From Brochureware to ‘MyBo’: An Overview of Online Elections and Campaigning

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Abstract:

Online campaigning raises provocative questions about whether modern day electioneering is becoming a more participatory and grassroots affair, and whether use of digital tools can actually affect the outcome of a race? This paper provides an overview of some of the key debates and findings that have emerged in relation to these and other questions posed in the literature. Specifically, we review studies of the supply side of online campaigns – who is adopting the new digital tools and how they are being used? We also look at the demand side of the process and profile arguments made for voter impact.
Introduction

The study of online campaigning occupies a small but increasingly important area of study for political science. Sitting at the intersection of the political communication, election campaigning and party change literatures it raises some new and provocative questions about whether modern day electioneering is becoming a more participatory and grassroots affair, and whether use of digital tools can actually affect the outcome of a race? In this short overview we aim to profile some of the key debates and findings that have emerged in relation to these and other questions posed in the literature. Specifically, we break our review down into three core areas: those studies that have focused on the ‘what’ or contents of online campaigns; those that have examined the question of ‘why’ in terms of explaining the adopting the new digital tools; and finally those that examined the ‘so what’ question, looking at voter effects. To a degree these foci have also proceeded in a chronological fashion. Starting in the latter part of the 1990s, scholars in the U.S. and UK began with a close examination of campaign websites in national elections, identifying a range of core functions that parties were transferring into cyberspace and comparing them on the performance of these functions. Soon after research expanded to focus on more causal questions of uptake and impact, shifting the lens down to the online campaigning at the local level. Who was using the new digital tools, and more importantly perhaps were they gaining any electoral benefits from doing so? Below we review these three areas of academic study and profile their key conclusions. Finally, we articulate some considerations for future studies of internet campaigning to take into account.
Online campaigning: content, style and organization

As noted, early studies of online campaigning tended to focus on more descriptive questions and sought to profile what the parties were doing with their websites. A series of key functions including information provision, participation, networking and resource generation were identified and measured with indices that mapped the presence of certain content items such as chat rooms, email and online donation facilities (Gibson and Ward, 1998; Gibson and Ward, 2000). Beyond this practical goal, however, scholars were driven by a more analytical aim which has recurred across studies of the topic to date. Broadly summed up this is the question of ‘normalization vs. equalization? Is the internet an essentially levelling communication tool in that it elevates the profile of the smaller and more marginalised players in the political system? Or one that simply reinforces existing power and participatory biases? (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Based on the findings of website contents and delivery it was possible to draw some tentative conclusions about the extent to which the internet might offer a more level playing field than existing mainstream media outlets. Studies took place in a wide range of democratic contexts, moving outside of the UK and U.S. to a wide range of other European contexts including Germany, the Netherlands, and France, Southern European and Scandinavian countries and down-under to New Zealand and Australia. While cross-national differences emerged in timing of adoption and overall enthusiasm for online campaigning, conclusions were broadly similar in terms of failing to conclude any dramatic power redistribution taking place. The larger parties were seen as dominating their smaller and fringe counterparts in terms of richness in content and overall style and site design.
Within this picture a couple of interesting sub-trends of note emerged. Firstly that in between elections the differences between parties reduced somewhat. Rather than suggesting a ‘catch-up’ by the smaller parties, however, this was actually more the result of the major parties taking a more laissez faire attitude to their web presence. Elections, therefore, appeared to act as a catalyst to this normalizing trend. Secondly, and in contrast to this overall theme of ‘politics as usual’ some exceptions to this rule were noted among individual parties. Green parties and those on the far right were generally seen as gaining some significant advantages from the use of the technology, primarily in terms of building up a virtual infrastructure and intensifying communication with and between activists.

More recent developments in the use of social media tools in the U.S. and beyond have served to re-open the debate about whether the internet can provide a more prominent platform for less well known candidates and parties. The move toward the use of web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter in elections opens up new possibilities for more interactive communication between party elites and voters, and more significantly perhaps between voters themselves to promote and organize on behalf of their preferred party. The use of these ‘free’ third party platforms to organize and coordinate supporters and activists arguably extends the reach of smaller parties to disseminate their message and mobilize resources. Notably evidence from Australia examining trends in web campaigning over time by minor and major party candidates confirms that it is the latter that the former are more actively exploiting the web 2.0 or social media channels by 2010 while candidates from the bigger parties continue to focus on building their own independent web presence (Gibson and McAllister, 2011b).
Taking this a step further, some parties and candidates have developed their own activist hub centres online (e.g. Obama’s MyBO.com and the UK Conservative Party’s My Conservatives.com) where members and supporters are provided with the opportunity to canvas, fundraise and raise awareness of the policy agenda. Again, while this appears to be the preserve of the larger well resourced actors, these moves toward online activist mobilization via the net signal the potential for a deeper structural change in parties’ campaign and wider overall organization. As Castells (2009) has pointed out in his recent analysis of the Obama 2008 Presidential Campaign, a crucial and unique element of his success was the way he transferred the ‘time-tested’ principles of community organizing in America into the online environment – creating the first networked campaign (366). Although on the one hand this new model of organization further centralized fund-raising efforts it also devolved considerable tactical authority at the local level to a vast ‘army’ of volunteers, who operated outside of formal structures. Building on and lending support to such arguments outside of the political sphere is the work of Clay Shirky (2008), who in his publicized recent book Here Comes Everybody, subtitled – the power of organizing without organizations – talked of the ‘flattening’ effects of the net on traditional hierarchies and how it gave ordinary people the opportunity to challenge the monopoly of cultural institutions such as the Catholic Church and traditional media organizations and BBC.

