

The Internet, election campaigns and citizens: state of affairs

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Abstract

This article reviews how, according to current research, the Internet is affecting electoral processes and, in particular, the development and consequences of campaigns. The main conclusions of this review of the literature state that there is a significant distance between the potential offered by this new medium, both to parties and citizens, and how it is actually used by everyone concerned. Political parties use the Internet as a communication tool that complements but in no way replaces offline activities. Citizens still put their faith in traditional media as their main sources of information on elections. Citizens that look for information online in Spain are a minority that concentrates socio-economic resources, technological skills and political motivations. The effects of Internet use on knowledge, the implementation of policies and participation, attitudes and behaviour are not negative although they are moderate.

Key words

Internet, Electoral campaigns, citizenship, participation, politics.

Resum

Aquest article repassa com Internet està afectant els processos electorals i, en particular, el desenvolupament i les conseqüències de les campanyes segons la investigació existent. Les principals conclusions d'aquesta revisió de la literatura apunten que existeix una distància important entre les potencialitats que aquest nou mitjà ofereix tant a partits com a ciutadans i la realitat dels usos que tots dos en fan. Els partits utilitzen Internet com a eina de comunicació que complementa, però en cap cas substitueix, les activitats offline. Els ciutadans encara confien en els mitjans tradicionals com a principals fonts d'informació sobre les eleccions. Els ciutadans que busquen informació en línia a Espanya són una minoria que concentra recursos socioeconòmics, habilitats tecnològiques i motivacions polítiques. Els efectes de l'ús d'Internet sobre el coneixement, la implicació política i la participació, les actituds i els comportaments no són negatius, tot i que sí modestos.

Paraules clau

Internet, campanyes electorals, ciutadania, participació, política.

The expectations regarding the changes that the Internet might make in politics in general have varied from the most inflated utopias (easily accessible plural information, unprecedented communicative and organisational capacity, low-cost participation especially among some sectors that do not tend to get involved in politics, such as young people, re-balancing and decentralisation of the distribution of power) to more pessimistic scenarios (information overload, hyper-fragmentation, territorialisation and polarisation of society, reduction in social capital and the risk of techno-elitism and populism).

As is well known, the Internet is different from the traditional media because it allows the rapid circulation of a large volume of information controlled by users, the possibility to aim this information at specific receivers or narrowcasting, decentralised control and interaction (Abramson, Arterton and Orren 1988). Without doubt, electoral processes are expected to be one of the areas affected by its emergence and growing use in

society. One of the first studies on this question, along optimistic lines (Corrado and Firestone 1997), predicted four possible consequences of the new medium on the electoral process: stronger links between citizens and candidates, improved political information for voters, greater accessibility and visibility of candidates with fewer resources in the political process and more voter alternatives and civic participation.

Empirical analyses in this area, which have multiplied over the last few years but still have few data, have therefore had to tackle very different questions: how have parties adapted to the new medium? Have they changed their campaign strategies? Can people at the grassroots participate more in this and control their leaders and candidates better through the Internet? What are the electoral consequences of online campaigns and, in particular, of the so-called Web 2.0? To what extent does Internet use favour access to political information for citizens? Can Internet use increase electoral participation

and political involvement in general, in particular among those sectors who usually participate less?

The findings from the first empirical studies on this area were more prosaic than the original expectations. Parties, candidates and voters use the Internet to varying degrees and for different purposes but this use does not seem to radically alter the essential characteristics of the electoral process, neither in terms of parties and their campaign strategy or citizens and their attitudes and behaviour (Bimber 2001) (Bimber and Davis 2003) (Gibson, Ward and Lusoli 2003). The scenario was far from realising the potential offered by the Internet.

This summary may be a touch disappointing for those expecting a good headline about how the Internet has revolutionised political communication. In comparison, for example, with the area of social (Donk 2004), institutional and representational movements, the changes that the Internet might be able to introduce into our democracies are more tentative. Notwithstanding this, the debate is far from over. The Internet and its political uses are evolving and changing at great speed and there is hardly enough time to analyse many of the issues proposed with sufficient perspective. More recent studies highlight changes that, although not revolutionary, are significant (Gibson and Römmele 2008) (Norris 2003) (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal 2007). Below we will present some of the main conclusions of the international literature on the Internet's impact on election campaigns. We will frame this discussion within the more general academic debate concerning election campaigns and will distinguish two quite different questions: how are campaigns carried out and what are the effects on voters?

