Chapter 67
Online Election Campaigning:
Exploring Supply and Demand during the France 2012 Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

Studies of online campaigning tend to focus on the supply side: the way political parties communicate and campaign using the Internet. This chapter explores the online presences of the main candidates and their parties who stood in the 2012 French presidential election. The research focuses not only on the supply side but also explores demand, utilising data from the Mediapolis survey to ascertain what citizens search for online and in particular what citizens seeking help with their voter decisions seek online. The data shows that citizens are provided with a rich online experience during election campaigns. Information is presented in engaging ways and candidates attempt to mobilise their supporters and offer various opportunities to interact with the campaign and other Website visitors. Interaction is augmented in particular by the use of social networking sites. Citizens, however, appear to mostly go online to find detailed information on the policies and programmes of the candidates. There appears little call for engaging communication, interactive opportunities, or details on the personal lives or personalities of the candidates. The data may, therefore, suggest that information may need to be packaged for accessibility and presented in a way that allows voters to make up their own minds, rather than following the norms of corporate sales campaign Websites.

INTRODUCTION

A plethora of pseudo-scientific sociological, business or marketing texts offer the impression that the Internet has the capacity to revolutionise all aspects of modern life. The mundane behaviours relating to buying goods, how we communicate, how we build a social circle, and how we influence the world around us have been revolutionised (Baym, 2010; Press & Williams, 2010). The evolu-

tion of technological development which ushered in Web 2.0 platforms and tools, in particular, lead to talk of big conversations taking place at a global level; superseding national institutions as well as nations themselves. There is no doubt that the Internet has had a clear and tangible impact on the lives of many, though not all, who live in modern societies. However reality does not always live up to the hype. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, have become part of the toolkit of the strategic communicator. Social media facilitate a more immediate, more widely connected, communication environment that can be used for any purpose the individual desires. People can create first-hand accounts from within Syria, or amusing videos of cats; the audience equally can choose which they want to watch during their leisure time. What the various works on the potential and actual impact of the Internet tell us is that a lot of potential for change exists, but that both creators and audiences seem reluctant to explore this potential. The dichotomy between the potential and the actual is nowhere more clear than within the context of electoral politics and the extent the Internet will lead to a more participatory democratic culture.

This chapter focuses on one election contest: the French presidential election of 2012. We set the scene by outlining the potential that the Internet might play in terms of usage by political parties and candidates and the reality of the role played by online communication as shown by a range of research projects over the last decade or so. The data we go on to present is unique. We are able to describe and explain the way the Internet was used during the election contest, while also outlining how the French voters used the Internet. We thus provide a picture of the campaigns of the candidates and their supporting parties, judging the extent that it was both persuasive and participatory. To measure the demand on such a political content we provide data on the forms of online political engagement and on the characteristics of those who are most politically active online.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND ELECTIONS ONLINE

With the Internet becoming a publicly accessible medium emerged a range of optimistic accounts of the impact upon politics. The cyber-optimist position argued that existing hierarchies of power and influence would be flattened, any individual would have an equal share of voice independent of their status and politics would develop an inclusive and participatory character (Rheingold 1993; Negroponte 1995; Dertouzos 1997). The arguments surrounding the potential uses and impacts of the Internet are summarised well by Pippa Norris (2003: 24):

first wave advocates claimed that the Internet could provide new forms of horizontal and vertical communication, which had the capacity: (i) to broaden the range of pluralistic voices heard in the public sphere and (ii) to facilitate new forms of interactivity and deliberation, thereby (iii) widening the pool of political participants.

The majority of work focusing on the context of election campaigning has studied the impact of the Internet from an institutional perspective. The early works found little evidence that the Internet was having any impact beyond strengthening existing patterns of participation (Bimber 1998; Corrado 2000; Davis 1999; Davis & Owen 1998; Hill & Hughes 1998; Kamarck & Nye 1999). The evidence led Margolis and Resnick (2000) to articulate an enduring perspective of the Internet as perpetuating what they describe as 'politics as usual'. In rebutting the cyber optimist perspective they observe that "Far from remaking American politics, the development of cyberspace, and particularly of the WWW, seems more likely to reinforce the status quo" (Margolis & Resnick 2000: 54).

There is thus a perspective of standardization in web-based campaigning that has revolved largely around producing an online variant to the offline

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