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Paper Title

Towards a more participatory style of election campaigning: identifying the comparative use of Web 2.0 by parties and candidates in elections 2007-2010

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Abstract

Election campaigning tends to be synonymous with top-down, persuasive and propaganda-style communication; with the strategic aim being to win the support of voters crucial for the victory, either in local or national contests, of a candidate or party. While this remains the dominant paradigm for understanding campaigns, the use of the Internet as a communication tool challenges this notion and in particular with the availability of Web 2.0 tools, features and platforms for campaigning purposes. Emerging in 2005, Web 2.0 has heralded a networked, participatory culture to be observed online with tools being introduced to facilitate synchronous or asynchronous conversations to take place within a variety of online environments. This participatory and conversational culture, like the Internet itself, reaches beyond national borders and cultures, reshapes communicational hierarchies, and creates a new set of communicative rules. The existence of Web 2.0 applications raises significant questions for political parties and individual candidates in terms of how they might use the Internet. Web 2.0 offers political actors a potentially effective means of building a relationship with activists, supporters and possibly floating voters. The cost, however, is that the interactive nature of these technologies requires some loss of control over political discourse. Our question is regarding the extent to which these rules have permeated election campaigning.

This paper analyses the use of the Internet, and in particular Web 2.0 tools, features and platforms, across four key election contests over the period 2007-2010. Focusing on the presidential election contests in France 2007 and the USA 2008 and the parliamentary contests in Germany 2009 and the UK 2010 we measure the extent to which there is a more participatory culture being encouraged by election campaign's online modes. The analysis follows the conceptual tradition of MacMillan (2002); Ferber, Foltz & Pugliese (2007) and Lilleker & Malagon (2010). This allows us to not only detect feature use but to analyse whether the inclusion of Web 2.0 into election campaigning actually potentiates participation of voters and so conversation between voters and political actors as well as intra-voter discussion. Our (currently incomplete) data (we have three of the four election case studies) suggests there has been some significant moves towards a more participatory style of election campaigning over the last four years with Obama's campaign setting clear benchmarks for later contests in the UK and Germany.

377 words