1. Postmodern campaigns and the online era

The literature has distinguished between at least three stages in the historical development of election campaigns (Norris 2000): pre-modern campaign (up to 1950, based on parties' local organisations and on face-to-face contact), modern campaigns (between 1950 and 1990, based on the mass media and particularly television) and "Americanised" campaigns, professionalised and postmodern (as from 1990). The latter are characterised by a greater degree of personalisation and professionalism and by the increased application of marketing techniques aimed at specific groups of voters or targeting.

The first Internet applications in election campaigns appear in this third stage, within a context where television continues to play a central role both in party strategy and for citizens. The Internet is seen by some as a chance to establish direct contact with parties and candidates with voters without the mediation of journalists. It is also considered to be the ideal medium to apply micro-targeting strategies, aiming messages at specific sections of society. And, of course, it can encourage greater grassroots involvement in the campaign and, in general, in the internal life of the party (Chadwick 2006).

The Internet complements but does not alter parties' campaign strategies

In none of these three aspects does reality seem to match up with the more optimistic expectations. Television, press and radio continue to be the main media through which citizens follow election campaigns and get their information. Moreover, most citizens who use the Internet to get political information do so by accessing sites of the traditional media. According to the post-election survey by CIS, more than 80% of the citizens who followed the 2008 election campaign online did so through the sites of newspapers and other traditional media (study 2757 of the CIS). Although the content is not exactly the same (the online versions of the press, radio and TV channels are more interactive and include access to other content such as blogs, multimedia applications, etc.), this evidence indicates that the availability of information does not reduce but possibly increases the need for the guidance provided by the traditional media. These still have a significant presence both offline and online and consequently parties focus their attention more on these media than at citizens.

On the other hand, spamming or the indiscriminate sending of emails is not usually employed by parties due to the fear of it being counterproductive. The sending of messages produced to be sent to specific groups doesn't seem customary either, at least in European campaigns (Karlsen 2007).

The first applications of the Internet made by political parties consisted basically of static websites with content such as photos and biographies of the candidates, electoral programmes, press releases and agendas (for a summary see Gibson, Ward and Lusoli [2003]). These were largely "electronic leaflets" focusing especially on giving information. There are no significant areas for interaction, perceived as more of a risk in terms of controlling strategy by the parties than as an opportunity for grassroots participation. In any case, the Internet is used by parties to accelerate their communicative capacity, passing on their offline message without losing control of it and not to develop all the participative potential. Internal debate and discussion may highlight internal differences and conflicts that parties are not prepared to tackle (Vaccari 2008).

According to some, the outcome is simply "*politics as usual*" (Margolis and Resnick 2000). However, it's important to point out that there are significant differences between countries and parties in the use made of the Internet. Contextual and organisational factors, different for each party and each campaign, affect the intensity and manner in which parties incorporate new technologies into their election strategies and campaigns. Aspects such as the degree of political decentralisation, the electoral system, ideology, the organisations' resources, the competitiveness of the contest, the candidates' characteristics and other contextual incentives, such as the degree of penetration of the Internet are essential and must be taken into account (Cunha *et al.* 2003) (Gibson and McAllister 2006). In general, candidates use those websites more intensively where the electoral political system places them, and not parties, in

the centre of the competition, as happens in the US or, to a lesser degree, in Finland and France (Karlsen 2007) (Carlson and Strandberg 2005) (Vedel 2006).

The appearance of Web 2.0 and the development of online party activism

A change started to be perceived towards the middle of the first decade of the new century: parties started to take their online campaign more seriously than just creative websites, in part possibly due to the significant rise in Internet penetration levels.

Some campaign advisors draw comparisons between business and politics, according to which the Internet's potential to transform lies more in its dimension as an organisational tool aimed at followers and activists than in its communicative dimension aimed at floating voters (Vaccari 2008a). Howard Dean's 2004 campaign is considered to be the first where Internet use constitutes a fundamental change from the point of view of attracting and creating a network of committees to support the campaign (Hindman 2005). Almost all research agrees that parties use the Internet not to convince floating voters but fundamentally to mobilise activists already predisposed to vote for them, reinforcing their opinions, raising funds and taking voters to the poll stations on the day of the election (Karlsen 2007) (Bimber and Davis 2003) (Vedel and Cann 2008).

Within this context appears the so-called Web 2.0, which refers to a series of online applications whose content is defined by users (blogs, social networks, file-sharing websites). According to Gibson and Römmele (2008), Web 2.0 entails four fundamental changes for political communication: a) going from a 'one to many' model of message distribution to one of 'many to many'; b) the growing need, given the rising volume of information online, for aggregator or information 'broker' services; c) the production of political content that can be distributed via very different media, and d) the extension of bottom-up communication channels.

