

# The normalization of online campaigning in the web.2.0 era

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## Abstract

This article is based on a comparative study of online campaigning and its effects by country and over time, using four of the largest European Union member states (France, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom) as a case study. Our research explores the extent of embeddedness of online campaigning, the strategic uses of the whole online environment and in particular the use of the interactive features associated with web.2.0 era. However, our research goes beyond studies of online campaigning as we also determine whether online campaigning across platforms matters in electoral terms. Our data support the normalization hypothesis which shows overall low levels of innovation but that the parties with the highest resources tend to develop online campaigns with the highest functionality. We find that there is a vote dividend for those parties which utilized web.2.0 features the most and so offered visitors to their web presence a more interactive experience.

## Keywords

Content analysis, Europe-related issues, Internet related, methodology, political communication

## Introduction

The 21st century cluttered and fragmented media environment means political campaigns find audiences hard to reach. Face-to-face communication remains the top communication priority (Lilleker et al., 2015b), but reaching voters on doorsteps and high streets is highly challenging in an era of hectic social lives, irregular work patterns and

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multi-occupancy accommodation. To compensate for communication challenges, and due to the potential reach and low resource cost, campaigning using a range of digital tools and platforms is now firmly embedded within party campaign strategies with usage of a range of online tools, from email and websites (which have a long history) to the more recently popular social tools (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) now almost de rigeur (Lilleker et al., 2014). Studies of online campaigning find that election campaigns utilize the online environment mainly for providing information (persuading) as well as making attempts to mobilize party members and supporters. Despite the interactive affordances of digital technologies, hosting debates or discussions around party policy, campaigns and tactics have historically been marginal activities. Our data explore whether the limited functional use of the online environment remains the case through a case study of four nations: France, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom. Our sample represents the largest European Union (EU) nations, all with a regional list system except Poland which has regional lists but uses a preferential voting system, but differing party systems and contexts (see also Lilleker et al., 2011). In order to assess the evolution of online campaigning strategy, we compare data from the 2009 and 2014 European Parliamentary elections. However, this study goes beyond studies of online campaigning by developing analytical tools to determine whether online campaigning performance across platforms matters in electoral terms. We hypothesize that greater use of specific digital platforms for certain functions, in particular greater interactive use of social media, may have a positive impact on vote share. We therefore determine patterns in party strategies, detect change over time and test the explanatory power of the normalization and equalization hypotheses for explaining online campaign performance. We also use the data to explore the extent that online campaign performance, and the adoption of interactive functions, impact party vote shares to determine whether online campaigning might have an impact upon election outcomes.

## **Theoretical framework**

New communication technologies, it was initially suggested, would have a profound impact on existing power relationships within society, in particular leading to a flatter, more equal hierarchy between organizations and ideologies. The so-called cyber-optimists suggested that greater use of the Internet by individual citizens would 'level the playing field' (Bimber, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). The equalization hypothesis argued that existing power elites' dominance relied upon their greater access to traditional media through the exercise of information subsidies (Gandy et al., 1992). In contrast, in the age of the Internet, communication technologies facilitated the bypassing of traditional media by political actors allowing them to communicate directly to, and in the web.2.0 era with, citizens. Within the context of election contests, the equalization hypothesis implied smaller political parties would be more likely to utilize the Internet and use a range of resources to build awareness and gain support. Early studies within the post-2005 web.2.0 era suggested, in particular, that it would be smaller parties that were most likely to adopt a more interactive paradigm of campaigning to compensate for the low attention mass media would award them (Chen, 2010; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009).

However, empirical evidence largely disproved the equalization hypothesis; rather, in most cases, the normalization of power relations was found in online environments. Empirical findings popularized the normalization hypothesis, which suggests that power relationships are immutable independent of the media environment (Bellamy and Raab, 1999), and therefore political power relations online would demonstrate ‘politics as usual’ (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Existing electoral inequalities would be reinforced by digital technologies (D’Alessio, 1997; Davis, 1999) and, independent of the ability to communicate, communicating would not equate to being heard (Hindman, 2008). Put simply, the attention that highly resourced political parties are paid offline by traditional media would be the major driver of traffic to their online presences. Similarly, the access to greater resources will mean that the most popular parties in parliament will also be most innovative in their use of digital technology.

The weight of evidence has consistently demonstrated the explanatory power of normalization. Research into online campaigning in Germany during both national (Schweitzer, 2008) and European Parliamentary (EP) elections (Schweitzer, 2009) demonstrated huge disparities between the sophistication of the websites of parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties. A similar pattern was demonstrated in a comparative study of the online campaigns of major and minor candidates during the 2007 French presidential elections (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014a; Vedel and Koc-Michalska, 2009) and subsequently when comparing Polish and French parties (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2014). Studies of UK parties found, during election campaigns in the late 1990s, some evidence that smaller parties were the most likely to be early adopters of technology (Gibson and Ward, 1999), specifically those on the right of the political spectrum (Copsey, 2003). However, longitudinal studies have largely found that developments are better explained by the ebb and flow thesis. Ebb and flow recognizes that at certain times, some parties will be the most innovative in campaigning. However, any innovation that is seen to have impact is quickly adopted by other parties who may add a further layer of innovation. At the same time, studies find early adopters’ campaigns become static and less innovative between contests. Initially, this was demonstrated during the UK EP contest in 1999 when smaller parties offered websites with greater functionality than those of larger parties (Gibson and Ward, 2000); equally during the 2005 General Election, smaller parties were most likely to use the Internet for mobilizing supporters (Jackson, 2006) and were found to be more likely to explore the potential of web.2.0 applications (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009). However, temporally comparative research allowed the ebb and flow to be visible across elections culminating in the finding that by the 2014 EP election, the design and sophistication of the six UK party web presences included in the study were almost identical (Lilleker et al., 2015). While a limited sample, the study shows that innovations do not appear to be the result of resources but more likely to be a feature of prevailing thinking within a party as strategy is developed for a specific contest building on lessons from previous performance.

