

# UK: Momentum. Taking electoral politics seriously

Momentum Activists Are Trying to Make Jeremy Corbyn Prime Minister

Friday 22 November 2019, by [REES Emma](#) (Date first published: 13 November 2019).

**The grassroots group Momentum was an instrumental campaigning force for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party during the 2017 election. Now the group is bigger and stronger, and preparing for victory next month.**

[Momentum](#) has always been a grassroots organization. Formed in 2015 with a mandate to protect a [Jeremy Corbyn](#) leadership from a parliamentary party eager to depose him, the group has always [represented](#) the left of the Labour Party membership base, and [agitated](#) for more democracy within the party.

A core Momentum strength is its volunteer-run canvassing drives, and in the 2017 general election, Momentum helped send out activists to marginal seats all over the country. That year, Corbyn increased Labour's vote share more than any of the party's leaders since 1945 — destroying [Theresa May's](#) majority in the process.

Now, with another general election [around the corner](#), Momentum is spearheading the campaign to send volunteers to doorsteps across the country. To learn more about the organization's campaign strategy, Alex Doherty of the *Tribune* podcast, [Politics Theory Other](#), spoke to Momentum co-founder Emma Rees. In the summer of 2015, Emma volunteered with Jeremy Corbyn's leadership campaign during her summer break as a primary-school teacher. Just four weeks after his victory, she became one of the three staff members who helped to establish and build Momentum from the ground up, to a volunteer-driven, membership organization of over 42,000 paying members. Rees continues to support Momentum, and now also works for [The Social Practice](#), alongside veterans from the Bernie Sanders 2016 campaign.

## **AD | What are the key points of Momentum's plan to win the general election?**

**ER |** Momentum's strategy hangs on three key pillars: people power, the targeting of marginal seats, and the idea of getting everybody to step up.

It's been said before and it'll be said again: the Conservatives are the party with the money and the media on their side. What they lack and what we have in abundance is a movement. Literally tens of thousands of people are willing to give up their time to go out and carry the message of what a radical Labour government can do to transform society. So we really need to harness that people power and that energy — and that's a core part of our theory of change.

In terms of targeting marginal seats, we saw that in 2017, this method helped us flip a lot of seats, and we had some very unexpected victories. We know we're living in politically volatile times, so there's less certainty than there once was in regard to who will win these seats. Last time, there were eleven constituencies that were won by fewer than a hundred votes, so this year we're being

very targeted in our campaigning.

To that end we've recently launched a new app called My Campaign Map, which is like My Nearest Marginal on steroids. Whereas the 2017 version informed people of their nearest marginal seat so they could go out canvassing there, this new app is much smarter. It's more data-driven, and it will be using a number of different metrics to continually update activists about where they can make the biggest impact when campaigns are taking place there. We're now able to prioritize seats that need more attention, and encourage more people to get out and campaign; this should mean we'll have a more even spread of activists in marginal seats across the country.

"Stepping up" refers to Momentum's volunteer-run "distributed organizing" model, which draws on the experience of a range of decentralized political campaigns, among them the Bernie Sanders campaign of 2016. Stepping up refers to the understanding that to bring about the sort of change we need — and winning this election is obviously a core part of that, but not the end point — we're going to require everybody on side. There's no way that a simple staffed campaign can pay enough people to actually get a team on the scale we need to win.

In that spirit, a recent initiative has been the launch of Labour Legends, which asks people to take a week or more off work or study, to campaign for Labour — ideally in the fortnight leading up to the election. We will then help to place people where they can make the biggest impact in that time. The idea is that a Labour victory isn't going to just happen for us. We need everybody to step up and make it happen.

**AD | A more traditional, centralized electoral campaign also depends heavily on volunteers. What's the key difference between this distributed organizing model that Momentum and Sanders campaigns draw upon, and that more hierarchical model?**

**ER |** I think it's best understood in terms of the staff to volunteer ratio. We know that in a traditional campaign, the staff are the people who know the strategy and organize the activities. While the volunteers still play a crucial role, they basically perform certain tasks — attending canvassing sessions, for example — that are directed by campaign staff.

