

Online Political Campaigning: A Bird-Eye's View

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Introduction

The semi-annual TIM survey, measuring Internet exposure and usage patterns (June 2008), shows that broadband Internet penetration in Israel is extensive. Internet usage is estimated at 69% among the adult Jewish population, and 56% among the adult Arab-Palestinian population. The primary uses of the Internet are information search (96%), news reading (89%), and activities such as watching videos (73%) and shopping online (56%).¹ This article examines if the massive penetration is manifest in the Israeli political arena as well, on both the national and municipal levels, by political players as well as the public.

While articles that study online campaigning typically analyze particular case studies, here the goal is to provide a comparative and comprehensive look at a number of campaigns. The fifteen months between November 2007 and February 2009 provide a unique window to examine the penetration and consolidation of the Internet as a medium for political marketing in Israel. In this period, no less than four country-wide elections took place: the general elections for the Israeli parliament (Knesset) in February 2009, and three rounds of municipal elections, one for mayors and heads of local councils in November 2008, and two rounds of elections for regional councils, in November 2007 and January 2009. Note that municipal administration in Israel is composed of three levels: cities (in general, municipalities with over 20,000 residents), local councils (in general, municipalities with 2,000-20,000 residents), and regional councils, that are in general composed of a number of communities with less than 2,000 residents.

During the campaigns, candidates have clear incentives, probably more so than after the elections, not only to pass their message to the public, but also to be attentive to public opinion. They can become better acquainted with the distribution of opinions in society, and adjust their platform accordingly, thus bringing about a better fit between the public agenda and the agendas of candidates (see Nadeau et al. 2008). Through the Internet, political players may

¹ Cohen, Maayan. "250,000 New Internet Users in 2008". *Haaretz*, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasite/spages/1055634.html> (Hebrew).

find it significantly easier to create a bi-directional contact with constituencies, which may serve to enhance accountability and responsiveness. This was highly evident in Obama's victorious campaign for the U.S. Presidency, where the elections also took place in November 2008 (Stallings-Carpenter 2010). Therefore, it is important to study when and how political campaigns migrate to the Internet, which players are involved, and to what extent the public reacts.

Israeli Campaigning Online

Few studies have analyzed Internet usage in previous general campaigns in Israel, and have demonstrated uses that were mostly static, i.e. as one-way conduits of information from the party to websites' visitors, involving very few attempts to interactively strengthen the connection between users and the party, or to motivate users to act on behalf of the campaign (Lehman-Wilzig 2004; Atmor 2008).

Still, it seems that in the recent election campaigns, technological innovation became focal. The apparent shift to the Internet was led by marketing professionals and PR companies, who for the first time, intended to invest a major chunk of campaigns' budgets into the Internet, according to journalistic reports. *Kadima*, for example, sought to invest in its Internet-based campaign around 9 million NIS, around 50% of its total marketing budget at the time. *Meretz* planned to allocate 30% of its campaigning budget to the Internet. The *Likud* party went even further; it budgeted 10 million NIS to its Internet campaign, which was 60% of its entire campaign fund.² Note, however that in practice, the distribution of funds was different, and in some cases, the Internet campaign was allocated lower budgets than planned. For example, the *Likud* eventually spent only around 1.7 million NIS on its online campaign, out of the final budget of 32 million NIS.³ Aside from marketing professionals, news reporters and commentators were also impressed by the parties' willingness to jump to the Internet.⁴ They argued that

² Moualem, Mazal, Roni Zinger-Heruti, and Jacky Huggi. "Online Elections: Campaigns Migrate Online". *Haaretz Online*, 24.11.2008 <http://www.haaretz.com/captain/spages/1040480.html> (Hebrew).

³ Barzilai-Nahon, Karine. "The Future of Online Politics: What Our Elected Representatives Know". *Ynet Internet* 22.07.2009 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3750548,00.html> (Hebrew).

⁴ Berkovich, Uri. "Parties Jump over the Internet". *The Marker IT* 08.02.2009 <http://it.themarker.com/tmit/article/5764> (Hebrew).

the Internet "killed the jingle stars,"⁵ that it overshadowed TV campaign ads, and even made activists on the ground unnecessary.⁶

Just like during the general campaigns, it seemed that the Internet has reached deep into the municipal political landscape and gained media salience, especially in the big cities. To demonstrate, *Israel Today*, a leading news daily, declared on its election-day issue that "the campaigns this year were characterized by comprehensive usage of Facebook, blogs, websites, and all the tools the Internet has to offer."⁷ Gal Mor, writing for *Ynet*, the biggest news portal in Israel, argued that

"The Internet has awakened the electoral campaign in Tel Aviv...both camps [of the leading candidates] were present in all the significant online arenas, responding to news items, in Facebook, *TheMarker Café* [a leading Israeli social networking site], forums, blogs, supporters' websites, YouTube and more. They left their candidate's mark on each significant discussion, and were involved in endless debates...The Internet may be a game changer, and encourage young people to join the political game and make their impact."⁸

The paper studies if indeed a trend towards greater collaboration and involvement through the Internet, in national as well as municipal politics, is evident.⁹ The paper studies the penetration of the Internet in the political arena in Israel, to learn if the enthusiastic media claims of a new campaigning paradigm are accurate. Let us begin with the municipal elections and work our way towards the general elections.