Despite the power of the ebb and flow thesis, normalization remains dominant when looking across the range of studies. Therefore, we would expect that parties with higher levels of representation in national parliaments, so reflecting their support within their nation, and who have long-term experience of competing nationally and in EP contests would offer the most innovative and sophisticated web presences. In other words, the

parties with the greatest resources will be most likely to be early adopters of features and have web presences that encompass a greater number of features and so will have greater functionality. However, given the longitudinal component to our study, it is likely that some evidence will support an 'ebb and flow' of adoption of specific online features and functions, in particular the features which offer interactive functionality to visitors. A previous study of online campaigning across these four nations found 'a range of party web presences offering a rich experience that combines engaging features with the delivery of information'; however, differences could be clearly explained by resources and campaigning experience resulting in the conclusion that 'while we find web 2.0 features to be taken up by all parties across our four nations at the 2009 EP elections, the degree to which this has happened is still a function of traditional patterns in offline politics' (Lilleker et al., 2011: 208). The question this article poses is whether we find similar results, and so our conclusions present the definitive answer to questions on online campaigning or whether we find evidence of ebb and flow between 2009 and 2014 across time and nations. Arguably, we might expect this to be the case given that a study of the attitudes of campaign managers and strategists in 16 EU member states showed new media to be fully embedded within campaign design by most parties in most nations. Differences in priorities cannot be explained by national or party-related factors; rather, the authors suggest, the extent of new media usage may be more a factor of individual choice among party strategists than the available resources: 'Strategists evaluate highly the communication tools they find to be appropriate within the context in which they operate and hence the weightings they award to these tools are shaped by a range of factors' (Lilleker et al., 2014: 16).

The factor that may determine uptake, or not, of the various functions afforded through the adoption of online communication tools is therefore a judgement regarding the perceived value. Put simply, is there a potential for building a sophisticated website, becoming more interactive, colonizing social media and building an online network to translate into votes? It has been tentatively argued that this might be the case. Normatively, it is suggested that a more interactive and accessible style may be rewarded (Simmons et al., 2010). The challenge, however, is that it is almost impossible to prove unequivocally due to the complexity of isolating any single aspect of a campaign. However, within the context of an EP election, campaigns in these countries tend to be homogeneous, they are largely low-resourced, national-level, party-driven campaigns with minimal local campaigning beyond posters and mailouts with media attention being given to the most popular parties. Therefore, within this context, we argue that it is possible to assume that the campaign across all other elements is roughly similar and, using the *ceteris paribus* principle, considers all other aspects fairly equal, so allowing us to detect an effect from web-based campaign performance. Due to the number of parties (228) across the four nations, there is sufficient number to perform regression analysis; therefore, we test whether there are any differentials in vote share which can be explained by online performance scores for the use of features consistent with the information age of Internet communication (web.1.0) or those developed for the interactive age (web.2.0). In particular, we are able to determine whether parties who adopt a more interactive communication strategy online gain a vote dividend as some studies have indicated may be the case (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014b; Simmons et al., 2010).

This article, therefore, focuses on four discrete research questions:

*RQ1.* Can we detect greater innovations in online campaigning across the EU nations in 2014 as compared to 2009?

*RQ2.* Can we detect a shift to an online communication strategy consistent with the usage of web.2.0 tools in 2014 and are party and nation variables moderating factors?

*RQ3.* Does the normalization hypothesis remain the most powerful explanatory factor for variation in innovations in the development of online strategies?

*RQ4.* Can we detect a positive impact from variations in online campaigning styles and strategies on share of vote earned by parties?

## Methodology

Four nations were selected for inclusion in the study: France, Germany, Great Britain and Poland. These represent the largest EU member nations, with the highest number of parties standing for election. These nations elect members of European Parliament (MEPs) from party lists to represent regions within the nation, thus allowing us to isolate national and party-related causes for variances in online communication strategy.

Content analysis of the main party websites, or where appropriate specific campaign websites, was conducted in the last 7 days of the campaign (1–7 June 2009 and 18–25 May 2014). The coding scheme was based upon that developed by Gibson and Ward (2000) and updated to include social media in more recent studies (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009; Koc-Michalska et al., 2014a). In all, 214 features, dependent on the type of site, were identified as present or absent using a standardized survey for all countries. The coding was performed on 228 parties (98 in 2009 and 130 in 2014). The number of parties per country and other key data on the nation are included in Table 1. The parties' selection was according to official registration with national election committees, regardless of results in previous elections. The websites were coded by four coders, all coders passed inter-coder reliability tests (Krippendorff's alpha: .76) and any irregularities were checked and corrected. The final Holsti reliability coefficient was .87. This measurement is appropriate for data on a nominal level where coders decide only for absence or presence of features as in our study (cf. Stempel, 2003: 216; Watt and Van den Berg, 1995: 375).