This is inherently limiting, as the staff member has only so many hours in a day, and can only spend so much time onboarding new volunteers and training them up. I remember in the early days at Momentum, we would have an inbox full of people who were desperate to get involved and at that time there were three staff members. It didn't matter that we were working round the clock, we could only reply to so many people. Thinking back on it now, I cringe at how many emails went unanswered just because we didn't have the systems at that time to really utilize all of that energy and goodwill. There were so many people who wanted to get involved, who wanted to help, but were essentially locked out of doing so because we didn't have enough hours in the day to reply to emails and follow up.

With the distributed model, the core functions of the campaign are run by volunteers. This is what enables the campaign to grow to scale, so that now we're gaining enough momentum to have volunteers who perform in a very structured way. The key parts of the organization's operation, from fundraising to recruitment to disseminating information about canvassing sessions, are run by volunteers.

There is a small staff responsible for running the social media campaign, but they are supported by volunteers who are scouring the news for relevant clips. We've got members all across the country who volunteer to watch the news, dividing up between them various channels at various times of day, to be ready just in case there's something particularly good or bad (in the case of the

opposition) that needs to be clipped. They've been trained up to take the clip and upload it to a shared drive for the Momentum social media team to distribute through their channels.

**AD | We tend to think of electoral campaigns as a sort of cloak-and-dagger affair. I'm sure Momentum has internal documents that aren't seen by everybody, but it also seems that the organization has opted for transparency when it comes to its campaign strategy. How has Momentum weighed the benefits of openness and the drawback of our opponent knowing the strategy and tactics?**

**ER |** If we truly believe that people power and volunteers are going to be decisive in winning this election for Labour, then volunteers need to put in significant hours to go out canvassing and do all of the other work that needs to happen. That means they need to be empowered to understand the plan, because again it's at the core of the philosophy, of what we're trying to do. So, if we're asking people to give up hours and hours — to take time off work or use their holiday entitlement in some cases — to help get Labour elected, we also need to give those volunteers a clear understanding of what the plan is.

The more that people understand what it's going to take to win this election, the more they'll be willing to take the time to make it happen. This is the advantage of transparency, and we believe the approach far outweighs any tactical gains we may have made by being more guarded.

**AD | So you're not going to be treating volunteers as doorstep fodder?**

**ER |** No. Part of what we're doing is encouraging people who consider themselves as activists — like those who go out canvassing, or those who are looped in to some extent with the Labour Party — to start seeing themselves as organizers. It's no longer enough to be someone who just turns up canvassing; we need those people who turn up to also bring five friends, or ten friends — or to be in a WhatsApp group that starts off with maybe a few coworkers, and by the end of the campaign ends up with a hundred people.

We're encouraging people to set up "Let's Go" groups to collectively campaign within their networks — Let's Go Bristol, or Let's Go North London, or wherever. That's an initiative that won't be directed by the national office; if the national office were to try to direct them, they'd be reducing the potential that's already there.

**AD | One of the many contrasts between the election campaigns of the two major parties is that Labour has various centers from which they organize — there's the Momentum office, Labour HQ, the Leader of the Opposition's Office — which isn't the case for the Conservatives. Is working with these different organizing models ever problematic, or do you find you might be working at cross-purposes? Do the Tories have any advantage in having a perhaps tighter organization?**

**ER |** I hope not, is the short answer. There's something self-generating in the current campaign strategy. And there's momentum from the 2017 election as well, which itself had so many unintended consequences. But by taking the approach that we did then, and which we have built on now, we became much greater than the sum of our parts. There are so many poles of attraction within the Labour Party, and I see no reason why any of those things should be mutually exclusive.

One example of this is the community organizing unit, which is separate from Momentum and has been running for about a year and a half now. Their organizers have been doing deeper community work within particular key seats, and running their own very persuasive canvassing training there. This means that Momentum can focus on running its training sessions in big metropolitan areas,

where there's likely to be a higher percentage of activists, who aren't necessarily looped in with a community organizer. These people can then be encouraged to canvass in different marginal seats in their general area. So I see them as totally complementary approaches.

