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POLITICAL PARTIES, PARTY COMMUNICATION AND NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

The article provides a theoretical overview of how parties in modern democracies are using the Internet to perform a range of key functions, such as opinion formation, interest mediation and party organization. Drawing on the party goals' literature and classic party typologies, the central argument of the article is that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are utilized in different ways by different types of political parties. While some parties stress the downward dissemination of information via new ICTs, others emphasize their interactive and targeting possibilities. The findings of the articles included in this Special Issue are profiled and assessed for the extent to which they provide empirical support for the strategies outlined.

KEY WORDS ■ campaigns ■ communication ■ new ICTs ■ political parties

Introduction

In modern mass democracies it is political parties that connect government and the governed with one another: 'Citizens in modern democracies are represented through and by parties' (Sartori, 1976: 24), which means that communication occurs through political parties and comes from them. Sarcinelli (1998: 277) ascribes a 'communicative hinge function' to parties in the democratic process; they perform a reciprocal middleman service in the communication between state agencies and citizens, in both the process of opinion formation and the process of interest mediation. 'Parties can best be conceived as means of communication' (Sartori, 1976: 28). This connecting function is also made clear in the party literature (Key, 1961; Lawson, 1980; Sartori, 1976).

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Hence, the history of political parties is also a history of political communication. Depending on the technological possibilities, political parties have communicated with citizens in various ways during different stages of their development (Farrell and Webb, 2000; Gibson and Römmele, 2001; Norris, 2000; Römmele, 2002). The earliest forms of campaigning were characterized by face-to-face communication among party members and voters, and mass events and rallies organized by the party were dominant. During the second or 'modern' era of political campaigns, communication switched to the more impersonal channel of the mass media, especially TV. With weakening ties between citizens and parties, a maximizing of communicative contacts was seen as vital to winning elections, a task for which television seemed better suited than any other medium. In the past decade, a third mode of election campaigning is said to have emerged in post-industrial democracies. While initially it was referred to in generic terms as an Americanized style of campaigning (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996), recently it has had more historical or developmental labels applied to it, such as postmodern (Norris, 2000), phase 3 (Farrell and Webb, 2000) and post-Fordist (Denver and Hands, 2002). Despite these differences in nomenclature, there is considerable agreement between these scholars as to the central features of this new era of party campaigning. First, the tools or mechanics of campaigning are seen to have changed with the adoption of new communication technologies such as the Internet, direct mailing and telephone banks. These innovations have occurred alongside an intensification of existing methods for divining voters' thoughts, such as opinion polls and focus groups. In addition, there have been changes to the internal workings of parties, with a shift of power upward and outward to leaders and external media and public relation consultants (Mair et al., 1999). Most fundamentally, perhaps, the overall style of political campaigning is seen to have become more business-like in its approach (Gibson and Römmele, 2001).

In this article I attempt to place the role of new ICTs in the context of this more professionalized model of party communication and provide some theoretical speculation on whether and how its new possibilities will be exploited. My central contention is that while some generic change will take place among parties, adaptation cannot be understood as a 'one-size-fits-all' model. Drawing on the party goals' literature and classic party typologies, I argue that new ICTs will play different roles for different parties. In brief, while some parties are expected to emphasize the participatory aspects of the new technology, others will focus on the possibilities for top-down information dissemination and broad monitoring of public opinion. In making such an argument, I eschew rigid technological and socially determinist views of new ICTs and opt for a more mid-range perspective. The impact of innovations such as the Internet on political actors is in part a function of their inherent technical capabilities, but also a product of the context in which they are used. Of course, ultimately, systematic comparative analysis

will be necessary to test these propositions – a goal which this volume aims to provide a first step toward.