Features were grouped, first, as belonging to web.1.0 or web.2.0, and also whether the main function was to provide information, encourage visitor engagement, mobilize support or allow interactivity; the groupings are outlined below and full details can be found in Appendix 1. The feature groupings were based upon previous coding schemas developed for the analysis of party websites (De Landtsheer et al., 2005; Gibson and Ward, 2000; Koc-Michalska et al., 2014a; Lilleker et al., 2011; Lilleker and Malagón, 2010). Consistent with the approach of Farmer and Fender (2005: 49; see also Koc-Michalska et al., 2014a; Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2013), indexes of the average number of features for each grouping were created: web.1.0, web.2.0, information provision, engagement, mobilization and interactivity. The feature groupings allow us to understand the

**Table 1.** Sample size and key national statistics aiding comparison 2009 and 2014.

	GB		FR		GER		PL	
	2009	2014	2009	2014	2009	2014	2009	2014
Years in the EU	36	41	52	57	52	57	5	10
Number of seats in EP	72	72	72	72	99	96	50	51
Turnout in 2004 (%)	38.9		42.7		43		20.4	
Turnout in 2009 (%)	34.7		40.6		43.3		24.5	
Turnout in 2014 (%)	35.4		42.4		48.1		23.8	
Number of country's residents (millions)	59.8	64.3	62.1	65.8	81	82	37.8	38.4
Country's GDP	116.2	106	107.9	108	115.6	124	56.4	68
Internet connections (% of population)	77.9	89	69.3	84	67	85	53	65
Number of parties included	22	49	31	40	32	28	12	14

Sources: [www.elections2014.eu](http://www.elections2014.eu), [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com), [ec.europa.eu/](http://ec.europa.eu/)  
 GDP: gross domestic product; EU: European Union; EP: European Parliament.

key functions of parties' websites. To compare online performance, we generated an average online performance (AOP) score (calculating an overall mean per type of communication from the maximum possible score in that strategy). This allows for straightforward comparisons of categories containing unequal numbers of features (scores are calculated by dividing the number of indicators present by the total number of features within that grouping).

## Dependent and independent variables

The article is based on seven dependent variables. Six derived from the website content analysis, they are constructed as indexes (see Appendix 1, Table 9).

The two discrete categories, *web.1.0* and *web.2.0*, are constructed from an exclusive set of features (only in one of the categories) and four inclusive indexes (features may belong to more than one index): *information provision*, *engagement*, *mobilization* and *interactivity provision* (Lilleker et al., 2011). The features used in this article were available for the construction of the website or social media presence in both years (2009 and 2014) allowing to control for real change in online campaigning and not simply detecting technological development.

Finally, in order to indicate the potential influence of online performance, parties' *electoral performance* from 2009 and 2014 EP elections is used.

*Web.1.0* strategy index is based on the traditional website style and does not employ any interactive feature, and it contains 30 features (Cronbach  $\alpha = .753$ ). On the contrary, *web.2.0* is more innovative utilizing interactive and discussion-based communication and is based on 18 features ( $\alpha = .753$ ). Those two indexes are further used as independent variables to explain vote share. Pearson's correlation between the indexes is .55.

*Information provision* consists of 22 features ( $\alpha = .671$ ), *engagement* 17 features ( $\alpha = .663$ ), *mobilization* 15 features ( $\alpha = .689$ ) and *interactivity* strategy 15 features

( $\alpha = .680$ ). As could be expected due to inclusivity of the features, the correlations between different indexes are high ( $.67 < p > .84$ ).

Independent variables follow the literature (Gibson and Römmele, 2009; Lilleker et al., 2014; Tenscher and Mykkänen, 2014) explaining the professionalization of campaigning and parties' electoral outcomes.

*Country differences:* We control for the difference between countries by including a dummy variable for each country, with Germany as the comparative category. On the four countries' level of comparison, this strategy seems to mirror best all the possible meta-characteristics (gross domestic product (GDP), population size, Internet penetration rate, etc.).

*Time difference,* dummy, controls for the election year (2014 = 1).

*Party characteristics:* *Parties present in both elections 2009/2014* (dummy) controls for parties fielding candidates in both years, and 56 parties appear in this group; *party years of existence* (continuous) records number of years of creation; *party size* (dummy) categorizes the parties according to their result in the last national elections and number of seats in the national parliament<sup>1</sup> (or *vote share in last national election* as continuous); *major parliamentary* (scored above 20%<sup>2</sup> in elections and have more than 100 MP,  $N = 16$ ), *minor parliamentary* (other parties present in parliament,  $N = 33$ ), *major fringe parties* (gained more than 1% of national votes,<sup>3</sup>  $N = 18$ ), *minor fringe parties* (all other parties,  $N = 161$ ); *number of seats in EP in previous term* (continuous) is the number of seats gained by parties in EP in 2004 and 2009 elections.

*Party ideology* (dummy) and *EU positioning* (dummy) variables are based on the data delivered by *EU profiler study*.<sup>4</sup> *Party ideology* consists of four categories: right leaning parties ( $N = 58$ ), left leaning parties ( $N = 92$ ), centre leaning parties ( $N = 26$ ) and single issue/other parties ( $N = 52$ ). *EU positioning* identifies three groups: Pro-EU ( $N = 113$ , comparative category), Neutral ( $N = 59$ ) and EU-sceptics ( $N = 56$ ).

## Findings

### *Comparisons by nation and party type over time*

The first layer of analysis focuses on comparing the AOP of parties within each nation, by type of party, between the two elections. The simple feature counts show two clear findings. First, France, Germany and Poland show a fairly consistent pattern across contests, with a strong overall AOP for major parties, and normalization appears the dominant explanation of differences. Using party support (as determined by their position vis-à-vis the national parliament), we find that the major parties which are likely to have the greatest resources at their disposal also have the most sophisticated online campaigns. Great Britain shows a lower overall AOP, and lower differences for party type, with the peak of innovation for major fringe parties witnessed in 2009. But for all four nations, we can observe a smooth transition from major parties downwards in terms of their sophistication in their approach to online campaigning, although this pattern is least pronounced for parties in Great Britain.

