

Chapter 107

A Europe Wide Web?

Political Parties' Websites in the 2009 European Parliament Elections

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the characteristics of parties' Websites during the campaign for the 2009 European Parliament elections. The study focuses on 5 Western and Southern European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom) and covers a total of 55 Websites, which were analyzed in the last 2 weeks before the vote. The analysis was conducted through a standard coding scheme modelled after Gibson and Ward's (2000) seminal proposal, expanded to account for the developments in e-campaigning that have occurred in the last decade, and integrated with the results of a meta-analysis of 7 coding frames employed by previous researchers. Website features were divided into 2 main categories: those that provide information to users and those that facilitate their participation to the campaign both online and offline. The goals of this study are, first, to offer an updated mapping of the state of the art in Western European online campaigning and, second, to discover which variables affect the characteristics of party Websites. This goal is achieved through regression analyses that correlate indices measuring the amount of information and participation features in parties' Websites with variables that measure system-level as well as party-level characteristics. Results show that system-level variables such as technological development, and aggregate levels of political support have no appreciable effect on party Website characteristics, nor do party-level variables such as resources and incumbency. Instead, ideology has a strong effect on Websites, as parties' membership to the Socialist and Left-Libertarian families is strongly and positively correlated with both information and participation features on their Websites.

INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

More than fifteen years after its first uses in election campaigns, the internet has now become a standard, almost taken-for-granted component of

parties' and candidates' communication toolkits. However, research on the political role of ICTs still suggests caution in evaluating their impact on campaigns and democracy. On the one hand, various studies based in the United States have found that visiting candidates' sites enhances both

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online and offline political participation (Park and Perry 2008) and that online political engagement discriminates less than offline participation based on traditional SES variables (Jensen et al. 2007: 47); moreover, a meta-analysis of 38 US studies found a positive, albeit modest, correlation between internet use and political participation, although questions of endogeneity persist (Bouliane 2009). On the other hand, most literature still subscribes to the notion that the political potential of digital media lies mostly in reinforcing, rather than changing, existing patterns of civic engagement and, conversely, in making it easier and less costly for political organizations and social movements to mobilize their supporters (Bimber and Davis 2003). However, few scholars would disagree that the availability of the internet has enlarged the repertoires of political action for parties, activists, and voters, so that 'the distinction between being a citizen offline and being one online has started to dissolve' (Chadwick 2006: 172) and that the web has widened the pool of democratic competitors by reducing the costs of communication and organization and helping new political movements and entrepreneurs to harness the energies of supporters unattached to traditional structures (Ward and Vedel 2006).

By contrast, most of the available research on Western parties' and candidates' adoption of ICTs has failed to detect a significant and widespread commitment to the participatory and mobilizing potential of the internet by traditional parties (Ward et al. 2003; Nixon et al. 2003). Political actors 'have simply transferred the existing framework from the real world to the virtual realm, using ICTs principally to improve the speed of organizational communication' (Bentivegna 2006: 336). The classic explanation for such a timid approach is that parties and candidates are wary that allowing supporters to engage on the internet could result in a loss of message control (Stromer-Galley 2000). Consistently, research has shown that political actors are more eager to provide voters with information that can be centrally directed than with

opportunities to effectively participate (Druckman et al. 2007; Foot and Schneider 2006; Gibson et al. 2003). Another hampering force is what Ward and Vedel have termed the 'fear factor within mainstream institutions' (2006: 220): because parties are aware that both media and citizens have high expectations on their online performance and are prepared to fully scrutinize it, they overweigh the risks of a potential backlash when evaluating whether or not to experiment with online tools, which results in a rather cautious approach to innovation. These sombre assessments are in line with Margolis and Resnick's (2000) assertion that 'politics as usual' would prevail online and that a process of 'normalization' would empty the internet of most of its innovative potential. A case in point is the fact that, while theoretically the web could level the playing field between smaller and larger parties, in reality the latter usually have stronger ICT infrastructures due to their superior resources. However, normalization has been found to be conditional on contextual factors such as a pluralitarian electoral system, a long democratic history, high technological development, and an unrestricted media environment both online and offline, while its opposite, equalization, has been found in countries with a long democratic history and a more open online than offline media environment (Strandberg 2008: 238).

In general, while still limited to smaller and more politically idiosyncratic audiences than traditional mass media, the internet can help strengthen parties' organizations and reinvigorate their relationships with members and supporters, which a vast literature has found to be weakening over the last decades (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). While the evidence previously summarized suggests that political actors have overall been reluctant in pursuing such a route, this tendency may be subject to change, as indicated by the increasing relevance of 'Web 2.0' environments as relevant 'third places' (Chadwick 2009) which have become so pervasive in citizens' everyday social lives that politicians cannot avoid them.

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