Party Communication and New ICTs

There are numerous ways of systematizing the various Internet communication facilities and possibilities, in part because the degree of differentiation of political Net-communication has increased rapidly over recent years. Some scholars differentiate between internal and external communication (i.e. Leggewie, 2002). Our categorization is guided by the key functions that political parties fulfil in representative democracies, i.e. opinion formation (informing the electorate), interest mediation (participation of the electorate) and organization (of the party), and in particular the communicative tasks underlying those functions.

Opinion Formation

New ICTs offer political actors direct contact with citizens and thereby an advantage over existing media. Parties are able to control the content and 'dosage' of political information that they emit via the Internet and so can offer unfiltered information to the public and also to more specific target groups. This is particularly useful for smaller and less established parties, parties that do not receive as much attention in the mass media and that have a difficult time obtaining the financial means needed for direct mailing and telemarketing.

In the early days, parties were largely content to put advertising material on the Net, with websites serving as a broad information board for citizens as well as journalists. Much of the information provided on the home pages of parties was taken from the parties' standard official material, e.g. the party charters and the party history (Löfgen, 2000: 63). While retaining some of these more basic characteristics, many party sites have moved on to offer more of an 'online magazine' with news updates and personalizing options. Some parties have even started to invest in making their sites 'political Web portals' which serve as a broad entry point for users into politics online (Leggewie and Bieber, 2001: 39).

As well as expanding the style and content of the general information provided online, parties have also moved to make use of new ICTs to inform particular subgroups within the electorate, and more particularly their own members. Password-protected areas of the public site are now common with members gaining access to private party documents and news.

Interest Mediation

Whereas information via the mass media is unidirectional, new ICTs have the potential of offering a truly participatory element. Citizens have the

opportunity to use interactive features offered on the parties' websites. Thus, parties are presented with a new way to open themselves up to interested citizens who might not have had the time or capacity to become involved in the more conventional forms of party membership. In addition to opening up a dialogue with the electorate at large, the interactivity of the Internet can also be used by parties to build greater links with members. These linkages can take a bilateral form, such as email between the party and voter or member, or be multilateral, involving many actors in online chat rooms, bulletin boards or special question-and-answer sessions. The latter tend to be more time-restricted and topic-focused events involving 'celebrity' or elite level participation. These electronic linkages make possible the forging of new group identities and thus new interests among party members that are not limited by geography. In addition, applying the technology to current practice allows for more regularized discussion within existing groups and thus the cementing or reinforcement of existing commitments among members. Such an understanding builds on the 'bridging' and 'bonding' role assigned to online technologies in building communities (Norris, 2002), with 'bridging groups' functioning to unite disparate members of a community and 'bonding groups' reinforcing close-knit networks among people sharing similar backgrounds and beliefs (Putnam, 2000).

Party Organization

New ICTs are successfully being implemented in the area of the party organization, too. Day-to-day administrative processes are simplified and accelerated via intranets; coordination of different party branches becomes easier. Above all, during election campaigns the intranet constitutes a strategically important tool because not only is it an additional channel for the distribution of material and a medium for campaign management, it also enables region-wide mobilization of the active party base. For new parties in particular, such developments provide the means to building an organizational infrastructure that avoids the usual costs of regional headquarters and physical participation in the party organization. At the extreme, such possibilities lead to the formation of 'virtual' parties, such as the German party 'Die Digitalen', which ran in the 1999 local government election in Berlin. This party operated on an Internet basis only, with an 'open policy' programme whereby policy formulation was subject to any interested person online. So-called party members were solely in charge of organizing and coordinating the process of policy development. Another example to be drawn upon is the Swedish Leftist Party and its hearings – via the Internet – of party policy to the electorate in general (Löfgren, 2001). While such developments are potentially revolutionary, greater reliance on electronic methods for party mobilization of course raises important questions about the nature of the bonds that will develop between the parties and the voters,

and the overall meaning and relevance of party membership. Do such steps push us further toward the 'consumer-citizen' model – the minimal member – content to interact with others in a wholly virtual world without any face-to-face interaction? Can such a model even be sustained beyond an election given the realities of present-day governing systems? It would seem inevitable that these new party elements would need to develop a 'real world' component if they wanted to have any direct influence over policy outcomes.