The second finding is one of mixed innovations in online campaigning between the nations. The data show a very clear increase in the use of features between the 2009 and

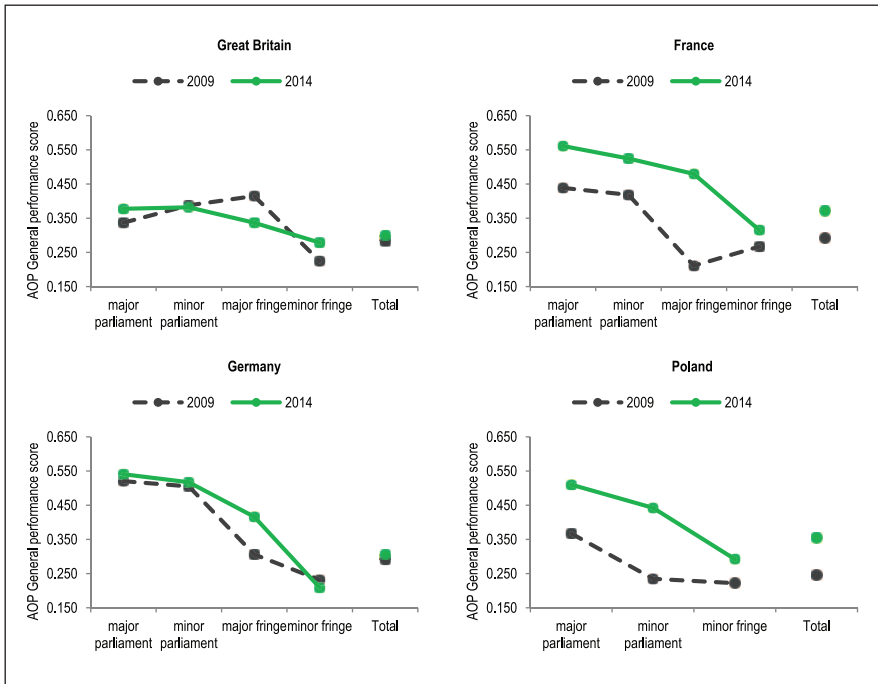
2014 campaigns by parties in France and Poland, with the latter contest showing significant sophistication of online campaigning (general performance AOP score: FR (2009: .292; 2014: .371; difference = 79) and PL (2009: .246, 2014: .356, difference = 110). German and Great British parties also show an increase, but this is very small suggesting that their party online strategies were almost identical in both years (general performance AOP score: DE (2009: .291; 2014: .306, difference = 15) and GB (2009: .283, 2014: .300, difference = 17).

When it comes to performance according to party size, the picture is similar for France and Great Britain where the performance is standardized, especially in the 2014 context. In Great Britain, there is very little difference between the highest and lowest AOP by party type and major and minor parliamentary parties are equal. In France, the gradient is fairly shallow from major parliamentary parties through to major fringe parties, and normalization is only pronounced in the gap to minor fringe parties. However, with the very pronounced differences between party types in German and Poland, we suggest that differences in the sophistication of online campaigns are largely explained by the normalization thesis. The only clear exception to this pattern can be found in Great Britain in 2009 where the minor parliamentary parties outperformed major parliamentary parties, and the major fringe parties outperformed both of them. In 2014, overall online performance shows less differences between parties with vastly different resources leading the online campaign to appear more equal, if relatively less innovative. This may be due partially to the promotion of UK Independent Party (UKIP) to being a minor parliamentary party (having gained two seats in by-elections in 2014); in 2009, it was a minor party. There is also one departure from the normalization pattern, in 2009, in France, where minor fringe parties outperformed major fringe parties. The fact that those anomalies are no longer visible in 2014 appears to confirm that with time the explanatory power of the normalization hypothesis is strengthened (Figure 1).

## **Web.1.0 or web.2.0 communication strategies**

The transition from the informational web to the conversational web, characterized by the web.1.0 and web.2.0 metaphors, is one that has been of interest to many scholars of online campaigning. Comparing all parties standing in 2009 and 2014 in all countries, we note that adoption of web.2.0 has increased significantly between the contests (AOP web.1.0: 2009 = .346, 2014 = .356, difference = 10; AOP web.2.0: 2009 = .187, 2014 = .295, difference = 108). Web.1.0 prevails as the basis for party online communication strategies. However, we find parties embracing a broader range of features that offer the potential for interaction between the organization and visitors to their websites and linked platforms. This is also confirmed with regression analysis (Table 2) which explores the potential for country and party-level independent variables to influence web.1.0 and web.2.0 adoption. Time difference is statistically significant only for web.2.0 performance. The historical experience of the party in EP elections is not significant; there are no performance differences between well-established and new parties. Similarly, years in existence plays no important role in the adoption of either strategy.





**Figure 1.** General online performance (AOP) by nation and party type.

Two-way in-between analysis of variance (ANOVA), statistically significant difference  $p < .05$  for GB (party size, partial eta squared = .217), FR (time, eta = .148; party size eta = .347), DE (party size, eta = .581), PL (time eta = .325; party size eta = .395).

There are significant country-by-country differences in the adoption of web.1.0 and web.2.0 features. France and Germany perform higher for web.1.0 adoption compared to their Polish and UK counterparts. In terms of adopting a web.2.0 strategy, German parties appear to lag behind in comparison to the other sampled countries.

When looking between parties across the four nations, we see that left-wing parties tend to remain locked in a web.1.0 paradigm of online campaigning to a greater extent. This is consistent with Copsey's (2003) finding that right-wing parties were embracing the full potential of online campaigning to a greater degree and that in previous UK-based studies the far-right British National Party outstripped all the competition in using web.2.0 features (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011). We find that although there is no significant effect shown for being a right-wing party, the coefficient is positive for both strategies showing greater sophistication. EU positioning, sceptical, neutral or positive, shows no impact on online performance.