#1: Municipal Campaigning Online

The *municipal* elections that are held throughout the country in numerous different municipalities, enable to examine and analyze Internet campaigning in a

⁵ Kam, Anat. "Internet Killed the Jingle Star". *Walla! Elections*, <http://elections.walla.co.il/?w=/2668/1430926> (Hebrew).

⁶ Hason, Nir. "The Internet Defeats the Activists". *Haaretz Online*, 01.01.2009 <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1059798.html> (Hebrew).

⁷ *Israel Today*, November 11th, 2008, p. 7 (Hebrew).

⁸ Mor, Gal. "Local Network: The Municipal Elections in Tel-Aviv are Bubbling Online." *Ynet*, November 7th, 2008. <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3619129,00.html> (Hebrew).

⁹ Technological innovation was the word of the day in another aspect of the elections, namely the shift to widely-covered computerized primaries in the three big parties (Kadima, Labor, and Likud); for the first time, all three big parliamentary parties (at the time) chose their lists on primaries that were conducted electronically. Glitches occurred in the Likud party primaries and especially in the Labor party primaries, where it even caused the cancellation of the electronic vote, which was postponed for two days in favor of a manual vote and, again, received heavy media coverage. *Strong Israel*, that did not eventually enter the Knesset, was the first one that elected its list in a remote Internet voting.

higher resolution than we would get by studying the *general* elections campaigns, which take place in Israel in a single district (the entire country). The study of municipal campaigns provides a full picture of the national distribution of website usage for political purposes, and enables to discern geographic, socio-economic, and cultural differences that affect the decisions of the candidates to use the Internet.

The studies surveyed in the following two sections are based on website analysis and interviews, and checked whether or not candidates had a website, and what features the websites contained. Also, the candidates were asked about the efficiency of Internet usage and if they felt that, after the fact, the Internet could have been used to a greater effect considering the circumstances in which they operated. Beyond checking the content of the sites, some socio-demographic and strategic variables were introduced, to see if they can predict whether or not the candidates would make use of websites or not (Lev-On 2010a; forthcoming [a]).

The study started by receiving candidates' names from the office of the elections supervisor in the Ministry of the Interior. Following that, candidates' websites were searched for numerous times during the campaigns from the first 500 results on the *Google* search engine (using multiple variations of candidates' names). Likewise, the study looked for information about candidates' websites on local forums, where many candidates post information about themselves, including links to their websites. Finally, post-election phone interviews were conducted with the candidates or their contact persons.

The municipal elections that took place in November 11th, 2008 were held at 156 authorities, involving 594 candidates. All of the websites located were analyzed, and interviews with 334 (56.2%) of the candidates or their contact persons were conducted. Out of the 156 different municipal races, 53 took place in authorities where the population is non-Jewish (in 52 the population is Arab, in one the population is Circassian). 213 candidates competed in these 53 races.

Sociological, political and cultural processes, dating back before the establishment of the state of Israel, led to nearly complete residential segregation of the Jewish and Arab-Palestinian populations. This enables us to compare campaigns run in municipalities in which the population is Jewish, to those where the population is Arab-Palestinian.¹⁰ Note that data shows a narrow digital divide in terms of Internet penetration rates between the two populations; for instance, TIM survey quoted above found 56% of the adult Arab population surf the web

¹⁰ Note that three Arab candidates competed in three municipalities with an Arab minority population: Haifa, Acre, and Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

(vs. 69% among the adult Jewish population). A *Geocartography* survey from November 2008 found that 95% of Arab youths are online.¹¹

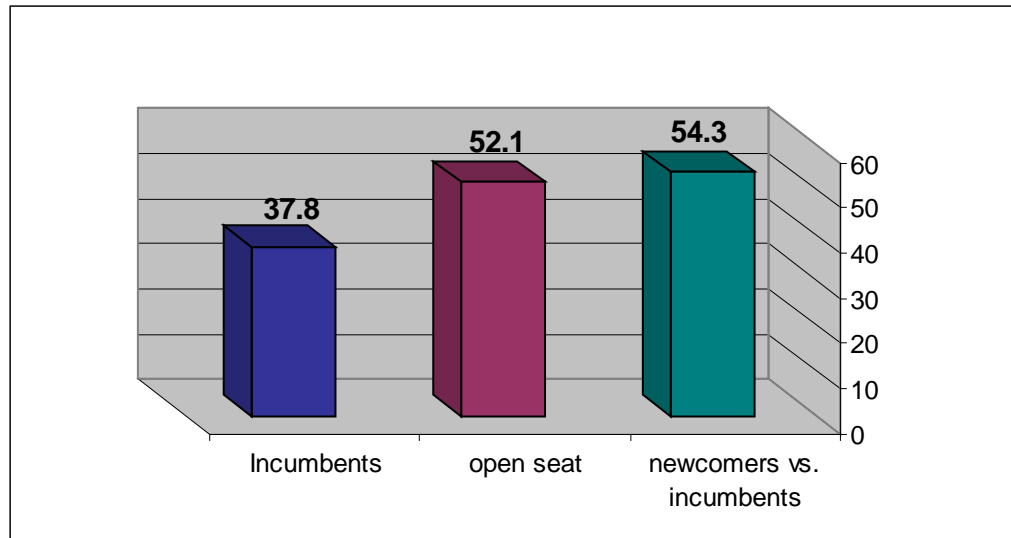
Note that some factors could have, in fact, encouraged a significant usage of the Internet in the Arab-Palestinian sector in the municipal campaigns, over and above its potential usage in the Jewish sector. The number of candidates per municipality was slightly higher in the non-Jewish municipalities vs. Jewish municipalities (4 vs. 3.7 on average), i.e. increased competition. Also note, that the municipal elections in the non-Jewish sector are characterized by significantly higher voting rates than the Jewish sector (Mustafa 2005), i.e. heightened public interest.