Parties and New ICTs: Models of Adaptation

Given the quite significant changes that new ICTs can be seen to have on political parties, the question to be examined here is the extent to which parties will actually undergo the transformations detailed above. In general, political parties are conservative organizations and are reluctant to embrace wholesale and major change. Nevertheless, most parties do recognize that they need to respond to environmental conditions. This is particularly the case with regard to external communication with voters. The changing nature of media technology and above all the rise of TV has clearly forced parties to professionalize their management of public relations and to make increasing use of external party consultants and agencies (Farrell, 1996: 168–72).[1] In addition, dealignment within the electorate in established democracies (Dalton, 2000; Dalton et al., 2000; Wattenberg, 2000) has also led parties to reduce their sectoral appeal in favour of more diffuse catch-all programmes.

All of these tendencies are encapsulated in the ongoing discussion about the so-called 'Americanization' or 'Modernization' of political campaigns across the world (Norris, 2001; Plasser and Senft, 1999). While this debate provides a useful basis for understanding current shifts in the nature of party communication with voters, much of the work in this area has focused on the systemic level forces involved in such change. As such, we have a basis on which to interpret developments *between* different party systems, but little insight into why the differences emerge between parties *within* a given system. Some parties are clearly adept at using the new techniques, whereas others are far more resistant. Given the potential for new ICTs to be used in different ways, as highlighted above, it is clear that much of the recent literature on changes in party communication does not provide a basis for speculation on how individual parties would respond. In order to address this question, therefore, we turn to the literature that has focused on differentiating political parties – that relating to primary goals (Budge and Keman, 1990; Harmel and Janda, 1994; Laver and Schofield, 1990; Ström, 1990).

Party Goals and New ICT Strategy

While some observers have put forward the argument that the main goal of every party is to win elections (Downs, 1957), the growing body of literature on political parties has demonstrated the need to look at more possibilities than electoral performance as the primary force behind a party's behaviour. As Deschouwer states:

> Electoral results are important. But they are not equally important for all parties, and for a single party they do not always have the same importance. . . . A party primarily oriented towards political power certainly needs voters, but is not necessarily out of power when it loses. Especially in systems where power is reached through coalition formation, electoral losses can be of little importance.
>
> (Deschouwer, 1992: 16)

Expanding on this, Harmel and Janda (1994), in their integrated theory of party change, state that 'though all parties have numerous goals, each party has a primary goal' and the primary goal varies among parties – and perhaps within parties over time. In general, the literature distinguishes between at least four different primary party goals: vote maximization, office maximization, representation of members and policy/ideology advocacy (Ström, 1990). Given that it seems reasonable to assume that a party's main goal will affect its campaign strategy and thus the nature of its political communication, this literature would seem to provide a theoretical basis for speculation on how parties might incorporate the new ICTs.

A party that has a primary goal of *vote maximization* must aim at attracting voters from all societal groups, i.e. it not only has to mobilize its own electorate it also has to convince the undecided voters of its party programme. A vote maximizing party, in general, does not make a sharp distinction between its voters and its members. The electorate at large has become more important to the party because the party cannot rely on the support of predefined groups and interests at elections. Those party goals can be brought together with two party models known from the literature, namely the catch-all party (Kirchheimer, 1966) and the cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995).

The ICT strategy supporting a vote-maximizing party will mainly be concerned with top-down information; broadcasting via new ICTs is the dominant communication strategy. The trend toward personalization of political communication is also expected to appear in vote-maximizing parties' use of new ICTs, with an emphasis on leaders and candidates within the party appearing on the website. In addition, the party will push targeted information toward specific subgroups in society. As Löfgen points out (2000: 16), even though the websites fulfil the function of bypassing the traditional mass media, the ICT strategy is strongly attached to the symbolic rationality of modern mass media, and is interacting with it. Party members will be provided with the same channels for communication as the voters,

but can be provided with some selective fora for arguments and debate, and easier access to the information systems. Organizationally, local branches will be supported in building their own websites, but within centrally authorized templates and guidelines. In campaigns, vote maximizers will also make use of an intranet to optimize their campaign and to mobilize their ground troops and thus the broader electorate.

