

# The Digitalization of the West European Party Systems

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## INTRODUCTION

American politics has been at the forefront of World Wide Web use. In the early 1990s political parties and candidates started to employ Web sites to spread their message. President Bill Clinton's second-term campaign for the 1996 election was the first time the Internet appeared as a pervasive presence in American Politics, and in which all presidential candidates had Web sites (Rash, 1997). After some time, European parties and politicians followed the lead. In this article, we intend to describe the emergence of Web sites of political parties in West European nations. Reaching out to the Web required allocating limited resources. What advantages did parties hope to reap by creating a Web site, and what disadvantages might they have encountered once the sites were in place? Ideally, a comprehensive analysis would include all political parties in every West European nation. Given the complications regarding collection of data from multiple nations, however, we focused on the parties which were represented in parliament. At the same time, not all nations are currently included in this assessment. The data set consists of information provided by country experts that kindly responded to an expert survey, which included categorizing their national parties by party family (ideologically).<sup>1</sup> To facilitate comparative analysis, we have organized the existing data into four chronological lists (tables) and two figures such as the level of Internet penetration in countries, as well as party family, size, and ideological characteristics:

1. "Complete Chronology" provides the data according to party Web site inauguration for all parties and all nations. The calendar year is divided into three-month quadrants. Is there a correlation between the spread of party Web sites in national party systems and the emergence and development of Internet connections within individual countries?
2. "Party Family Chronology" categorizes site emergence regardless of nationality by ideological divisions ranging from "Nationalist/extreme-right" to-

ward the left ending with "Other" (mainly regional parties). Did ideology influence parties' decisions to initiate Web sites?

3. "National Chronology" arranges Web site emergence by individual nation. Did party size (small, medium, or large) influence the Web site creation decision?
4. "National Initiator Chronology" lists only the first political party in each nation to initiate a Web site.

We also include figures that consolidate the data from the lists to portray potential patterns behind party Web emergence.

Our content analysis of the digitalization of Western European parties is limited only to their decisions and motivations for initiating a Web presence. We do not intend to systematically look at other facets of digital activity such as internal uses of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) by political parties for data management (archiving or membership lists) or communication (newslists).

## BACKGROUND

### Political Parties and the Web: Advantages and Disadvantages

The Internet, and particularly the Web sites, provides a number of advantages to political parties (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988; Jordan, 1999; King, 2002; Margolis, & Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2000; Selnow, 1998). First and foremost, the Web sites can rapidly provide seekers large amounts of information that can be updated without much difficulty, such as press releases, brochures, electoral programs, or even complete books. Moreover, this information can be presented through varied multimedia forms such as text, image (photographs, video), or sound (spoken word, music). A second advantage is the speed with which information transmission processes are running on the Internet, and the decentral-

ized way in which information can be retrieved. Visitors to a Web site can download abundant information regardless of their geographical distance from the server on which the site is based; in other words, Web sites have a global reach.

Both the demand and supply sides find the speed of the Internet profitable. Parties can update their sites quickly to inform supporters of latest official positions. The political messages can be directed toward a broad public (broadcasting) or oriented toward certain target groups, such as party members, youth, or female voters (narrowcasting). Another advantage is that parties can highlight positions in a “controlled” fashion, without the intermediary roles of selective and interpretive journalists from newspapers, radio, and television—which leads to a new form of political communication (“unmediated politics”)—that is neither filtered by, nor dependent upon, the traditional media. In addition, parties can use their sites to attract new members and/or to mobilize campaign workers or money.

Furthermore, the interactive aspects of the Internet allow parties to tailor the issues that are deemed important to followers. If desired, parties can allow site visitors explicit reaction to certain standpoints, propositions, or elements of the electoral campaign. Through this two-way communication, parties can collect sympathizers’ opinions and, in principle, confirm, modify, or fine-tune their views where necessary.

In sum, these Web site properties appear to be ideal for the parties, even more so because the costs of installing and maintaining a site are relatively low, certainly in comparison to the costs of advertising in the traditional media. However, not all that glitters is gold; there are also

disadvantages with this new medium such as accessibility and security.

The first drawback of the Internet is the flawed, technological security. In the run-up to the British elections in 1997, for example, the Labour Party site was infiltrated and swamped with anti-Labour political slogans and pornographic images. However, security has improved fairly substantially in recent years, though Web sites are still not immune from hackers.

The second one is the “digital divide,” which is still relevant. Access to the Internet is restricted in both quantitative and social terms, and this was especially the case at the start of the World Wide Web in 1993 (and continues today). Those who are active in *cyberspace* are certainly not a true reflection of the electorate; in general they are (still) largely male, young, highly educated, and wealthier than the average. Even now a part of the population will not be reached by the new medium (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it may also be assumed that not all netizens will be interested in politics, which means that these advantages for the parties are relative.

Although Web sites certainly have some disadvantages, the advantages for the political parties seem to be much greater. Because parties generally are rather reluctant to provide information regarding the number of visitors to their Web sites, there are strong indications that the use by voters of party Web sites to obtain political information is growing. In the campaign for the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands in 1998, for instance, party sites attracted at most about 100,000 visitors in the five weeks leading up to the elections (Voerman, 2000; Voerman & Boogers, 2005). In the final three weeks of the 2002 and 2003 election campaign, the sites were visited between 1.5 to 2 million times. About 16% of the electorate visited one or more Web sites during the 2002 election campaign and by January 2003 that increased to 17% (Voerman & Boogers, 2005). This relatively high number of voters actively seeking political information reveals that the party sites are beginning to play a more important role in communications between parties and politicians, on the one hand, and the electorate on the other—at least in Dutch politics.<sup>3</sup>

Given the many attractive elements surrounding political party Web sites, it is surprising that so many parties waited so long before starting Web sites. In this article we deal with possible factors which have influenced the moment at which parties adopted Web sites, such as the level of Internet penetration in countries, as well as party family, size, and ideological characteristics. We also expect that parties generally start sites prior to scheduled elections.

Table 1. Internet users in member states of the European Union and the United States, 1997-2001 (European Commission, 2001, p. 38)

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
European Union	5.2	9.7	14.9	26.2	30.2
Belgium	4.9	7.8	13.7	22.7	27.3
Denmark	11.4	18.9	28.2	48.4	56.2
Germany	6.1	12.8	19.4	29.6	33.2
Greece	1.9	3.3	7.1	9.5	11.8
Spain	2.8	4.4	7.2	13.9	16.4
France	1.7	6.0	9.7	16.9	16.8
Ireland	4.1	8.1	11.9	27.5	27.9
Italy	2.3	5.2	8.7	23.3	24.3
Luxemburg	7.2	11.8	17.5	27.5	33.9
The Netherlands	6.4	10.2	19.0	45.9	57.7
Austria	8.1	7.4	10.5	37.0	51.3
Portugal	5.0	6.0	7.0	10.0	11.8
Finland	19.5	25.5	32.3	44.5	56.1
Sweden	22.6	33.5	41.4	56.4	62.6
UK	7.3	13.5	21.0	33.5	41.7
United States	15.0	22.3	40.5	56.1	61.1

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