As with general AOP scores, resources seem the key variable that separates parties, with their standing within the national parliament prior to the EP election used as the proxy. Being a minor parliamentary party appears the strongest explanation for the adoption of web.2.0 features. Minor fringe parties (comparison group) are least likely to adopt

**Table 2.** Regression analysis, adoption of web.1.0 and web.2.0 features.

	Web.1.0	Web.2.0
	<i>N</i> = 228	
	<i>B</i> coef.	<i>B</i> coef.
Parties present in both elections 2009/2014	.009	.007
Time difference (2014)	.023	.104***
Country (comparison Germany)		
GB	-.049**	.066**
FR	.045**	.060**
PL	-.067**	.063*
Party characteristics		
Party years of existence	.000	.000
Party ID (comp. single issue party)		
Right	.039	.000
Left	.061**	-.016
Centre	.049	-.022
EU positioning (comp. positive)		
Neutral	.006	-.028
Sceptics	.005	-.016
Party size (comp. minor fringe)		
Major parliamentary	.087	.134*
Minor parliamentary	.117***	.186***
Major fringe	.077**	.105**
Number of seats in EP in previous term	.005*	.002
Constant	.259***	.112**
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.372	.364
Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.328	.319

EU: European Union; EP: European Parliament.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Dependent variables: continues. Panel is based on the parties present online in both EP elections 2009 and 2014. Independent variables: please see explanation in the text.

Significant values: \*\*\*<.001; \*\*<.05; \*<.10.

features from any strategy. However, it is worth noticing that there is no statistically significant difference in web.1.0 performance between major parliamentary and minor fringe parties. This indicates that parties across the spectrum use a range of features most closely associated with the web.1.0 era; however, the parties with the greatest resources supplement these with greater web.2.0 functionality.

Interestingly, the parties who gained most seats at previous EP appear generally to rely on the usage of web.1.0 features. A general conclusion is that, independent of overall age of a party, the experience of standing in multiple elections or ideological stance of the party, the normalization hypothesis provides the strongest explanation for differences in online campaign sophistication, when considering adopting web.2.0 features.

## The web as a campaigning tool

The trends relating to the use of different campaigning strategies (information, engagement, mobilization and interactivity) indicate similar patterns as usage of web.1.0 and web.2.0 strategies. Party history, years of existence, position towards EU and party ideology play no significant role, with the exception being that right leaning parties offer slightly more features that are engaging than their left or centrist counterparts. Engaging features are slightly more likely to be adopted by parties with a record of winning seats in EP elections. Interestingly, the *Engaging* strategy alone did not change much over time (2009 AOP = .248, 2014 AOP = .259). Time difference is statistically significant for *information* (2009 AOP = .327, 2014 AOP = .343), *mobilization* (2009 AOP = .274, 2014 AOP = .344) and *interactivity* (2009 AOP = .249, 2014 AOP = .326). In general, it was the mobilization strategy that was most employed in 2014, replacing information provision from 2009. But these general patterns have their national deviations. We find UK parties focusing a little less on information provision online and French parties a little more. German parties lag in terms of lowest performance in interacting. All parties are increasingly adopting features associated with the development of the conversational web and have created their own architecture of participation for supporters to join, mostly through the widespread colonization of social media platforms, in particular Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. As with previous analyses, the most important variable influencing online performance is resources. We find minor fringe parties performing worse on any online strategy employed, therefore suggesting they struggle to match larger parties and are unable to utilize the potential technology offers to allow them to reach a wider audience online.

Reassessing these findings focusing purely on party type separated by election and nation, we find a further mixed picture. Information provision (Table 4) was the most important strategy in 2009 in France, Germany and Poland; however, it remained the priority in 2014 in France only. German parties changed their strategy towards mobilization and Polish parties towards interactive communication. In Great Britain, the priority shifted from a mobilization strategy in 2009 to interactivity in 2014.

Confirming normalization, major or minor parliamentary parties construct the best online communication regardless of strategy or country. The exception is 2009 when the level of adoption of mobilization, engagement and interactivity strategies by major fringe parties in Great Britain was equal or better than their counterparts. Perhaps this finding relates to the increased focus on online campaigning by UKIP alone. The increase in UKIP's online campaigning activity compared to previous elections (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011; Lilleker et al, 2015a) and embrace of the conversational web indicate an attempt to build support and, once earned, harness their supporters to the campaign. Perhaps this activity is related to UKIP's success in winning most seats overall within the UK contest in 2014, as well as contributing to their success in two by-elections.

However, the interesting finding is not only the average performance in itself, which increased significantly for parliamentary parties, but also improvements in performance over time. Within the countries, we find a few interesting tendencies, both progressive and regressive, in changes in online performance (Tables 3 to 7, YOY = year-on-year difference). In Poland, all parties improved their performance from 2009 regardless of strategy or party size, and interestingly the greatest difference is for minor parliamentary

parties. A similar pattern can be found in France, performance improves for all parties, but major fringe parties improved most. Germany and Great Britain offer a more mixed picture, and information provision is definitely lower in 2014 than in 2009 regardless of party size. The use of features permitting mobilization and interactivity increased slightly in Germany with major fringe parties most improved. There is no visible pattern in Great Britain, performance differs according to party size and year; however, one consistent finding is that major parliamentary parties innovated most compared to the other countries' parties. Therefore, while normalization remains the dominant explanatory hypothesis, there is evidence of ebb and flow in innovations between parties of different types and with differing resource capabilities in some nations (Table 7).

**Table 3.** Regression analysis, usage of the Internet as a campaigning tool.

	Information provision	Engagement	Mobilization	Interactivity
	N = 228			
	B coef.	B Coef.	B coef.	B coef.
Parties present in both elections 2009/2014	.012	.010	.012	.003
Time difference (2014)	.028*	.019	.077***	.076***
Country (comparison Germany)				
GB	-.050**	-.003	.003	.054**
FR	.054**	.118***	.041	.049*
PL	-.039	.007	-.086**	.056*
Party characteristics				
Party years of existence	.000	.000	-.001	.000
Party ID (comp. single issue party)				
Right	.022	.045*	.037	.015
Left	.037	.033	.036	-.001
Centre	.023	.044	.018	.000
EU positioning (comp. positive)				
Neutral	.020	.000	-.029	-.036
Sceptics	-.002	.015	.003	-.026
Party size (comp. minor fringe)				
Major parliamentary	.075	.135**	.189**	.170**
Minor parliamentary	.144***	.183***	.163***	.154***
Major fringe	.093**	.077**	.105**	.102**
Number of seats in EP in previous term	.004	.005*	.003	.002
Constant	.244***	.119***	.200***	.182***
R <sup>2</sup>	.355	.476	.313	.332
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.309	.438	.264	.285

EU: European Union; EP: European Parliament.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Dependent variables: continues. Panel data are omitted due to space limit and results are discussed in the text. Independent variables: please see explanation in the text. Significant values: \*\*\*<.001; \*\*<.05; \*<.10.

