

Chapter 82

Campaigning Online, Locally

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ABSTRACT

How do candidates for municipal office use the Internet in their campaigns, and are there differences between candidates according to the character of the constituencies and the races? This is the first a country-wide study of website usage in low-visibility political campaigns for municipal offices. Data were collected during municipal elections campaigns that took place in Israel in three cycles between November 2007 and February 2009, in 143 different municipalities and involving almost 500 candidates across Israel. The paper explores the characteristics of municipal campaigning, including the scope of website usage, the features available in candidates' websites, variables predicting website usage, and the perceptions of candidates regarding websites' effectiveness. While Websites were used by half of the candidates, they tended to be static and include very few interactive features. The characteristics of the constituencies and the races were correlated with the scope of Website usage by contenders.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of online campaigning have focused almost exclusively on high-visibility candidates and races, i.e. for presidential, parliamentary and gubernatorial offices (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Gibson, 2004). This paper contributes to the study of online campaigning by putting low-visibility campaigns under the spotlight.

This paper presents and analyzes website ownership and usage of candidates who ran for mayor in the three cycles of municipal elections that took place in Israel between November 2007 and February 2009.

Municipal administration in Israel is composed of three levels: cities (in general, municipalities with over 20,000 residents), local councils (in general, municipalities with 2,000-20,000 residents), and regional councils—generally comprised of a number of communities with less than 2,000 residents each. Since the amendment to the municipal election law in Israel was passed in 1975, the elections have been conducted under a two-ballot system: one for the mayor of the city or local or regional council and one for members of the municipal council. If no mayoral candidate gains at least 40% of the votes in the first round of the election, a runoff between the two contenders who received the largest share of the vote is held two weeks later.

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Israel is a promising arena to study online campaigning, due to the widespread penetration of the Internet and its significant political uses in the country. The June 2008 TIM survey (conducted by TNS) measuring Internet exposure and usage patterns, shows that broadband Internet penetration in Israel is extensive: Internet usage is estimated at 69% among the adult Jewish population, and 56% among the adult Arab population. Primary uses of the Internet are information search (96% of users), news reading (89% of users), as well as activities such as watching videos (73% of users) and shopping online (56% of users) (Cohen, 2009).

The Internet has also reached deep into the political landscape, playing a dominant role in national election campaigns (Lev-On, 2011), as well as in the municipal elections in 2007-9 that are the subject of this study. Indeed, *Israel Today*, a news daily, declared on its municipal election-day issue that “the campaigns this year were characterized by comprehensive usage of Facebook, blogs, websites, and all the tools the Internet has to offer.” (Israel Today, 2008). Special attention was granted to Internet campaigning in the two largest municipalities, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Ronen Madzini, writing for *Ynet* (the leading Israeli news website) about the two leading mayoral candidates in Jerusalem, Nir Barkat and Meir Porush, was especially impressed with (the winner) Barkat’s seamless integration of the Internet into his campaign (Madzini, 2008). But no less significant was the Internet usage of the ultra-Orthodox mayoral candidate, Member of Knesset Meir Porush, whom Madzini noted used the Internet in a “most original way.” His mayoral campaign was launched on a “virtual press conference,” and he maintained a constantly updated and interactive website and a blog in the Israeli-based social network *TheMarker Cafe*, in which he answered users’ questions and uploaded photos and videos with holiday greetings.

The municipal elections in Tel Aviv-Jaffa were no less wired and attention-grabbing. Gal Mor, also writing for *Ynet*, argued that “[t]he Internet

has awakened the electoral campaign in Tel Aviv. Heated debates on blogs and ‘talkbacks’, videos on YouTube and Facebook, Google-Bombing and other tactics were all brought to the battle.” Much of this was due to the work of the young campaign teams of the two leading candidates, Dov Hanin and Ron Huldai (the incumbent and re-elected mayor). Mor (2008) surveyed the activities of the campaigns and wrote that “both camps were present in all the significant online arenas, responding to news items, in Facebook, *TheMarker Cafe*, forums, blogs, supporters’ websites, YouTube and more. They left their candidate’s mark on each significant discussion and were involved in endless debates.” But is the picture portrayed here representative of online municipal campaigning throughout the country? This study explores the presence and activity of contestants for mayoral offices throughout Israel in the municipal elections of 2007-9.

ONLINE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

The merits of the Internet as a marketing and campaigning medium have been discussed at length. Notably, the Internet allows campaigners to garner and distribute huge amounts of information at little to no costs, and in a variety of formats: to large audiences, or alternatively to smaller and more distinct groups of potential constituencies, while overcoming difficulties of distance, weather, and other physical detriments. Moreover, an unprecedented ability to document, measure and analyze Internet traffic and usage patterns has emerged (Gibson & Römmele, 2005; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Howard, 2006).

Further unique advantages involve the ability to conduct a two-way conversation with target audiences, encourage public participation and involvement, and generate a ‘viral’ social transmission of campaign-related messages among interested users. Such advantages were evident in Obama’s victorious U.S. Presidency campaign leading up to

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