

Chapter 59

Online Engagement and Impact: The Case of Greek Politicians during the Financial Crisis

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors studied how Greek politicians use their Internet presence and in particular social media to engage citizens, examining the perceived significance of establishing an online presence and the motivating and hindering factors for doing so. The authors also studied how online strategies are implemented and executed in three different periods, namely pre-elections, a crisis period (in the authors' case the Greek sovereign debt crisis) and a 'normal' period. To answer the authors' research questions the authors adapted a social media conceptual framework to online political presence. Data was collected via in-depth interviews with candidates of 5 different political parties taking part in the general elections of 2012. The authors' analysis suggests that although politicians are increasingly interested in engaging with citizens via online technologies, their efforts are not always focused on achieving measurable and tangible results. Politicians' online strategies need to be organised around the concepts of communication, engagement and influence and not around the electronic spaces where these take place, i.e. the objectives and the means need to be clearly distinguished and utilised. The authors discuss the implications of their findings from a theoretical and practical perspective, in the context of online political marketing and political participation and engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although political parties and their affiliated politicians may have often reacted slowly in grasping and adopting technological developments, they are gradually recognising the importance that online technologies have and the opportunities and challenges they may give rise to. An example of this can be seen in Barack Obama's presidential campaign and the way social media were utilised (Luck, Beaton, & Moffatt, 2010; Sevin, Kimball, & Khalil, 2011). Having a web site and organising a page on Facebook, which were considered an innovation just a few years ago, are now becoming an essential ingredient of any campaign, as they enable not only the promotion of the candidate, but also more active engagement with voters. Undertaken effectively, online campaigning can yield great returns. Undertaken poorly, it can backfire, creating irreversible damage to a candidate's profile. It is not unusual to come across web sites, blogs, Facebook pages and other online spaces created just for the sake of campaigning, signalling to visitors the lack of real interest in and understanding of such technologies by the candidates. Such late efforts would have a limited impact.

This work's main research objective is to study how politicians use their Internet presence (e.g. their web sites and social media) to engage with citizens during different circumstances. More specifically, the research questions it sets out to answer are firstly what is the perceived significance of establishing an online presence for politicians and what are the motivating and hindering factors for doing so, secondly what is the role of social media within the context of a politician's online presence, thirdly how do politicians form their online presence strategies and how do they plan and implement their engagement plans and finally, how are online technologies, and in particular social media, used during 'normal' circumstances, extreme circumstances (e.g. political and financial unrest) and while campaigning? The paper will

continue with a review of the relevant literature, before discussing the methodology adopted and the research process followed. It will then present the results and key findings, which will be discussed from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Using the Internet to Engage Citizens

Political marketing has grown as a discipline over the past two decades, attracting the interest of marketers, political scientists and communication experts (Yannas, 2005) (for an account of its emergence and development see Scammell, 1999; Shama, 1976). Wring (1997, p.653) suggests that political marketing is concerned with a "party's or candidate's use of opinion research and environmental analysis to produce and promote a competitive offering which will help realise organisational aims and satisfy groups of electors in exchange for their votes". In other words, it aims to identify what the voters want so a value proposition resulting in a favoured vote can be put forward. Maarek's (1995) agrees with the above statement, but goes a step further, explicitly referring to the use of online approaches. He defines it as "the use of online and offline advertising, marketing and promotion techniques to influence individual voters to cast their vote in favour of a specific political party or candidate" (Maarek, 1995, p.15). For O'Cass (1996) political marketing promotes and enables parties, candidates and voters to participate in a constructive dialogue for both specific and broader societal development and utilisation of social and economic goals. Finally, Hughes and Dann (2009, p.244) adapting the 2007 commercial marketing definition of the American Marketing Association defined political marketing as "a set of activities, processes or political institutions used by political organisations, candidates and individuals to create, communicate, deliver and

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