**Table 4.** AOP information provision scores per year, party size and country: pooled and panel parties.

	GB			FR			DE			PL		
	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY
N = 228												
General	.293	.284	-.009	.341	.422	.081	.360	.325	-.035	.269	.360	.091
Major parliament	.318	.227	-.091	.455	.591	.136	.614	.523	-.091	.432	.545	.113
Minor parliament	.439	.331	-.108	.443	.565	.122	.580	.561	-.019	.250	.500	.250
Major fringe	.409	.273	-.136	.318	.614	.296	.409	.400	-.009	–	–	
Minor fringe	.234	.279	.045	.316	.362	.046	.294	.238	-.056	.237	.273	.036

AOP: average online performance; YOY: year-on-year difference.

Two-way in-between analysis of variance (ANOVA), statistically significant difference  $p < .05$  for GB (party size  $\eta^2 = .143$ ), FR (time  $\eta^2 = .127$ ; party size  $\eta^2 = .249$ ), DE (party size  $\eta^2 = .575$ ) and PL (time  $\eta^2 = .272$ ; party size  $\eta^2 = .493$ ); YOY = change between years (2014–2009).

**Table 5.** AOP engagement provision scores per year, party size and country: pooled and panel parties.

	GB			FR			DE			PL		
	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY
N = 228												
General	.227	.203	-.024	.288	.357	.069	.237	.198	-.039	.217	.294	.077
Major parliament	.324	.353	.029	.471	.618	.147	.441	.441	0	.382	.471	.089
Minor parliament	.333	.303	-.030	.544	.529	-.015	.471	.373	-.098	.235	.392	.157
Major fringe	.333	.324	-.009	.176	.412	.236	.255	.318	.063	–	–	
Minor fringe	.168	.170	.002	.241	.294	.053	.176	.104	.072	.176	.222	.046

AOP: average online performance; YOY: year-on-year difference.

Two-way in-between analysis of variance (ANOVA), statistically significant difference  $p < .05$  for GB (party size  $\eta^2 = .338$ ), FR (time  $\eta^2 = .590$ ; party size  $\eta^2 = .399$ ), DE (party size  $\eta^2 = .539$ ) and PL (time  $\eta^2 = .202$ ; party size  $\eta^2 = .562$ ).

**Table 6.** AOP mobilization provision scores per year, party size and country: pooled and panel parties.

	GB			FR			DE			PL		
	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY
N = 228												
General	.300	.318	.018	.281	.388	.107	.271	.345	.074	.221	.305	.084
Major parliament	.400	.467	.067	.467	.633	.166	.533	.633	.100	.367	.467	.100
Minor parliament	.333	.381	.048	.433	.571	.138	.517	.578	.061	.233	.356	.123
Major fringe	.467	.433	-.034	.089	.467	.378	.311	.493	.182	–	–	
Minor fringe	.243	.293	.050	.264	.322	.058	.200	.227	.027	.185	.252	.067

AOP: average online performance; YOY: year-on-year difference.

Two-way in-between analysis of variance (ANOVA), statistically significant difference  $p < .05$  for GB (party size  $\eta^2 = .127$ ), FR (time  $\eta^2 = .146$ ; party size  $\eta^2 = .292$ ) and DE (party size  $\eta^2 = .498$ ).

**Table 7.** AOP interactivity provision scores per year, party size and country: pooled and panel parties.

	GB			FR			DE			PL		
	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY	2009	2014	YOY
N = 228												
General	.261	.327	.066	.256	.335	.079	.231	.267	.036	.261	.409	.148
Major parliament	.367	.500	.133	.500	.433	-.067	.433	.500	.067	.367	.533	.166
Minor parliament	.311	.438	.127	.383	.467	.084	.433	.467	.034	.233	.444	.211
Major fringe	.400	.400	0	.133	.367	.234	.244	.427	.183			
Minor fringe	.205	.295	.090	.227	.294	.067	.177	.157	-.020	.244	.370	.126

AOP: average online performance; YOY: year-on-year difference.

Two-way in-between analysis of variance (ANOVA), statistically significant difference  $p < .05$  for GB (party size  $\eta^2 = .163$ ), FR (party size  $\eta^2 = .297$ ), DE (party size  $\eta^2 = .470$ ) and PL (time  $\eta^2 = .290$ ).

## Vote share

Determining the impact of online campaigning is very difficult. It is impossible to isolate the online dimension from all other activities. Since we are not able to control for the offline campaign or other independent variable effects, we propose to compare only the potential effect from the adoption of web.1.0 and web.2.0 features, *ceteris paribus*. Studies have found a positive correlation between being online and a candidates' score in a national election (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014a). We suggest that this is an artefact of visibility. That being online leads to greater awareness, possibly as one element of a highly proactive campaign, and so support at the ballot box. Here, we suggest that if being online creates visibility, we will find no effect from either strategy; however, if we find a relationship between one or another strategy, we can suggest that the style of campaign may be influential on support. When looking at relationships between a number of variables and vote share overall, we see some interesting patterns<sup>5</sup> (Table 8). However, we focus here on three variables and the interaction between them: national vote share (which allows controlling for party size, possible resources (financial and human) that a party may deploy in campaigning and potential for traditional media coverage); AOP score for the use of web.1.0 and web.2.0 features, and an addition variable, titled interaction (national vote share multiplied by web.1.0 or web.2.0 performance) is constructed. The analysis therefore allows us to control for normalization, the party size effect on online performance and so for the levels of support larger parties receive.