But in spite of that, comparing Internet usage among candidates competing in Jewish and Arab municipalities shows a deep usage divide. Among the 213 candidates competing in the non-Jewish municipalities, only 8 (!) candidates, less than five percent, had a website, compared to 191 (50.1%) of the Jewish candidates. The absence of Internet usage in the Arab-Palestinian sector is an interesting phenomenon that cannot be explained by access differences alone, and requires a separate explanation, which may take into account variables such as the unique social structure in the Arab-Palestinian sector in Israel as well negative personal attitudes towards technology (see Lev-on forthcoming [b]). *Thus, the rest of the analysis refers to municipal races in authorities with a majority Jewish population.*

381 candidates competed in 103 municipal races in the Jewish sector (3.7 candidates per municipality). Out of the 381 candidates, 90 were incumbents, 243 were new candidates running against incumbents, and 48 were new candidates who competed in the 13 authorities where incumbents did not run for re-election (open seat). There are 4.3 million eligible voters in these municipalities, and the total count of valid votes was 1.97 million (45.8%). Among the 90 incumbents running for reelection, 72 were reelected, while only 18 incumbent candidates (20%) were unseated by newcomers. A Second round of elections was held in 13 municipalities. The average percentage of votes the candidates received: incumbents, 53.2% (as stated, 80% of incumbents were re-elected); newcomers facing incumbents, 17.3%; newcomers facing other newcomers in open-seat races, 27.1%.

The first interesting finding is the difference in website usage among incumbents, newcomers contending with incumbents, and newcomers in open-seat races. Graph 1 shows the results.

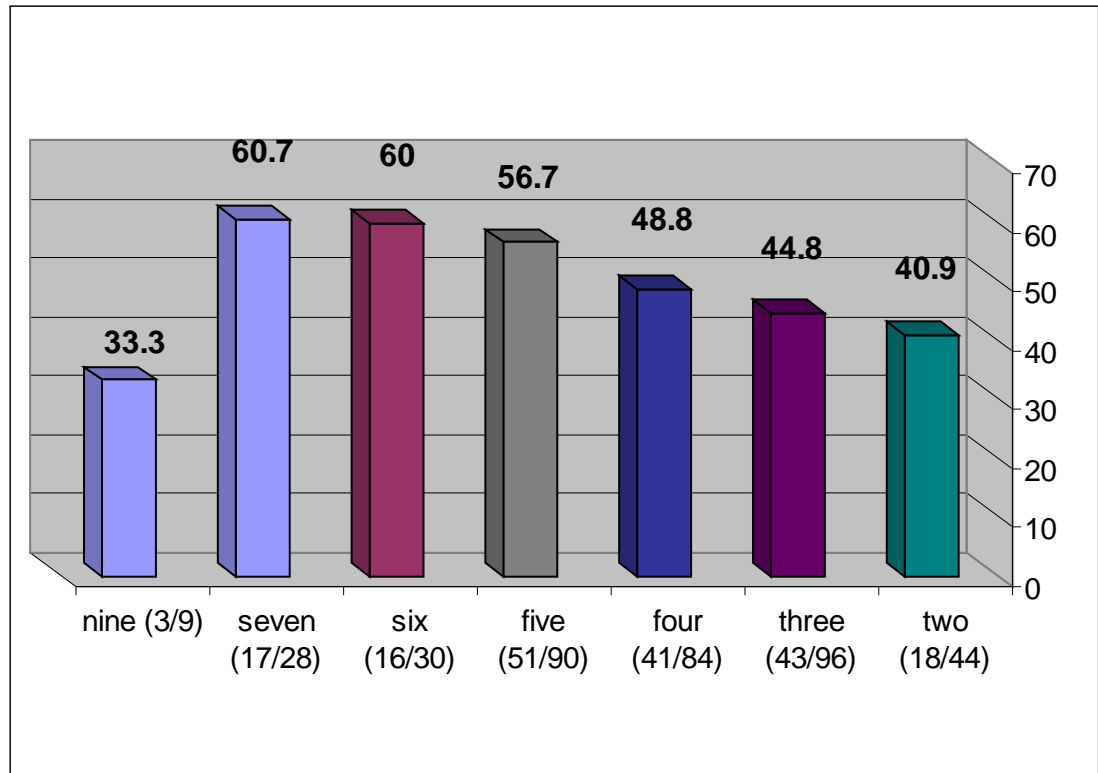
¹¹ Nechushtai, Efrat. "Do Arabs Resist the Internet? It's Uncertain." *Haaretz*, February 24th, 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/captain/spages/1066537.html> (Hebrew).



