

Summary

This dissertation is an empirical investigation of how the internet is used by political parties and their candidates. This project seeks to make an original contribution to the literature on political parties, electoral campaigns and democratic theory.

With regard to the literature on political parties, this study contributes to our understanding of how the internet affects parties' communication strategies and practices. It explores the possibility that different types of party might use the internet in different ways. This study represents the sole example of a comparative study of political parties in 'peacetime' to date. In this dissertation, we investigate the impact of party ideology, levels of democracy within parties and party resources in determining the quality and status of parties' websites. We examine these variables, over thirty-three parties' websites from four European countries, in relation to the informative side of parties' websites, the interactive side and finally to their overall status. In so doing, we make use of a parsimonious model, which introduce several improved measures of party characteristics and website interactivity; we challenge the existing conceptualization and operationalization of participatory/interactive activities online by introducing the idea of *immediate participation*. In terms of information dissemination, we observe strong evidence of websites undergoing a process of standardization. With regard to participation/interaction, we encounter consistent evidence of large and leftist parties being more prone to introduce participatory features in terms of both 'general' participatory activities and *immediate* ones. On the impact of party internal democracy on online participation we found mixed evidence, in terms of overall participation, this factor appear to play a role, but when it comes to *immediate* participation its effect fades away. With regard to the overall status of parties' websites, in line with previous studies, we find that interactivity and participation are promoted to a smaller extent than dissemination of information. We also test the explanatory power of the aforementioned independent variables on Web 2.0 platforms by selecting three different applications and we show that, across types of applications, the only stable characteristic of parties that 'have gone Web 2.0' is resources.

Big parties appear to be more up to date; they seem to have more readily grasped the potential of Web 2.0 applications than their smaller counterparts.

With respect to electoral campaigns, we explore what elements facilitate cyber-campaign and what effect online campaigns have on votes. This investigation takes the form of a case study of the Irish general election 2007. We begin by presenting a longitudinal analysis of Irish parties' websites in the run up to the 2007 election. We observe a relatively modest growth in parties' online activity, and no evidence of inter party variation. When looking at candidates we did not observe any viral spread of the internet phenomenon. We show, through an empirically grounded analysis, that launching a website seems to be motivated by symbolic considerations rather than strategic ones. The empirical proof of what is known in the literature as the 'me too' effect - at the candidate level - represents one of the major contributions of this research. When looking at the effect of candidates' cyber-campaigns we observe that having a personal website is associated with winning votes. We contribute to the debate on cyber-campaigning with regard to three main elements. Firstly, we explore the effect of cyber-campaigning in a European country for the first time. Second, we test a number of scenarios put forward in the literature but never empirically investigated before, by providing a control for electoral expenditures and front-runner status. Finally, we highlight the necessity of dedicating some attention to the relationship between demand for and supply of online campaigns.

With regard to implications for democratic theory, we seek to identify whether factual evidence supports the normative claim that the internet can enhance democratic participation, favour dialogue and empower resource-poor actors. Our findings show that better-resourced actors bring their offline advantages with them into cyberspace, and that political parties do not invest much in implementing forms of online interaction with the public. Our evidence points towards the conclusion that technology *per se* won't create any more participation or any virtual public sphere.