First, we find, as expected, that the national vote share has a significant effect on EP election score; the largest parties on the whole gain more votes. Second, and more surprisingly, we find that a greater commitment to web.2.0 features appears to have a positive effect on vote share; using web.1.0 features has no statistically significant effect. Finally, we find the effect of the interaction of national vote and a web.2.0 strategy also offers significant explanation of vote share (interaction with web.1.0 is not significant). The direction of influence is negative, which suggests that the employment of the web.2.0 strategy by a large party is less influential on vote share obtained in second-order elections (Figure 2). Rather it is the medium and smaller parties that may gain most from the adoption of a web.2.0 campaign. This finding is consistent with conclusions from simple

**Table 8.** Poisson regression, vote share controlling for party size.

	Vote share in EP elections	
	Coef.	SE
	N = 228	
Party characteristics		
Party years of existence	-.001	(.001)
Party ID (comp. left)		
Right	.299**	(.139)
Centre	.201	(.159)
Single issue/other	-1.961***	(.264)
EU positioning (comp. positive)		
Neutral	-.959**	(.299)
Negative	-.066	(.241)
Stood in previous EP election	.693**	(.274)
Vote share in last national election	.096***	(.017)
In government	-.329**	(.106)
Web.1.0. performance	1.484	(.937)
Web.2.0. performance	2.244***	(.586)
Interaction (national vote share × web.1.0.)	-.037	(.037)
Interaction (national vote share × web.2.0.)	-.054**	(.021)
Constant	-.831	(.513)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.651	

EU: European Union; EP: European Parliament; SE: standard error.

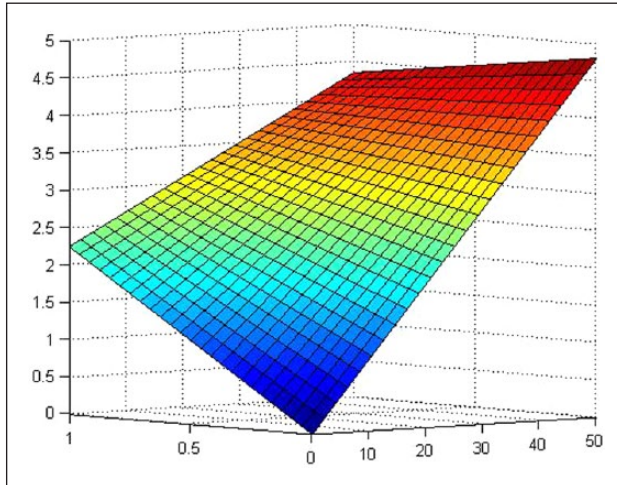
Poisson regression. Dependent variable: vote share (%) in 2009 and 2014 elections.

Significant values: \*\*\*<.001; \*\*<.05; \*<.10.

AOP analysis indicating that the strategies dedicated to direct discussion and responsiveness towards citizens and voters when employed more intensively by middle size parties appear to have a significant influence on electoral results.

## Conclusion

The study of online campaigning has a long history with most studies finding low innovation in functionality combined with mixed findings relating to the adoption of the latest features, tools and platforms. The sense is that digital technologies are largely moulded to the will of political campaign strategists, and despite suggestions of the social web leading to a new and more social communication paradigm to pervade all spheres of life, interactivity is the preserve of a minority of parties and often an experiment quickly discontinued. Experimentation seemed to be practised in 2009; particularly, studies found that the larger British parties peaked in their use of interactive features for the 2009 EP election, with a more mixed picture visible for the subsequent general election in 2010 and then largely convergence around the use of a range of features in



**Figure 2.** The relationship between national vote share, web.2.0 and EP vote share. Axe X (0–1), web.2.0 performance; Axe Y (0–50), national vote share; Axe Z (0–5), effect on the dependent variable (on top of the average). The figure can be read as follows: There is a direct positive effect on the dependent variable (vote share in EP election) as web.2.0 or the share of the party in the national vote increase (as exhibited by the increases in the border values for the other variable being held at zero). The interaction term between the two variables is, however, negative as shown by the falling dependent variable outcome at high levels of the national vote share with the increase in web.2.0. This indicates that parties with the largest national score do not gain from using a web.2.0 strategy.

2014 (Lilleker et al., 2015). With our wider sample of parties, some of these smaller differences are masked, permitting our data to show the power of the normalization hypothesis.

Taking a normative stance, we can confidently claim that parties do not use the full potential that the architecture of the web is offering. In general, the AOP scores of the parties are rather low with an average around 30% of the potential functionalities available actually featuring. The usage of features from the coding is spread among parties (so each feature is used); however, there is no single party using all or even a majority of features available to them (the best AOP score, by the German Pirate Party is 65%). After more than two decades of development in online campaigning, there remains much potential for innovation. We would suggest, therefore, that features are used due to their perceived utility for meeting campaigning objectives, as would be expected. However, this stifles innovation and the shift towards a more interactive paradigm of campaign communication that may have a positive impact on the engagement of citizens in party politics or broader tendencies towards participation in politics. The suggestion here is that engagement online may lead to engagement offline, so being able to interact with a party online might increase the propensity to be involved in partisan activities offline, such as joining, donating, contacting representatives or even attending party meetings or events.