Graph 1. Website usage among incumbents and newcomers

Analysis shows a significant difference between the percentage of new candidates facing incumbents, and percentage of incumbents who had sites ($p < 0.01$). But note that the percentage of votes received by candidates with a website (26.5%), was lower (although the difference is insignificant) than the percentage received by those without a website (27.6%); this is explained by the high percentage of votes received by incumbents, two thirds of whom lacked a website, versus the lower percentage of votes received by newcomers facing them, a significantly higher percentage of whom had websites (see Lev-On forthcoming [a]; Herrnson 2004; Herrnson, Stokes-Brown and Hindman 2007 for similar results).

Next, let us look at the impact of a number a variables that we have labeled "strategic", i.e. the number of eligible voters, number of candidates, the gap between winner and runner-up, and the percentage of votes that the winner received (both approximations for the competitiveness of the elections). Graph 2 shows the percentage of website among candidates as a function of the number of candidates.



Graph 2. Website usage according to number of candidates

Although the correlation between number of candidates and the percentage of websites was insignificant (due to the relatively small number of cases), Graph 2 is still indicative, as the percentage of websites increases between six out of seven categories. Also, t-tests demonstrate significant differences between candidates with and without websites in terms of average number of eligible voters, and the difference (in percentages of the total votes) between winner and runner-up.

Next, candidates with and without websites were compared on a cross-section of a number of socio-demographic parameters *of the population in the municipalities where elections took place*. Candidates with websites typically run in municipalities where the median age of the population is higher, and the percentage of residents in ages 20-29 is slightly lower than the municipalities where candidates without websites compete. In addition, candidates with websites typically compete in municipalities where the population is slightly richer, less peripheral, where the percentage of students enrolled in academic studies and graduating from high school is higher, where the standard of living is slightly higher, where the percentage of residents earning minimum wage is lower, and where the percentage of residents earning double the average wage is higher than the municipalities where the candidates without websites compete.

Candidates' websites almost universally present information about their actions, vision, and policy objectives. In three quarters of the sites, users could send mail and subscribe to mailing lists, and in two thirds of the sites they could access archived content. Still, less than a third of the sites had information in languages other than Hebrew, or information that catered to specific audiences (such as youths or new immigrants). Only a few sites contained polls. Slightly More than a third of the sites included video clips, Similarly, the use of interactive media such as forums and chat rooms was very limited.

Finally, when candidates were asked whether they exhausted what they could get from the Internet, most website owners replied *affirmatively*. We received a variety of responses; many site owners said that the advantages of the Internet were rather limited in local campaigns, where traditional forms of campaigning, like door-to-door canvassing and parlor meetings, are more effective. As one of the candidates said, compared to the general elections, "here it is more important to be on the ground". Another candidate said that "the target audience wants direct contact ... you cannot reach out through the Internet." A third said that the Internet is "nice, modern, but has no impact on the results."

Even among the candidates who did not use websites, few regretted their decision. A significant percentage of incumbents declared that they had not found it necessary to use the Internet, in light of the prior public acquaintance with them. Many candidates argued that, due to the characteristics of the electorate, there was no point to build a website for the campaign. In some cases the obstacles came from the candidates themselves; for example, one of the candidates declared that "not everyone has the luxury of dealing with the Internet."

