

Chapter 4

Websites as Spaces for Building the Identities of Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

Initially, studies on policy and the internet considered websites as spaces for the propagation of political and electoral marketing. However, this proposal presents a different perspective regarding the internet as a space for building the identity of political parties with their diverse audiences: cross-party and intra-party. The chapter is divided into three parts: the first deals with politics and the internet focusing on the theory of equalization and normalization to match the political game between major and minor parties. Thus, to understand the organizational structure of the parties, the theory of the parties of cadres and masses is offered. Also, to deepen this discussion, the selective and collective incentives that are part of the genetics of political parties are treated. As the results, the website serves as an instrument of communication of the party, divulging the objectives, the internal disputes between the different factions, and the way the party works.

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INTRODUCTION

Research on parties' websites is relatively new. The earliest published work on the subject dates to the mid-1990s, and since then a considerable volume of scientific books and articles has been published on the subject around the world. Originally developed in the United States and the United Kingdom (UK), research on political parties' websites has been conducted in different countries on several continents. For instance, continental Europe (France, Italy, Germany, and Norway), Oceania (New Zealand and Australia), America (Canada), and in South America (Brazil).

In contrast to the diversity of contexts applied, research on political parties' websites is characterized by the significant stability concerning its research agenda. Roughly speaking, two issues have dominated research on the subject. The first refers to the supposed potential of the Internet to promote greater equality of political communication opportunities between large and small political parties. Two rival hypotheses are presented here: The first, about the equalization of opportunities, points to a positive impact of the Internet regarding the homogenization of the conditions of competition by large and small parties. The normalization hypothesis, on the other hand, suggests that the Internet does not play a noteworthy role in this respect. The question here concerns the potential for democratization of the internal life of parties by allowing members and ordinary citizens to participate more actively in party affairs through their websites.

With these issues in mind, this chapter has as the central purpose to present, critically, the state of the art of research on political parties' websites. It is intended to demonstrate that both the works that investigate the effect of equalization of opportunities between the different parties and those that investigate the possible democratization of the internal relations in the parties tend to focus mainly the websites as fundamental elements of the analysis. Thus, prevails the detriment of the parties themselves, when the websites are assimilated as a strategy of political propaganda and as a tool for electoral marketing. This perspective has two primary drawbacks nowadays. First, the nature of the Internet has changed significantly since the mid-1990s. At that time, websites were the last word in Internet resources; currently, the sites coexist with other resources with much greater appeal and impact with users, as blogs and social networks. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the models drawn up on the Internet fifteen years ago are considerably dated about the impact of websites on parties' management. Second, this perspective says very little about the structure of the parties, understood as organizations with political goals that go beyond communicating with their members, constituents, or the public.

Grounded on that, this chapter aims to debate the Internet as a space for the construction of the identity of political parties with their different publics: Cross-party and intra-party. The premise is that the website offers excellent points of

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