The dominance of resources in explaining the adoption of a range of features, so making for a more sophisticated online campaign, means that the findings of the many previous studies testing normalization are borne out again in 2014. However, while



normalization is the most powerful explanatory variable, we also find some evidence of ebb and flow in terms of pursuing some strategies; for example in finding that minor Polish parliamentary parties or German fringe parties innovated most in prioritising certain feature functionalities over others when designing their websites. These innovations, however, are likely to be undertaken in the pursuit of votes. Yet, overall, it would appear that rich parties get richer in terms of having more sophisticated online presences, and on the whole, the richer parties with a history of high levels of support still receive the higher levels of votes in EP contests.

However, this simple linear pattern may not be the full story. While analysis of the party campaigns produced few unexpected or interesting findings, it appears when we explore whether there are any explanations for variance in vote share and when controlling for the dividend for being a large party that there is a visible web.2.0 effect. We find that parties that offer a more interactive style of campaigning, facilitated through placing features that facilitate engagement and interaction, may earn a vote dividend. However, and so in some ways countering the notion that normalization dominates all aspects of campaigning, smaller parties are likely to gain most from this dividend for pursuing a web.2.0 campaign strategy. This finding is important as the data suggest that smaller parties, when adopting more innovative communication strategies and allowing their supporters to interact with the party and one another, might become more visible, earn interest, engagement and support. Therefore, while we can argue that normalization remains a key explanatory concept, and in terms of both campaign sophistication and vote share, as the rich parties do get richer, the smaller parties may be able to find an electoral edge if they are willing to release control and offer a more engaging and interactive experience to visitors to their websites. The challenge smaller parties face is how to be ahead of the curve in the ebb and flow of innovations. Across the contests, we see an equalizing trend in innovation; therefore, smaller parties need to retain and grow support while maintaining their accessible and interactive communication style. Therefore, while we may be a little closer to identifying a vote dividend from embracing web.2.0 and going interactive for a niche or fringe party seeking to punch above its electoral weight, the advantage earned may be contest specific and a product of the novelty of the party and their communication style rather than long-term partisan attachment; hence, the positive impact may be fleeting, although detectable when research campaigning effects.

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## Notes

1. We used a mixed system in order to detect parties which gained few votes in elections, however, due to electoral systems that have representatives in the national parliament (e.g. in France, *Debout la République* gained 56% of votes in 2012 legislative elections but due to coalition electoral system has two representatives in the Assemblée nationale; <http://www.france-politique.fr/elections-legislatives-2012.htm> (accessed 5 January 2015)).
2. With the exception of Liberal Democrats (United Kingdom) who gained 22% of votes, others are in the minor parliamentary group.

3. With some exceptions, please see the footnote above.
4. *EU profiler study* directed by Alexander Trechsel and his team at EUI University, Florence (Garzia et al., 2015).
5. Due to the bias of omitting variables from analysis, we do not concentrate on general findings but on the difference of web.1.0 and web.2.0 effects; however, the results confirm, as expected from what is usually a mid-term and second-order election, that there is a penalty in votes for being in government. Also, given the context of this contest, one that was evidenced to a much greater extent elsewhere in the European Union (EU), there was an increased vote share for right-wing parties with parties neutral on the subject of EU membership being punished.

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## Appendix I

**Table 9.** Indexes of the online features.

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Web.1.0: Update on the website in last 2 weeks; Any form of newsletter communication; Special section: media; Videos online; Special section: radio; Special section: info from press conferences; Calendar of events; FAQ section; Animated photo on the website; Search engine; Easy contact; Political games; Online polls; Version for disabled visitors (font size); Version for disabled visitors (reading); Promotional materials to download; Possibility to download content; Party history and achievements; Party code of conduct; Possibility to become a volunteer; Possibility to donate money; Possibility to become a member of party; Information about political programme; Website registration for members only; Online shop; Website available in many languages; Translation to other languages; Information about national political issues; Information about EU political issues; Information about voting procedure

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Web.2.0: Possibility to comment on news; Blog; Agenda can be updated by visitors; A channel on video sharing websites; Possibility to comment (a video sharing website); Possibility to rate videos; Life webcam; Online photo gallery; Possibility to comment (online photo gallery); Possibility to rate (online photo gallery); Profile on SNS; Online forum or chat (among visitors); Online forum or chat (with politicians); RSS subscription; Possibility to share content of the website; Possibility to share content on social media; Tag Cloud on the website; Information about political programme (interactive format)

Information provision: Update on the website in last 2 weeks; Blog; Any form of newsletter communication; Special section: media; Videos online; Special section: radio; Special section: info from press conferences; Calendar of events; FAQ section; Search engine; RSS subscription; Tag Cloud on the website; Party achievements in previous terms; Possibility to download content; Party history; Party code of conduct; Information about political programme; Website available in many languages

Engagement provision strategy: Blog; Any form of newsletter communication; Videos online; Special section: radio; Special section: info from press conferences; A channel on video sharing websites; Life webcam; Animated photo on the website; Online photo gallery; Political games; Online polls; Possibility to share content of the website; Possibility to share content on social media; Version for disabled visitors (font size); Version for disabled visitors (reading); Tag Cloud on the website; Online shop

Mobilization provision strategy: Possibility to comment on news; Any form of newsletter communication; Calendar of events; Agenda can be updated by visitors; Possibility to rate videos; Possibility to rate (online photo gallery); Online polls; Online forum or chat (among visitors); Possibility to share content of the website; Possibility to share content on social media; Promotional materials to download; Possibility to become a volunteer; Possibility to donate money; Possibility to become a member of party; Information about political programme (interactive format)

Interactivity provision strategy: Possibility to comment on news; Agenda can be updated by visitors; A channel on video sharing websites; Possibility to comment (a video sharing website); Life webcam; Online photo gallery; Possibility to comment (online photo gallery); Easy contact; Online polls; Profile on SNS; Online forum or chat (among visitors); Online forum or chat (with politicians); Possibility to share content of the website; Possibility to share content on social media; Information about political programme (interactive format)

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FAQ: frequently asked questions; SNS: social networking service; RSS: rich site summary.