community agenda** and the Citizens UK 'fourth debate', which had a late influence on the flavour of discussion. This was unexpected in that despite painstakingly building up relationships in, and links with, a range of communities over twenty years, nationally Citizens UK were not regarded as part of the mainstream third sector (and nor would they define themselves in these terms) and indeed were stylistically quite unusual. The Citizens UK debate was interesting in that, if the initial post-election period is more broadly indicative, it appears to have at least partly driven the community organising agenda onto the mainstream. Community engagement represented a dimension of sectoral debate which had been little anticipated and whose complexity makes it difficult to push forward within a traditional policy framework.

The party manifestos

The party manifestos were important to third sector organisations not only in order to gauge their post-election positioning, but also in terms of providing a concrete measurement of how successful their pre-election campaigning had been. While manifestos did not represent a policy commitment, but a direction of parties' thinking, their content and the way in which it was presented offered a useful indication of how effectively TSOs had been able to make the case for their interests.

The first to be published, on 12th April, was the **Labour Party's manifesto**, *A future fair for all*, with a distinctive language contained within the document that included 'fair', 'active reforming government', 'level playing field' and 'strengthening'. The Labour Party manifesto arguably displayed the most integrated approach to the sector, in that third sector issues were

related to most aspects of policy and were hence discussed throughout the document. Reflecting the then government's policy of using the term 'third sector' to promote inclusivity, that discourse was employed exclusively in the Labour manifesto, although more broadly the manifesto employed a fairly mixed discourse, talking about 'third sector organisations', 'voluntary sector organisations', 'social enterprise', 'civil life and pride', 'voluntary and community sector', and 'civil society'. Notably, no use was made of the term 'charity/charitable sector'. Of the three manifestos studied, the Labour Party's integration of the third sector into its manifesto was the most thorough-going.

A day later the **Conservative Party** published its *Invitation to join the government of Britain*, characterised by language such as, 'new kind of government', 'Big Society', 'civic society' and 'responsibility'. They framed the sector in terms of a vehicle for individual responsibility and change. Their election manifesto's coverage of third sector issues was unsurprisingly dominated by their heavily-trailed Big Society agenda, on which they had consulted with a number of key third sector organisations. Rather than 'third sector', they used a discourse of 'voluntary sector providers', 'Big Society' (repeatedly used in contrast to 'broken society' and 'big government'), 'civil society', 'civic society', 'civic responsibility', 'voluntary (and community) sector', and 'community organisers/sector/ participation'. There were few references to sectoral issues outside of a focal 'Change Society' chapter, and this approach may be telling in light of the later presentational issues the Party experienced relating the Big Society concept to the electorate.

Finally, on the 14th April, the **Liberal Democrats** published their straightforwardly-titled *Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2010*. It drew upon discourse such as 'hope', 'credibility' and 'fairness'. Crucially it included recognition of the sector's valued independence and emphasised the importance of maintaining its campaigning role. The Liberal-Democrats, perhaps surprisingly, placed less emphasis on the sector in their manifesto than the other two parties, and more on broader societal 'fairness' and 'openness'. They defined the government's relationship to the sector in terms of fairness and ensuring the provision of appropriate support. The Liberal-Democrat manifesto was distinctive in making most sparse mention of third sector issues of the three main parties, whichever terminology was employed to locate them. What coverage it

provided was contained within its jobs, family and community chapters, and discussed in terms of 'voluntary providers', 'voluntary sector' and 'social enterprise'. Notably, the manifesto made no reference to the terms 'third sector', 'civil/civic sector' or 'community sector'.

The third sector then, enjoyed an unprecedented presence in the political parties' manifestos in 2010. Notably, all three parties made routine and positive references to **social enterprise**, not only in relation to third sector policy but in multiple contexts, a stark contrast to 2005 when it was mentioned in just one party's manifesto. The linguistic differences uncovered by a more detailed reading of the parties' manifestos, however, reveal significant political nuances in the meaning and value attached to the sector.

The apparently broad consensus on the importance of the sector masked key differences in how its role was viewed, with the Labour Party regarding it in terms of partnership, campaigning, service delivery and policy influence, compared to a Conservative emphasis on localism, social action and smaller government.

A number of themes came together to tell the story of the 2010 general election: the Big Society, managing the deficit, constitutional matters, a reorientation of the agenda and stylistic issues. These had a number of implications for the third sector, and the media played an important role in how these were presented in terms of the political mainstream. The Conservative's Big Society agenda lost momentum during the election, and the Citizens UK 'fourth debate' prompted an unexpected late surge of media interest in the sector.

Post election

Following the result of a hung parliament, the political uncertainty of the electoral period continued until the eventual emergence of the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition government. Of particular note to the third sector was the loss of the former Minister for the Third Sector's (Angela Smith) seat amid redrawn boundaries, but also the extended period during which it was unclear whether the Office of the

Third Sector would survive. The newly rebranded Office for Civil Society was announced but the attached Minister's role was changed to Parliamentary Secretary, compared to his predecessor who had been a Minister of State, although it is not yet clear if this reflects a deprioritisation of the department or the move is part of broader government rationalisations. The process was undoubtedly unsettling for the sector and was somewhat counter intuitive following the priority given to the sector in the Conservative manifesto.

Almost immediately, David Cameron chaired a Big Society meeting in the Cabinet Office, re-launching the programme with a selected group of community leaders that sparked much discussion about how pre-existing TSOs and umbrella agencies would fare under Big Society politics.

Although the post-election period is likely to involve significant settling-in for both government and sector, there is already much that can be construed about the success of the sector's campaigning, and organisations have experienced mixed fortunes in terms of making it into parties' manifestos, attracting media coverage, and establishing working relationships with the coalition government. If a general election can be considered to have winners and losers among the sector, then social enterprise, the community sector, and organisations allied or influential to the new coalition government, such as the Big Society Network and the think tank ResPublica, have emerged in a positive light. By contrast, early policy developments have made infrastructure organisations particularly nervous about their future, and spending cuts look set to hit larger, more contract-dependent organisations the hardest.

The sector are now in the somewhat unprecedented position of having had a good campaign but, being apprehensive about what happens next, remain unclear on which parts of the sector will enjoy greater favour under the coalition government. The adaptability of their campaigning techniques and skills in forging working alliances are likely to be called upon now more than ever as they negotiate this new and potentially leaner political territory.

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