In terms of interest mediation, if interactive elements such as chat rooms or question-and-answer sessions are used, the process will be strictly controlled by the party and used primarily as a way of monitoring public opinion rather than one of stimulating debate (Löfgen, 2000: 15). In recent research, Pennings and Hazan (2001) discuss the strengthening of voters' and members' sense of involvement as one new method of increasing a party's popularity and of gaining votes in elections. Although the authors focus largely on democratization of candidate selection as one way of increasing public involvement, attention is also paid to the Internet as having the potential to 'bring citizens back in' to the process. However, given the rationale of a vote-maximizing party, the key question is basically whether these offers are primarily meant to give the party a new, 'more democratic' image.

In pure two-party systems, one cannot distinguish between vote maximizers and *office maximizers*, since in such a context winning the election also means controlling government. In multiparty systems, however, office-maximizing parties can be distinguished by their focus on holding positions in a coalition government. In general, however, one would not expect their communication strategy via new ICTs to differ exceptionally from that of vote-maximizing parties. Top-down information dissemination is anticipated to be the principal use. However, because office-maximizing parties have to present themselves as acceptable to all possible coalition partners, one would also expect a more targeted information strategy to be put to use. Different segments of society would be approached with tailored information that might be attractive to them. In particular, small office-seeking parties not yet in power would see new ICTs as an invaluable way of informing voters and members about their political programme and of bypassing the traditional media given its greater coverage of the major parties. If already in power, office-seeking parties might also be particularly aggressive in utilizing the Web to draw greater attention to themselves. Within the party, new ICTs will be used for internal communication, although they will play a minimal role (if at all) in relations with membership, most attention being focused on the public promotion of the website through leaflets, general campaign material or even press conferences for relaunches of websites.

Whereas vote-maximizing and office-seeking parties most likely adopt a top-down information strategy when using new ICTs, parties with *intra-party democracy* as their primary goal stress the participatory aspect of the new communication technology. Parties whose primary goal is that of active

representation of members' wishes see themselves as accountable to their members and not the electorate at large. Elected politicians perceive themselves as legitimate delegates of well-defined and predefined social groups and interests. Party members are incorporated at all different levels of the political process and membership is bound up in all aspects of the individual's life. Members are given exclusive rights, which are not transferable to the voter. While the traditional mass party type would seem to be most obviously matched to this goal, the development of more recent political formations committed to a grassroots strategy such as Green parties also fits this model.

For such parties, the overall focus of implementing new ICTs is bottom-up communication and the promotion of member input. Truly participatory elements give members the opportunity to express their interests, and their demands are placed in the limelight. Intra-organizational electronic debate fora would be established to generate this input and also to provide top-down direction for members (Löfgen, 2000: 13). The primary focus of the public website would be the party programme rather than any personalized features on candidates and leaders.

The literature on political parties as well as party goals says comparatively little about *policy-seeking parties*. Ström sees the policy-seeking party as the 'least developed model of competitive party behavior' (1990: 568). Budge and Keman (1990) have argued that 'a policy-based perspective must put more emphasis than the office-seeking perspective on parties' concern not just with important ministries, but with ministries in the particular areas of their interest (p. 53). Thus it is not just a question of getting an equivalent general return for their support, but also one of securing a specific ministry or ministries because of their significance for the party's policy concerns. The communication strategy of policy-seeking parties, therefore, is most likely to be dominated by getting one message across – the consequence for new ICT usage being that it will serve as a useful channel for informing a broad audience, as well as targeted groups,