#2: Regional Elections

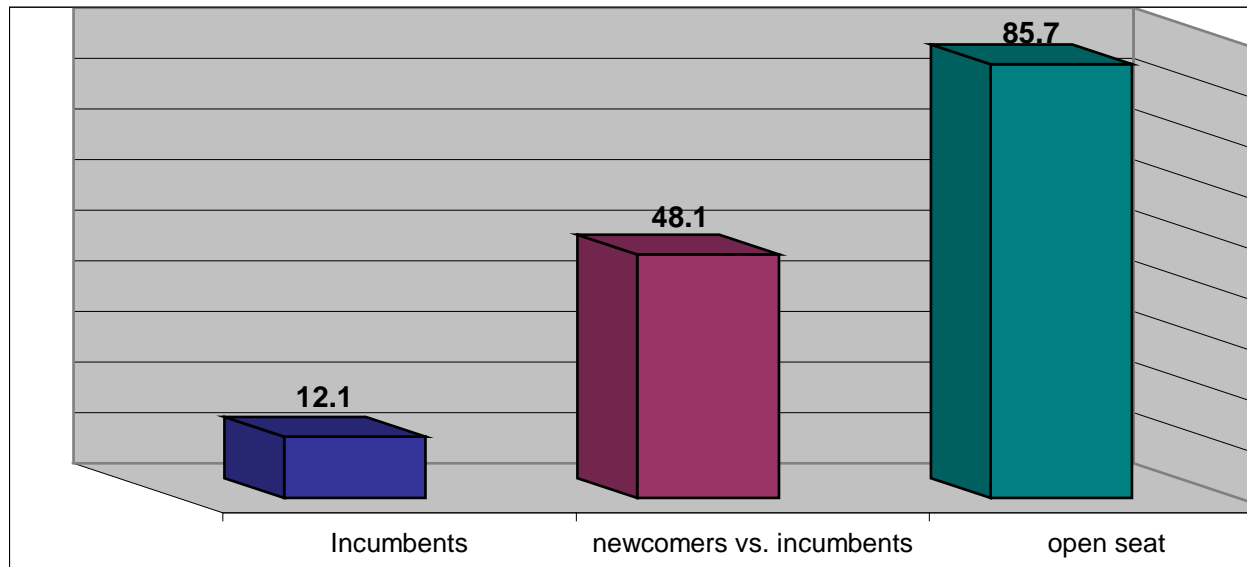
Let us briefly present the results of a pilot study that analyzed Internet usage by candidates to heads of *regional councils* in Israel (Lev-On forthcoming [a]). Regional councils are the local authorities that oversee the daily affairs of a group of small villages and other communities in a close geographic area, each with a population under 2,000. The council is composed of representatives elected in each individual community, while the head of the regional council is directly elected by the residents of the various communities within the jurisdiction of the municipality.

For logistical reasons, elections to the regional councils are held every five years, in two cycles – whereby elections to half of the councils take place in the first cycle, and to the other half in the second cycle. Forty regional councils held elections in the two cycles studied, 23 in 2007 and 17 in 2009. The councils included 770 residential communities which encompass 311,607 eligible voters.

108 candidates competed to lead the 40 different regional councils (2.7 candidates per council). Among the 108, 33 were incumbents, 54 were

newcomers competing against incumbents, and 21 were newcomers in open-seat races. Among the 33 incumbents, 28 were reelected. The average percentage of votes received by the candidates was as follows: incumbents – 59.5%, newcomers who competed against incumbents – 24.8%, newcomers who competed against other newcomers- 33.3%.

The study analyzed all of the websites that were located using search engine queries and other means. In addition, 79 of the 108 (73.1%) candidates or their contact persons were interviewed via telephone. The findings, in terms of website usage, resemble those found in the municipal elections of November 2008. 48 of the candidates (44.4%) had a website, while 60 candidates (55.6%) did not. Let us start by checking the difference in website usage among incumbents, newcomers contending with incumbents, and newcomers competing with newcomers (in open-seat councils). Graph 3 shows the results.



Graph 3. Website usage according to number of candidates

Graph 3 again demonstrates the importance of incumbency for explaining (the lack of) website usage. But, again, the percentage of votes received by candidates with a website (33.2%) was significantly lower than the percentage received by candidates lacking a website (40.1%). T-test results show significant differences ($P < 0.01$) between candidates with and without a website in the cross-sections of eligible voters and the number of communities per regional council. No correlation was found between number of candidates and website usage. Unlike the previous study, averages of socio-demographic variables (of the populations in the councils where elections were held) were not significantly different

between candidates with and without websites (due to the small number of cases involved in the study).

The data concerning features in candidates' websites is similar to the results presented earlier. Many of the sites included information about the candidate (97.8% - almost universal) and other vital information for voters. In more than 90% of the sites, visitors could have sent mail to the campaign staff and in more than half of the sites, they could have accessed an archive. Yet, only a few contained polls or information in languages other than Hebrew. Almost 40% of the sites include video clips, but only 20% included forums, and very few contained chat rooms. Applications for recruiting activists to get out the vote or participate in canvassing campaigns, were scantily used.