Receivers of messages in election campaigns have, in turn, become potential transmitters via multiple channels: online social networks but also face to face contact. Barack Obama's campaign intensively used online applications aimed at encouraging their followers to take part in the campaign (*my.barackobama.com*) and to raise funds during the very long primary process. This example cannot be extrapolated to European countries with much lower Internet penetration rates, more hermetic parties with more developed and stable organisations, political cultures with less customary participation in campaigns and with intense regulation both of their funding and data protection. But we can see significant changes in Europe as well, which Vedel and Cann have summarised with the expression "*des sites webs à l'activation par les réseaux*" in analysing the French presidential elections of 2007 (Vedel and Cann 2008). On the one hand, parties try to use website interrelations so that users inevitably come into

contact with the candidate's messages or arguments. On the candidate's official website there are links to other supportive sites of interest, those of local sections or committees and independent but sympathetic sites and blogs (blogospheres). On the other hand, the organisation is provided with online activism, proposing to followers, whether members or not, different activities depending on their interests and availability (taking part in online surveys, discussion forums, blogs or chats, everyday control of certain sites, giving advice, animations, etc.). It's a question of selectively activating those who, in turn, can mobilise other voters. It seems that parties have realised the Internet's capacity to spread messages (*virality*) and the possibility of getting a lot of people to collaborate, taking on very small levels of responsibility (*granularity*) (Chadwick 2008).

In general, however, the campaign strategy model continues to be top-down. Control of citizens collaborating in the campaign continues to be firm and centralised. In the words of one of Obama's advisors "you need to make sure that those people are making their numbers" (Vaccari 2009). In any case, we might talk of the integration of some hierarchical and participative aspects in which strategy and not technology continues to be the fundamental key and where online communication in no way replaces traditional activities such as press relations, fundraising or meetings. What does seem to be relatively clear is that "those who aim to influence public debate and attitudes will need to enter social networks developing around the new collective spaces that users, particularly young people, inhabit" (Gibson and Römmele 2008, 488), so that the mobilisation of activities is expected to be even more important in the future.

In general, the literature that tackles online campaigns has been limited to a few countries (essentially the United States and United Kingdom) and has restricted itself to looking at party and candidate websites, ignoring other possibly relevant actors in campaigns (Lusoli 2005). Only incipiently do we find systematic studies of the consumption of electoral content and we can therefore only start to analyse the consequences of online campaigns.

2. The consequences of online campaigns and the political uses of the Internet

In general, the existing studies on new media and elections have focused more on aspects of content than on the effects of online campaigns. Academic discussion regarding the importance or effects of election campaigns has a long tradition. Since the work by Lazarsfeld and his team in the 1940s (Lazarsfeld 1948), the prevalent position within political science has been that campaigns do not have a great effect on converting citizen preferences but usually reinforce previously existing predispositions, something which, on the other hand, can be decisive for the electoral outcome when it's highly com-

petitive. In spite of the erosion of party loyalties and the increase in floating voters, this argument has not varied substantially in the last comparative contributions to the issue (Farrell and Schmit-Beck 2002). We are therefore talking, in any case, of "minimal effects", although some indirect effects may be produced (such as those of *framing*).

An analysis of the consequences of online campaigns and the political uses of the Internet suffer from the same methodological difficulties as an analysis of the effects of campaigns. It's not easy to estimate to what extent the vote given depends on what happens in a campaign (and not on predispositions), neither is it easy to know to what extent the Internet (and nothing else) affects our way of thinking and acting. Firstly, we will talk about the possible *direct effects* on attitude and behaviour: the following of political information, political knowledge, political engagement, participation and election results. Secondly we will talk about *conditioned effects*, i.e. who is most affected by online campaigns and the political uses of the Internet, distinguishing three debates based on the literature: mobilisation vs. reinforcement, information vs. involvement and equalling vs. standardisation.

Information, engagement, participation: weak but positive effects

What are the consequence of the emergence and use of the Internet by citizens regarding their electoral behaviour? How many follow the campaign online? Are those who follow political information via the Internet more informed? Do they achieve greater levels of political effectiveness (the perception that they may influence what is decided)? Do they vote more? Do they orient their vote in a significantly different way to those who do not get their information from the Internet? Does an online campaign have any consequences for the election result? In short, what capacity do parties have to reconnect with voters via the Internet?

Firstly, we should ask how many people use the Internet for political purposes during election campaigns. According to CIS data,¹ in Spain only 10% of the electorate looked for information on the elections during the general campaign of 2008, of which only 20% visited party or candidate websites and a similar percentage blogs or debate forums. While only approximately 3% of voters followed the 2008 campaign via the Internet on a daily basis, a much higher percentage did so via the radio (20%), press (24%) and television (50%).