Table 1. Party goals and new ICTs

	Communication strategy	*Target audience*	*Message*
Vote maximizing	Top-down broadcasting	Voters	Personalized on top candidate
Office maximizing	Top-down	Voters	Personalized on top candidate
		Target groups	
Intra-party democracy	Intranet, bottom-up	Members	Party programme
Policy-seeking	Top-down and bottom-up	Target group	Policy

about what the party stands for. The message, therefore, will be more policy-oriented and less concentrated on political candidate(s). If a candidate is emphasized, he or she must have expertise on the very one policy the party stands for.

A summary of the preceding discussion is given in Table 1, where party models are classified according to their dominant use of new ICTs. The category entries of course represent only ideal types, rather than specific real-world examples.

Conclusions

This article has sought to present a theoretical exposition of the ways in which parties can be expected to use the new communication tools. The central point of the exercise has been to show that parties will have different approaches to using new ICTs based largely on their primary goal orientation. Empirical studies are obviously needed to establish just how far party implementation of these tools follows the anticipated path.

While not a systematic test, this special issue offers an up-to-date overview of how political parties are using new ICTs in established democracies as well as in the new democracies in east and central Europe. As such it represents a first bid to amass some of the empirical evidence needed to investigate the issues of differentiation among parties in their participatory, disseminating and organizing uses of the new media.

The contributions to this volume, while addressing a variety of research questions do offer some interesting empirical insight into the validity of the models of adaptation presented here. In particular, the smaller 'n' comparative studies of Gibson et al. and Semetko and Krasnoboka provide some interesting evidence with which to examine these assumptions. Overall, the findings from the US and UK party systems do indicate that mainstream vote-maximizing parties are proving keen to exploit the new ICTs for top-down information provision, with participatory elements occupying less prominence. There are, however, some parties that clearly stand out in opting for more genuinely interactive uses of the technology – the Greens in the UK and the Reform Party in the USA – these being newer formations that have based themselves around a more participatory ethos for intra-party democracy.

The findings for Eastern and Central European parties reveal a more uniform picture, with most websites aiming at opinion formation for a variety of electors in a catch-all manner, rather than targeting their message or soliciting communication from citizens. Although one might expect greater variance in these systems given the large number of parties that exist, parties in Russia and Ukraine, like the societies in which they operate, are still in the process of defining themselves. Expecting them to have settled upon primary goals at this stage, therefore, may be somewhat premature. It

is interesting to note that the 'party of power' category added by Oversloot and Verheul (2000) to the party models of Katz and Mair (1995) does appear to have relevance for distinguishing between parties in terms of their overall website quality, particularly in Russia. The governing parties, as well as their key supporters in parliament, offer some of the most functional and easily accessible sites within the system generally. On the whole, however, simply identifying themselves to the electorate using the Web would seem to be the major ambition of most parties, especially given the high level of public scepticism toward parties in these countries – a legacy from Communist Party days. In addition, given that the proportion of the public with access to the Web is miniscule compared with that in the USA and West European countries, simply by having a website the parties are targeting potential opinion leaders (workers who have access in their offices) who can generate discussion/leadership in community networks.

Tkach-Kawasaki's study of Japanese parties also focuses on a changing party system. She reveals that while the hegemonic Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was slow to grasp the possibilities of the Internet, the new crop of smaller office-seeking parties, such as the Democratic Party of Japan and New Komeito, were highly attuned to incorporating the Internet into their media strategy. These parties worked particularly hard to target younger urban voters and were the first to facilitate online donations. By the 2001 election, when the LDP was beginning to recover some ground in Internet campaigning and develop a clearer strategy, its deployment largely followed vote-maximizing lines, with an emphasis on information provision and a highly personalized focus on the new leader Koizumi.