In the political domain, the ‘reprogramming’ efforts of Obama as Castells notes, was of course prefigured by the efforts of another Democrat Presidential contender, Howard Dean in 2004, who successfully exploited the ‘Meetup.com’ website to establish a loose national organizational infrastructure. The incorporation and deployment of these
‘social networking technologies’ or SNT’s as Iozzi and Bennett (2005) term them challenge the formal hierarchies of control that have typified campaign management within the U.S. and more party-centered systems like the UK, moving them toward a more ‘decentralized network’ model that gives supporters partial control over campaign messages. Campaigns are turned into a ‘space’ as Chadwick (2007) put it where loose collections of supporters with disparate interests gather. Taking the argument one step further, he suggests that adoption of these new techniques or digital repertoires may be transforming the nature of political organizations more generally, with parties, interest groups converging on the looser social movement inspired model of collective action (Chadwick, 2007; Bennett, 2003).

Countering these expectations for organizational decentralization and fragmentation, however, there are of course those who claim a ‘darker’ side to the internet’s impact, in terms of the power it cedes to elites for censoring, surveillance and propaganda. (Morozov, 2011) In the campaigns context one needs to consider the arguments of Howard (2006) who conducted an indepth analysis of U.S. campaign elites’ adaptation to new media technologies and identified a set of centralizing tendencies as emerging. Essentially the move of campaigns to adopt the Internet he concluded was enhancing the powers of ‘hypermedia’ consultants to conduct surveillance, data mining, and targeting of voters, a trend not likely to promote higher levels of internal party democracy. The future direction of travel for party organizations – toward a more ‘managed’ data-driven process or a more open ‘self-seeding’ model in which supporters use social media tools to run campaigns at the local level – is not as yet clear. As parties continue to struggle to maintain their membership bases, however, incentives to employ
the ‘outsourced’ supporter-led approaches are likely to increase. The extent to which this new type of e-enabled campaign activism reshapes the role and profile of members, and traditional practices in terms of meetings and financing is clearly one for future research to follow up.

*Causes and Consequences of Online Campaigning*

Aside from questions about content of web campaigns and the implications for levels of inter-party competition, the study of the topic has widened and sharpened its lens to examine questions about causality both prior and posterior to the process – so first understanding the drivers behind the shift to online campaigning - who is engaging in it? And second what is its impact for voters?

*Uptake:* The systematic study of uptake of online campaigning at the local level among candidates in a range of national contexts including the U.S., the UK, Germany, Finland, Ireland and Australia has shown that a variety of factors appear to be driving the phenomenon (Carlson, 2006; Herrnson et al, 2007; Gibson and McAllister, 2006; Gibson et al., 2003; Klotz, 1997; Rackaway, 2007; Strandberg, 2009; Suddulich and Wall, 2009; Zittel, 2009). Chief among them has been party size, with the major parties generally fighting the most widespread online battle, however the rise of web 2.0 technologies and new external platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs that increase viral message communication effectiveness essentially ‘free to air’ ways are seen as challenging this. Other variables deemed to be important have been largely contextual and relate to the competitiveness of the race. At the individual level, while some disagreement has emerged as to whether incumbents or challengers are most likely to establish a site, there
has been little evidence of a digital divide, particularly on the grounds of gender. Age has been shown to matter 2009 but more in terms of cohort than overall age, with Zittel (2009) finding those born after 1965 being much more likely to adopt a website for campaigning than those born before. Finally, given the growth in the numbers of candidates running a web campaign, analysis of the 2008 Irish online election found support for a ‘domino’ effect with the likelihood of having an election website being significantly increased if one’s opponents did.