#3: National Campaigning Online

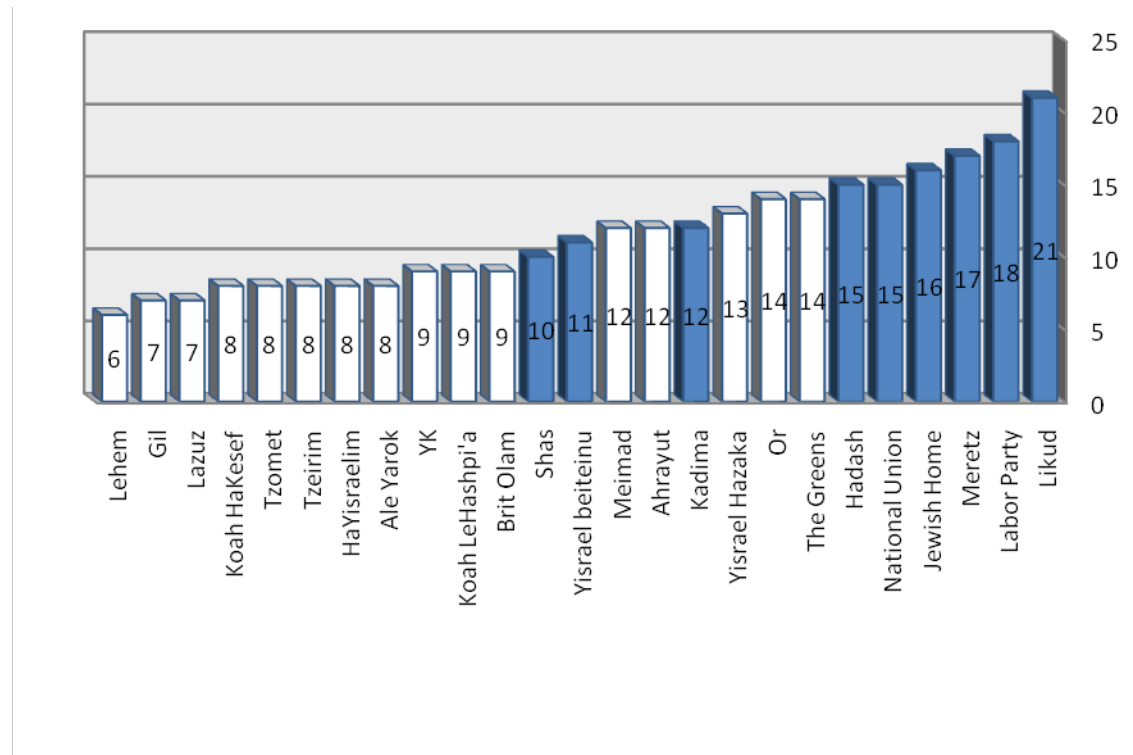
The next, and central, stop in the study of Internet usage in election campaigns is the general elections to the Israeli parliament (the Knesset). The following section uses data mostly from Atmor and Sinai (forthcoming), to reveal a nuanced picture. In spite of the transformation of the Internet into a dominant marketing and publicity channel, its potentials and capabilities are not exhausted in the political arena. Analysis also shows that, whereas the usage of the medium by political actors is awakening, there is no similar excitement by target audiences about using it as an arena for political interaction.¹²

According to the study by Atmor and Sinai (forthcoming), 28 of the 33 parties that competed in the election for the Knesset had a website. The study (from which a few central findings are presented later) covers all twenty five campaign websites on the Internet in Hebrew. For analysis, the authors used the scheme by Gibson and Ward (2000) which is prevalent to the study of online campaigning, and refers to online campaigns as collections of practices that can be analyzed by a scheme composed of four dimensions: Information provision, resource generation, promoting participation and campaign networking. Each of the dimensions is composed of a list of criteria whose presence or absence is checked, and the accumulated grade composes the final grade that the site receives in the relevant dimension. Below is a survey of parties' performance in the first three out of four dimensions of Gibson and Ward's (2000) scheme. Since networking and connectedness to external websites is not the focus of this article, and due to space constraints, analysis of the fourth dimension (networking) is omitted from further analysis below.

¹² Graphs are adapted, with permission, from Atmor and Siani's presentation in the conference "Online Campaigning in Israel", Ariel University Center, March 8th, 2009. The presentation is available at conf09.arieluc.org/

INFORMATION PROVISION

This dimension covers the content provided to users through a party's website. It is composed of twenty four criteria that involve, among others, information about party history, biographies, declarations, speeches, press releases, news via text or video, and other means through which the party can spread information about its goals through the site.



Graph 4. Information Provision Dimension. Source: Atmor and Siani (2009).

The average grade in the information provision dimension of the parties *that eventually won seats* in the Knesset is 15.1 (median=15; parties that entered the Knesset are represented on the graph as full bars, while empty bars correspond to parties that did not win seats in the Knesset). All party websites included a list of candidates for the Knesset, a biography of the chairman of the party and the candidates. All sites also included detailed party platforms, as well as marketing content of the campaign, such as banners, stickers, information leaflets and so on. Some sites included audio clips for download. Four parties included websites in languages other than Hebrew. Also, extensive usage of newsletters, invitations to party events, personal letters from party leaders and candidates was evident.

The average score of the sites of the fifteen parties that *did not cross the threshold* to enter the Knesset, was 9.5 (median=8.5). Relative to the websites of the parties that eventually got into the Knesset, it is evident that these sites contained less information and features.

Another striking phenomena was the presence of significant numbers of blogs. *Likud's* website included seven links to Knesset members' blogs, while *Kadima's* website presented dominantly the "election-diary" video-blog of chairman Tzipi Livni, which included a long list of personal video clips with visitors' comments following. Benjamin Netanyahu's blog on the *Likud* website included alongside the texts a number of video clips as well. A large number of parties uploaded video clips to the video sharing platform *YouTube* (see later).