In France, 44% of Internet users declared in 2007 that they had looked for political information online, 26% had visited a candidate's website, 19% had seen political videos and 18% had consulted political blogs (Vedel and Cann, 2008). In Norway, a little less than half the population looked for information on the election in 2005 on the Internet, although only 13% visited a party website (Karlsen, 2007). According to the Pew report² on the 2008 presidential election, 46% of North Americans used the Internet, email or text messages to get information on the campaign, compare their points of view or

mobilise other people. 35% mentioned having looked at political videos online and 10% having taken part in social networks such as Facebook or MySpace to get information or become involved. In a comparative study of European elections in 2004, Lusoli (2005) places the use of the Internet as a source of information between 4% in Greece and 14% in Finland, with Spain close to the rest of the countries in southern Europe (around 6%).

We therefore have a certain variation in the extent to which the Internet is used to follow election campaigns but in any case we know that it is a secondary medium with respect to traditional media and that Spain is not precisely in the top rankings with regard to online campaign tracking.³

In which direction might this albeit still limited use influence citizens' information and knowledge of politics be moving? Some authors note that this improved accessibility to information, contact and mobilising stimuli can work in their favour. Others note that the excessive speed and simplicity of content available online, together with the greater importance of image over text and the possible information overload of content of doubtful quality, meant that the capacity to transmit information is much below its use (Graber 1996). Empirical analyses point out that exposure to websites with electoral and political content modestly increase knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 2002) (Anduiza, Gallec and Jorba 2009) (Grönlund 2007). The effects on knowledge can be greater in elections with less intense campaigns and among voters who are less proactive in searching for information (Bimber and Davis 2003).

Looking for political information on the Internet requires a more proactive attitude than with other traditional media, such as television; it allows direct contact with representatives and politicians and offers online ways to participate in politics. For the more optimistic, this can encourage the political involvement of citizens; increase interest in public affairs, the capacity to situate themselves, the perception that they can have an effect (political efficacy) and consequently encourage participation. From other perspectives, this potential, if not realised, can lead to frustration and therefore disaffection. Various studies have found small significant effects of exposure to a campaign online concerning these aspects (Xenos and Moy 2007) (Kenski and Stroud 2006) (Cantijoch, Jorba and San Martín 2008) (Tolbert and McNeal 2003) (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal 2007).

Notwithstanding this, these studies are based on data from surveys with a cross-sectional design that have a limited capacity to estimate causal relations, such as the possible affect of the consumption of news online on attitudes and behaviour. Other studies apply more sophisticated designs. For example, Jennings and Zeitner (2003) analyse panel data that allow the conclusion that the political use of the Internet does not have, in itself, causal effects on variables such as knowledge, political efficacy, community work or conventional political involvement, taking into account prior levels of engagement. With an experimental design, other research (Kaid

2003) (Kaid and Postelnicu 2005) reach the conclusion that the channel by which political announcements are transmitted (television vs. Internet) has a certain importance, although not necessarily in the expected sense (exposure to television reduces political cynicism, while online media do not seem to have an effect).

Research into the effect of Internet use on voting behaviour is scarce. Some studies do not find any significant effect based on survey data (Anduiza, Cantijoch, Cristancho and Camilo, 2010) (Bimber and Davis, 2003), while other authors, using aggregate data, detect a certain impact on the part of candidate websites (not necessarily direct, given the low number of visits) on election results, taking other relevant factors into account (Gibson and McAllister, 2006) (Sudulich, 2009). Studies are still few and come up against the methodological difficulties already mentioned: it is very complicated to isolate the specific causal effect of Internet use and separate it from other possible causes related to the election campaign of the parties and candidates (resources, innovation), as well as it being difficult to estimate possible indirect effects (such as the effect of stimuli originating online but that are afterward passed on face to face).

Reinforcement, engagement, standardisation

These consequences that might come from the emergence of the Internet on attitudes and behaviour do not affect all citizens nor all parties in the same way. The discussion concerning who is more sensitive to the opportunities offered by the Internet can be summarised in the debate about the reinforcement-mobilisation dichotomy.

The perspective of reinforcement argues that it is those people who are normally involved in politics that use the Internet with political aims, to get information, mobilise or participate (Bimber 2001) (Norris 2003) (Margolis and Resnick 2000), and that, therefore, the political use of the Internet reinforces pre-existing political and social inequalities. Lusoli (2005) finds that the search for information via the Internet in Europe is closely related to different indicators of political engagement in campaigns and that socio-demographic factors have greater impact when attitudes towards the election are taken into account. Di Genaro and Dutton (2006) also find reinforcement effects in the British case.