**AD | How does Momentum plan to deal with the issue of the variable density of Momentum members in different parts of the country? It may be a cliché, but there's a perception that Momentum is very strong in particular metropolitan areas — London, in particular, but also Bristol and Manchester — but not elsewhere. I was recently talking to Alex Niven who's a Momentum member in Newcastle, and he was saying that the group is relatively small, despite being in a working-class city that mostly votes Labour. Is there a strategy to get activists from elsewhere into those parts of the country, and is it problematic to parachute people into places rather than having those who really know those communities talking to locals?**

**ER |** Yes, that's a good point. I know that generally the northeast is the region with the lowest density of Momentum members, and this is unfortunate because it's a place where Labour has a lot of work to do. In an ideal world, campaigns would be as local as possible. You would have people from the community going out and speaking to their friends, coworkers, and neighbors.

That's something that we do want to encourage as much as possible, and of course the likelihood is that people will travel to marginal constituencies within their own regions. That would mean that even if people are canvassing in a different constituency, they'd still be in the same broader area, or within a regional identity. During this election campaign, it will be a balancing act. If loads of English people went to Scotland, for example, it might have the adverse effect ...

**AD | Yes, an invasion of Scotland is probably not going to help anyone ...**

**ER |** Exactly. Yet, at the same time, I also think that there are plenty of common concerns across the country — like the increase in food banks. There's often a characterization of London as the metropolitan elite, but obviously the city is also full of working-class people who are really struggling to get by, and have much more in common with working-class people in a postindustrial area of the east midlands, for example, than they do with a wealthy person living in their own London constituency.

So, while I do anticipate that a lot of campaigning will be happening regionally or locally, I also think that can be supplemented, or complemented, by some activists from metropolitan areas where there are lots of safe Labour seats, going out and canvassing in solidarity with people in other parts of the country.

Hundreds of people came out canvassing last weekend, just days after the election had been called — and I think that's really powerful. People might be concerned that this involves people who aren't from the local area, but at the same time, the solidarity of all those people generates an energy, an optimism, and a hype, which in turn create its own momentum. That's what we need to galvanize as much as possible during the early stages of the campaign, and I think that will see us through.

**AD | There's been a sense, and this has been perhaps overplayed in the liberal media, that over the last couple of years, with all that focus on [Brexit](#) and the tussle in parliament, Momentum's base had become demoralized, and that particularly younger, pro-remain voters had been let down by the leadership. On the other hand, looking at the local campaign launches so far, they seem to have been a lot bigger than those in 2017. Is that right? Where do you feel the campaign is at in general?**

**ER** | I really do feel like the last few days since the election was called have just been astonishing. The movement as a whole has responded so positively, once again showing how badly the pundits have miscalculated where the majority of people are at.

One very positive indicator has been around fundraising: Momentum had a target to raise £50,000 in the first two days of the campaign. That amount was met within a handful of hours. We had a general election strategy conference call on Wednesday, which 2,000 people joined — which I think is the biggest in UK history (Jeremy Corbyn joined the call). Of the 2,000 people on those calls, the vast majority of people then signed up to go out canvassing. So it's no wonder that we've seen these huge mobilizations over the weekend.

There's genuinely twice as many people out canvassing as there were in 2017. The idea that Labour activists have all become demoralized or let down on Brexit, or whatever: it's clearly just wishful thinking. It doesn't match the reality on the ground. And I think people do really know that there's a stock on trust in this election and it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity — you know you can tell your slogan is quite good when you feel yourself about to say it without even meaning to. I was about to say, “generational opportunity for real change!” — it's so cheesy. But, you know, we are in a “socialism or barbarism” moment, and I think that's really galvanizing people to get out there, and to give everything for the next five or six weeks.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Emma Rees is a co-founder of Momentum, and until recently served as its national coordinator.

## **ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER**

Alex Doherty is the host of *Politics Theory Other*.

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