

MOVING BEYOND THE HYPE CYCLE? THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF THE INTERNET IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

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Abstract

The role of the Internet in election campaigns has been subject to considerable speculation. Has Internet changed the political communication? What role does it play in party and candidate competition? How effective is it concerning voters mobilisation? In discussing these themes, the presentation will draw on evidence from a range of liberal democracies but in particular will illustrate some of the debates with new empirical material from the recent 2010 UK election campaign.

Keywords

Internet; Election campaign; Voter mobilisation.

The role of the internet in election campaigns has been subject to considerable, and often excited, speculation. We have witnessed the emergence of hype-cycles around internet electioneering, with widespread claims about the internet's ability to reshape elections and, indeed, democratise politics more generally. The arrival of so-called web 2.0 tools, (social networking sites, YouTube and blogs), with their stress on the interactive has further heightened such speculation in the past five years. Consequently, in the UK, we've seen consistent media talk, since 2001, about the idea of an internet election, where new technologies somehow dominate communication and discussion around the campaign and also influence the outcome. Similarly, the 2008 US presidential race saw Barack Obama's being dubbed the first internet president with his victory, in part, being seen as due to an effective use of new technologies. However, outside the US, such optimism is often rapidly followed by disappointment about the apparent lack of impact of new technologies, with critics pointing to relatively small audiences for online election information and the continued dominance of traditional political actors and the mainstream media. However, these sorts of exaggerated hype-cycles tend to distort expectations about the internet and distract us from the possibly more subtle influences. Hence, I seek to move beyond the such hype-cycles here to examine more critically the extent to which the internet plays a role in election campaign politics – is it facilitating changes in campaigning styles and, if so, how and where? Alternatively, is it more accurately accelerating trends in campaigning such as personalisation and marketing that were present before the emergence of new technologies? Is the American experience of internet campaigning likely to be repeated

elsewhere? In examining these issues the paper will discuss more specifically three key areas of debate about the role of the internet in elections:

- *The internet and campaign change* – Much of the literature of campaigns since the 1960s has focused on a global convergence of campaign techniques with the professionalization of campaigning, the increasing reliance on political marketing techniques, the centralisation of campaign control and the dominance of television as the key mode of communication. Some have suggested that the internet challenges this model of campaigning in several ways: Firstly, the interactive features of new technology mean that it is going to be increasingly difficult for parties to control campaign messages and that election campaigns are going to see a more active input from voters. Moreover, secondly, the idea of top-down, centrally-driven campaign is also likely to be further threatened by the decentralist tendencies of new media. Hence, for example, in party-centred democracies the internet could allow candidates to personalise, and individualise their campaigns by providing them with relatively cheap platforms of communication outside central party control. Thirdly, the idea of the professionalised campaign controlled by a small coterie of expert specialists (pollsters, journalists, spin doctors) is likely to be challenged as the internet provides information & tools for even ordinary voters to challenge them. Overall, some commentators have suggested that the net is leading to a new [postmodern] era of campaigning.
- *The internet and party/candidate competition* – one of the first questions asked about internet in relation to elections was how it might impact on party competition, notably, how far the rise of new technologies might increase the competitiveness of minor parties and candidates. Initially, it was suggested that the low cost of online campaigning and the lack of a centrally produced and edited news sources would level the campaign communication playing field and increase opportunities for outsider groups to communicate their message. However, repeated studies have tended to support the idea of normalisation – where mainstream parties/candidates have come to dominate new media as they did the traditional broadcast media. Yet, whilst the internet might not have radically reshaped electoral competition one could argue that the internet has helped more fringe parties at least to survive and become more organisationally effective.
- *The internet and voter mobilisation* – Much interest has been generated by the idea that internet might play a role in mobilising voters. One of the key questions (especially given concern over turnout in some western democracies), has been whether the internet can bring new people into the political process or whether

new technologies simply preach to the politically converted/interested and thus entrench participation divides. Although most studies point towards a reinforcement effect, some research has suggested perhaps a more subtle role – of two-step mobilisation whereby the campaigns activate activists who then mobilise others via offline networks and traditional campaign methods.

In discussing these themes, the paper will draw on evidence from a range of liberal democracies but in particular will illustrate some of the debates with new empirical material from the recent 2010 UK election campaign.