

Chapter 20

Parties and ICTs: Analyzing Party Strategies to Use the Internet for Political Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

This chapter asks whether, and to what extent, parties are using the Internet for political mobilization. Internet offers new opportunities for political mobilization. If we believe that parties want above all to win elections, the question that follows is, how are they using the Internet to further this goal? I argue that if parties are not fully exploiting the Internet for political mobilization is because it is not always in their interest to do so. A key argument of this chapter is that using the new media to mobilize support may have different costs and benefits for parties depending on their characteristics. To test hypotheses concerning the characteristics of parties that matter for online mobilization, I propose and develop a methodology to assess the efficacy of party websites as platforms for political mobilization. To test the argument, I engage in website analysis using evidence from parties in Spain and Catalonia.

INTRODUCTION

The question of how parties are using the internet – with what intensity and for what purposes -- has attracted much attention from scholars in the last

decade. Much of this interest on party behaviour online has been driven and sustained by recent trends concerning declining levels of turnout and party enrollment in advanced democracies and by expectations that the internet may revitalize the nature of democratic institutions. As a result, an

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abundant literature has emerged in the last ten years, mostly focusing on how parties are using the internet in different countries.¹

While we owe these studies much of our cumulated knowledge on the subject, they have contributed very little to shed light on what accounts for parties' strategies online. Most of these studies have been descriptive (Newell, 2001; March, 2004; Vaccari, 2007; Lusoli et. al., 2008; Small, 2008). A few have systematically attempted to relate observed differences in party behavior online to explanatory variables (Norris, 2003; Gibson & Römmele, 2003; Padro-Solanet & Cardenal, 2008; Sudulich, 2009; Bastien, 2009; Foot et al. 2009; Chadwick & Anstead, 2009). But even those that have attempted to provide explanations (por exemple, Norris, 2003; Padro-Solanet & Cardenal, 2008; Sudulich, 2009) have not explained why factors such as party ideology, size and organization might affect party strategies online. In short, an integrated theory accounting for party behavior online is missing in this literature.

This chapter represents a first attempt to build an integrated theory accounting for party behavior online. Drawing on assumptions from the rational choice model about party motivations and behavior, an integrated framework accounting for party strategies online is proposed. To start building this theory I depart from the assumption that parties have one overriding goal: to maximize electoral support. Parties may have other goals, but I argue that maximizing support is their one overriding goal. In this sense, this study departs from others (Römmele, 2003; Gibson & Römmele, 2003; Sudulich, 2007) that attempt to explain party behavior online according to different party goals.²

Assuming that parties' goal is to maximize political support, the question that follows is: how are parties using the internet to further this goal? Are parties fully exploiting the *new media* to mobilize political support? And if they are or they are not, what accounts for their different strategies

online? To start thinking about this question I use a cost-benefit approach and argue that parties will exploit the internet for political mobilization when the expected benefits of this decision outweigh the costs. A key argument of this chapter is that using the new media to mobilize support may have costs for parties by interfering with their communication and organization strategies. Parties that are large, in the opposition, non-ideological or highly cohesive, and with small bureaucracies are in an advantage to compete for additional votes and support through the Internet. Hence, holding other factors constant, these parties will be expected to use the internet more intensively to mobilize support than parties that are ideological and have large extra-parliamentary organizations.

To illustrate the argument I use evidence from parties in Spain and Catalonia. To analyze online mobilization strategies I use data at the aggregate or the party level. Although parties can rely on many different tools to mobilize support online (email, social networks, websites), I use websites to analyze party mobilization strategies online. In fact, websites are used in many cases as platforms hosting other tools such as social networks. In total, twelve websites (eight from Catalan parties and four from Spanish parties) are analyzed. Since studying twelve websites is not enough to make causal arguments, the analysis will be used to illustrate the arguments formulated in the theoretical section. It will be left for further research to test some of the hypothesis drawn from this study.

The chapter is structured in the following way. In the next section, I provide some background before I lay out the argument. I discuss key concepts, review the literature, and specify my position on the subject. In the third section, I present the argument. In the fourth, I discuss the data, methods and measures used in the analysis. In the last section, I engage in the analysis and discuss the main results of this study. I conclude with some final comments.

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