Mobilization and effects of online campaigning on voters: Turning finally to voter effects, the evidence to date is rather more limited than that addressing the previous two questions, however, what has been done tells a surprisingly strong and consistent story of effects. Net of a range of other factors such as resources, party support and mainstream media exposure, a web campaign site is consistently and significantly linked to higher electoral support levels. One of the earliest studies of this question examined the variance in the success of candidates in the 1996 U.S. Congressional elections and concluded that those who campaigned online enjoyed a significantly higher vote total, net of party affiliation and incumbency advantage (D’Alessio, 1997). This work was followed by more indepth survey analysis of voter responses to websites in U.S. Presidential and state level elections by Bimber and Davis (2003). The authors did not find strong evidence of mobilization effects however. Subsequent work by Gibson and McAllister, (2006, 2011a) on candidate aggregate vote shares in Australian elections and by Sudlich and Wall (2010) on Irish online electioneering using an extensive range of controls supported the D’Alessio conclusions, finding a strong and consistent association
between website presence and a higher vote shares.1 While systematic study of the impact of the Obama campaign has not as yet been produced, survey evidence from the Dean Meetups has been analyzed to show that their online outreach efforts did attract political novices and the ‘non-usual suspects’ (Williams et al., 2004). Assessing the evidence Hindman (2005) concludes that at least the volunteer corp that the Dean team recruited ‘would have been significant smaller’ had they not had access to the Internet, as would the total funds raised (126).

In explaining how the internet may be mobilizing voters, authors are somewhat skeptical of any direct effects occurring, i.e. that the candidate’s website alone has moved those viewing it to go out and vote for the candidate. While this is a view based on the logic of self-selection that drives attention to campaign websites, it is underscored by the sheer facts about the size of the audience for such sites. While again the data is not widely available, the statistics on numbers accessing campaign material show that it is very much a minority activity. Even the 2007 French presidential elections for example, an event where the two main candidates waged high profile online campaigns, only around one in five Internet users were reported to have accessed election sites (Vacari, 2008; Vedel and Michalska, 2007). Parliamentary elections elsewhere in Australia (2007) and the UK (2005) have pulled in much smaller audiences, with studies reporting around three percent of voters to have accessed party or candidate sites (Gibson and McAllister 2011a; Ward and Lusoli, 2005). In addition to this more specific evidence of campaign site audiences, most studies of online participation have proven highly cautious in assuming that it is bringing in a sizeable body of new or previously disengaged individuals. (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Bimber, 2001; Davis, 1999; Norris, 2001, 2003
(Anduiza et al. 2008; De Zuniga et al., 2009; Gibson et al., 2005; Jensen et al., 2006; Krueger, 2002; Lupia and Philpot 2005; Mossberger et al., 2007; Moy et al., 2005; Quintelier and Vissers, 2008; Stanley and Weare, 2004).

Failing to find support for direct effects, speculation has turned to the more plausible idea of mediating factors that might be account for the apparent impact of these sites, as well as possible methodological limitations of their studies. On the latter front, it is argued that a web campaign may be a proxy for a more intangible candidate or campaign staff quality or outlook, that is not captured in the models so far tested. In terms of indirect effects and whether intervening variables may be at work here, a particularly intriguing explanation that has emerged from recent work within the UK and also Belgium is the possibility of an indirect or a two-step mobilization effect whereby campaign sites activate the activists who then go mobilize others in their offline networks (Norris and Curtice, 2008; Vissers, 2009). Certainly this seemed to be the lesson learned from the Dean campaign as the accounts referenced earlier attest to. Here the lesson for parties and candidates would seem to be that web outreach efforts are best conceived of as resources for a committed base of activists/supporters to go on and spread the word rather than to reach the wider electorate directly. The effect, as Vissers (2009) has neatly summarized it, is campaigners ‘preaching through’, rather than to, the converted.

While for the candidates the verdict at the ballot box undoubtedly remains the most important measure of any web campaign effects, from an academic perspective these studies suggest the need for a broadening of conceptual and empirical models of electoral outcomes and campaign effects. The use of web 2.0 tools by campaigns and voters now mean that the most significant and widespread changes in voters’ outlooks
and activities may be taking place well in advance of election day. The socially embedded and ‘always on’ nature of new campaign technologies such as Facebook and Twitter mean that the ‘reach’ of the campaign message may far exceed that taking place in the officially sponsored ‘old’ media channels and engage a new body of potential participants in a much more personalized manner. The receipt or sending of political jokes via email or mobile phone, reading or posting to a blog or advertising support for a candidate or political cause on one’s social networking profile constitute small but potentially meaningful new political acts that may energize the previously inactive (Shifman et al., 2007). Such developments may then require an expansion of traditional political science approaches and models for understanding voter behavior.

References


Vissers, Sarah (2009) ‘From preaching to the converted to preaching through the converted’, paper presented to ECPR Joint Research Workshops, Lisbon, 14-19 April.


It is noted that Bimber and Davis (2003) analysis of the 2000 election cycle using survey data found little evidence that candidates’ e-campaigns were able to convert undecided voters to their cause.