This reinforcement is accentuated because Internet access is strongly conditioned by socio-economic resources and because online skills and familiarity with the Internet can, in turn, constitute a necessary resource for participation (Krueger 2002). In effect, age, education and income are variables that determine the probability of being an Internet user but not so much the probability of using it for political purposes (Anduiza, Cantijoch and Gallec 2008).

Within the perspective of reinforcement, we can situate the debate concerning to what extent media environments affect differences with regard to levels of political knowledge between groups of citizens (so-called *knowledge gaps*). The Internet is

an environment that's very rich in information, with great diversity of content and possibilities of choice that requires initiative on the part of voters to access political content. This kind of media can increase the differences political knowledge between people with the necessary resources and motivations to take advantage of online information and those who are not interested in politics and prefer to dedicate their time online to entertainment (Prior, 2005, 2007) (Delli Carpini and Keeter 2002). Audiences of traditional media such as television are much more susceptible to being exposed inadvertently to political information that might affect not only their knowledge but also their behaviour and their vote, whereas in an environment such as the Internet it is easier for individuals to select the kind of content they wish to be exposed to, eliminating what they are not interested in.

Also from the perspective of reinforcement we must situate the debate of information vs. engagement. Which citizens are more affected by the Internet: undecided users who are looking for information or predisposed people susceptible to becoming engaged? The answer seems to lean towards engagement: according to Bimber and Davis (2003), the Internet does not significantly affect floating voters but reinforces the predisposition of sympathisers. Party positions on this issue, reviewed in the previous section, are consistent with this idea.

Alternatively, the perspective of mobilisation argues that the Internet represents new opportunities to re-balance the distribution of political power. At an individual level, this means that the online world is an opportunity to take part politically, attractive for people reticent in doing so through traditional channels. This would be the case particularly of young people. And here, once again, it is useful to distinguish between access to the Internet, on the one hand, and the political uses made of it, on the other, as although age is clearly crucial in determining the probabilities of being an Internet user, this does not mean that young people are the most participative group among those with Internet access.

With regard to parties and candidates, the theory of re-balancing would mean that the Internet could help towards better election results for marginal candidates and parties with fewer resources and possibilities. The empirical evidence in fact points towards a possible balancing or equalising effect of the Internet, in recognising the comparative advantage it might have for small candidates. But the online sphere increasingly reflects the same inequalities as offline: those parties and candidates with more resources can also spend more online (Margolis and Resnick 2000) and maintain an advantage in terms of the sophistication and visibility of their websites (Gibson, Nixon and Ward 2003).

3. Conclusions

Any attempt at a conclusion regarding the possible consequences of a medium such as the Internet is necessarily risky.

Notwithstanding this, we can summarise a series of aspects concerning which it is possible to identify a certain consensus and reasonable certainty:

1. There is a significant distance between, on the one hand, the potential offered by this new medium both to parties and citizens and, on the other, the reality of the uses made of the Internet by both.
2. In no case is technology the determining factor in the changes occurring; it can accelerate or consolidate prior trends but other factors (organisational, political, institutional, attitudinal) are the crucial aspects that need to be taken into account.
3. Parties (and in those contexts where they are relevant, also candidates) have used the Internet as a communication tool that complements but in no way substitutes offline activities. More recently, in some cases they have also used it as a means of engaging 'cyber-volunteers' to pass on their message and in campaign activities. Although the Internet would make it possible, there has not been any change towards bottom-up campaigns nor have parties opened themselves up to grassroots participation. In the future, parties will have to evaluate the consequences that might be generated by the viral and granular nature of online participation among their activists.
4. Citizens still put their faith in traditional media as their main source of information. Those who look for information on campaigns online are still in the minority, a very small one in the case of Spain.
5. This is also a minority that concentrates socio-economic resources, technological skills and political motivations. As some authors have pointed out, the true digital divide is between citizens who are politically active and those who aren't.
6. The effects of Internet use on knowledge, political engagement and participation, attitudes and behaviour are not negative, as some not very optimistic approaches warned, although they are modest, in accordance with the size of the effects that specialist literature attributes to election campaigns.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/-Archivos/Marginales/2740_2759/2757/e275700.html> (consulted 14 June 2009).
- 2 <<http://www.pewInternet.org/Reports/2008/The-Internet-and-the-2008-Election.aspx>> (consulted 14 June 2009).
- 3 Neither do we have information on the use of some tools such as selectors of candidates and parties. Grönlund (2007) finds that up to 8% of voters consulted them in the Finnish elections of 2003, something that significantly affects their level of knowledge.

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