RESOURCE GENERATION

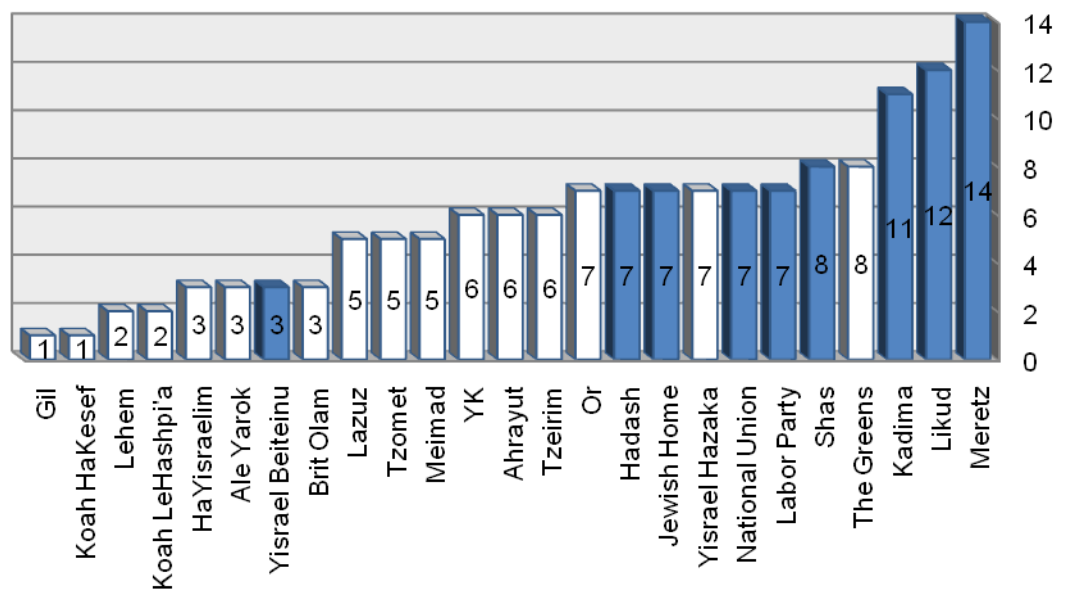
This dimension refers to the parties' websites as a source of recruitment for new supporters, activists, and donations. It includes eight criteria, such as: visitors' ability to subscribe to mailing lists, to become a party member online, make monetary donations to the party, and more.

Data indicates that parties made little efforts to recruit supporters and resources through the Internet. Recruiting supporters was done primarily through email lists. On almost all sites, visitors could subscribe to mailing lists and ask to be contacted for volunteering. On the websites of the *Likud*, *Labor*, and the *National Unity* party, visitors could even become members, using a secure connection. The sites of *Likud* and *Meretz* allowed visitors to invite friends to the site, and also included an online system to mobilize supporters and activists (Atmor and Siani forthcoming).

The 2009 campaigns involved first attempts to raise donations online, but only the sites of *Likud*, *Labor*, and *Jewish Home* included a secure link through which donations could be made. Among the parties that did not enter the Knesset, five recruited funds online. Many other parties recruited funds through their websites offline (through forms that could be downloaded, filled and sent). Still, according to Atmor and Sinai (forthcoming), the campaigns of 2009 did not bring extensive changes as far as recruitment of supporters or resources goes.

PROMOTING PARTICIPATION

The next dimension focuses on promoting participation. It examines to what extent parties used their websites to enhance civic involvement and participation, and for conducting large-scale discussions between members and supporters of the party and its leadership. This dimension includes eighteen criteria such as: sending messages to the party chairman or the candidates, blogs that include commenting, and the existence of onsite social networks on the party's website.



Graph 5. Promoting Participation Dimension. Source: Atmor and Siani (2009).

Promoting participation among parties that crossed the threshold and are represented in the Knesset varies, although dominance of the parties that eventually entered the Knesset is evident here as well. From the eighteen criteria that were examined in this dimension, *Meretz* won the highest grade of fourteen, and *Israel Beytenu* had the lowest grade of three.

Some parties made use of a few novel techniques to promote participation, like social networks, where the *Likud* and *Meretz* operated an on-site social network. Almost all parties opened profiles for their candidates on *Facebook* (see later). *Likud*, *Kadima*, and the *Green Party* also enabled their supporters to stay updated with recent campaign events through *Twitter*.

Although not evident in the graph above, a party that stood out in regards to promoting participation was The *Green Movement-Meimad*, which not only presented a coherent and cogent platform regarding technology and Internet, but based its election campaign on the Internet. Among other things, party leaders approached a few leading bloggers in an effort to involve them in the campaign. The party did tremendously well in the elections among leading bloggers, where it received the vote equivalent of forty six mandates (out of 120 in the Knesset), and became the greatest party within the "bloggers' parliament",¹³ but the party did not perform as well in the real ballots, where it didn't even manage to cross the threshold.

¹³ http://www.aplaton.co.il/story_513 (Hebrew).

Two small parties, *Strong Israel* and *The Jewish Home*, also excelled in mobilizing supporters online. *Strong Israel* was the first party in Israel to conduct remote primaries through the Internet. *The Jewish Home* was born out of a merger between the *National Religious Party* and the *National Unity Party*. The merge was followed by a number of activities rich in user-generated content. The first task that was crowd-sourced was choosing a name for the new party. The name *The Jewish Home* was chosen in an online poll which included roughly 10,000 Internet users. Choosing the logo of the new party also involved the party's online supporters. More importantly, supporters were asked to suggest candidates to the emerging party list and even vote for the candidates they see fit. 560 candidates were suggested by the public, and a special committee for locating and filtering candidates reduced this list to 40 candidates. Internal conflicts later led to a split between the two camps, which resulted in two parties running in the election: *The Jewish Home* and the reestablished *National Unity* parties.