Although no explicit reference is made to policy-seeking parties in the collection of articles presented here, Dutton and Lin's work on a single-issue campaign in Los Angeles, and Tkach-Kawasaki's study of Japan support the idea that ICTs can work in policy-specific ways and produce legislative reform. Indeed, if any general lessons can be drawn from this volume about the impact of new ICTs on politics, it would seem that less democratized contexts with lower numbers of Internet users do not present barriers to Web and email mobilization. Indeed, managed correctly, the technology appears to be able to operate as a real force for change. Within more liberalized and pluralized polities, new ICTs do appear to be strengthening communication pluralism by widening the information available about minor parties and promoting specific advocacy campaigns; however, they are generally not leading to any far-reaching redress of existing power relations.

As well as addressing the broader questions covered in this introduction, the studies in this volume also have their own specific research questions focusing on a wide array of theoretical and empirical issues concerning the impact of new ICTs on political parties. Specifically:

Pippa Norris takes the broadest view of political parties online, examining 134 party websites worldwide she asks how far they are really expanding

communication pluralism as well as opportunities for citizens to participate within parties. Do party websites increase the visibility of minor and fringe parties, and allow attentive citizens to learn more about the range of electoral choices? The top-down analysis of party sites is complemented by findings from survey data of the public using party websites in the 15 European Union member states.

Taking a smaller 'n' approach, the Semetko and Krasnoboka and Gibson et al. articles focus on the question of how far national institutional and cultural factors affect parties use of the WWW in election campaigning? The Gibson et al. article compares British and American parties' and candidates' election sites during the Presidential and General Elections of 2000 and 2001 and asks two basic questions: first, is there a convergence in the styles of Web campaigning across the two systems? And second, does the Web offer a more balanced or equalized exposure for parties' messages compared with other media? Since parties in both countries have a well-established Web presence, with most having already launched one cyber-campaign at the national level, investigation of trends toward standardization and normalization in parties' online practices are both timely and relevant.

Moving from developed democracies to societies in transition, Semetko and Krasnoboka tackle key questions about inter-party competition in a comparative analysis of the party systems in Russia and Ukraine on the Web. Do the major parties dominate as in more established systems or does a newer party system allow for a more open playing field? The authors also probe how significant party information provided on the Net is for voters in these countries, compared with other information sources on and off the Web? Given the controlled information climate of the past, are online news sources given greater credence than their offline counterparts, and how popular are parties' sites with citizens compared to media sites?

Turning to the policy implications of online campaigning, the Dutton and Lin report examines a cyber-advocacy campaign that took place in California and managed to bring about public policy and regulatory change in US telecommunications. The study reveals that not only did the Internet promote and facilitate collective action, it also changed the mode of communication among the key players. Using the Web, the initiators (a Los Angeles plastic surgeon and a local newspaper columnist) succeeded in bypassing the traditional media gatekeepers and geographical barriers to gain momentum for their 'Stop the Overlay' campaign. The authors raise questions, however, about the sustainability of such networks and thus their ability to enact policy change in any long-term fashion.

Another example of new ICTs being harnessed to facilitate political reform in an even more forceful way is presented by Leslie Tkach in her analysis of the development of Japanese politicians' and political parties' Web campaigning. Tkach reports on how the Internet campaigning environment in Japan became increasingly restricted from the mid-1990s under the one-party rule of the LDP. The enthusiasm for cyber-campaigns among newer

smaller parties, however, remained undiminished and served as a rallying point for their wider push toward a more genuinely multiparty system.

Notes

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1 Abrupt change is, on the other hand, often a direct result of decisions made by the party itself. In this case there is regulatory and structural change, strategic and tactical reorientation as well as programmatic revisions. This deals with reactions to actual or, at least, recognized environmental changes that, in the first place, manifest themselves for the parties in unsatisfactory voting results**.** The German Social Democratic Party after 1959 serves as a good example here. After heavy electoral defeats the SPD performed an ideological shift to the right for electoral gains.

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