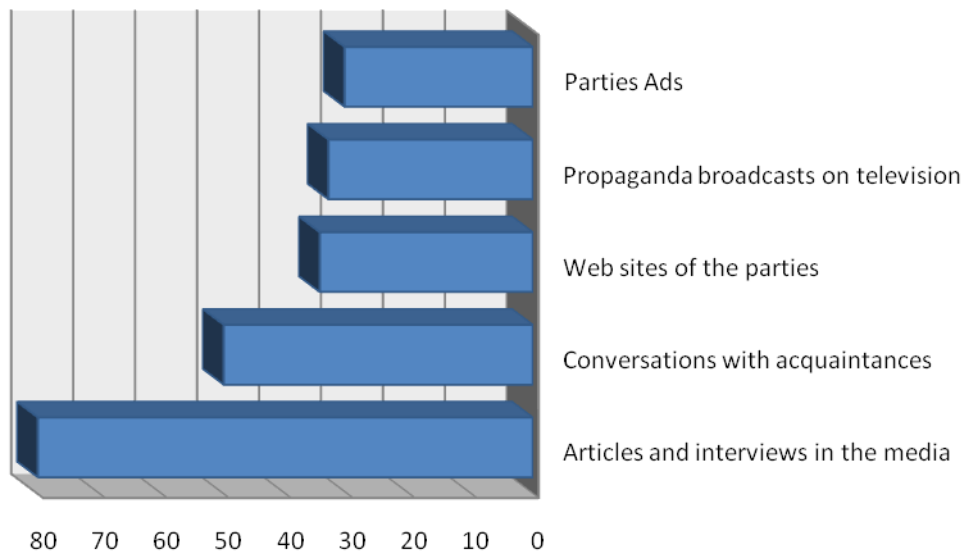
According to Atmor and Sinai (forthcoming), in reference to promoting participation and involvement, party websites actually improved compared to earlier elections. Some sites included new openings for participation, and introduced interesting innovations. On the other hand, this was evident in a relatively small number of early adopters, often as a result of a local initiative by campaign managers, and not as a result of an inclusive and participatory worldview of party leaders.

Citizen Involvement in Online Campaigns

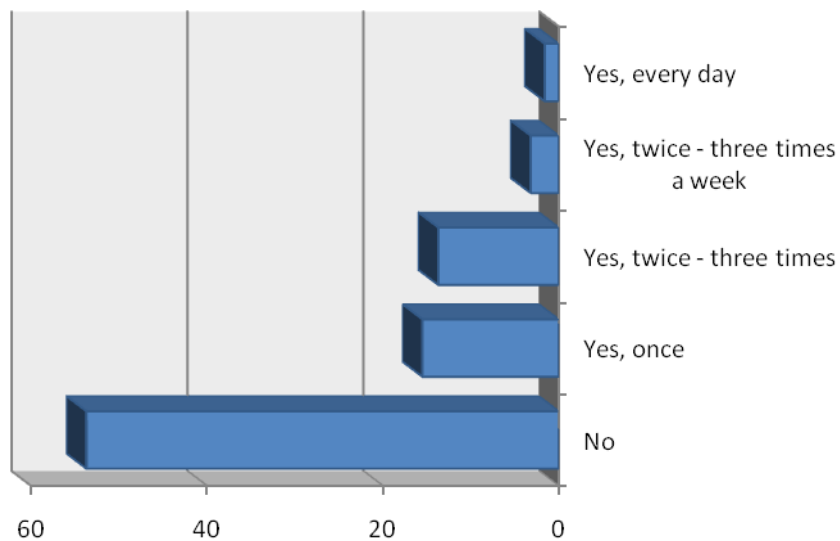
After surveying parties' Internet usage in the general election campaigns, let us move to voters' reaction. It seems that the quite a few parties made extensive efforts to show presence, uniqueness, and attract traffic online, either by setting up and maintaining formal sites, or by the use of social networking sites such as *Facebook*. The next section looks at how surfers react and use the variety of platforms and applications provided by parties.

A survey by *TheMarker* and *Panels Institute*,¹⁴ conducted in January 2009 among a representative sample of 503 eligible voters (graph 6), shows that 80% received information about the parties through stories and interviews on TV, radio, and newspapers. Discussion with friends and relatives is another important source of information about parties (50%). Party websites ranked only third; only 34.4% get information about parties through their websites. In addition, graph 7 shows that most of the population (53.7%) does not visit party websites at all.

¹⁴ Cohen, Maayan. "Elections Migrate Online, but Voters Do not". *Haaretz Online*, January 15th, 2009, www.haaretz.com/captain/spages/1055638.html (Hebrew).



Graph 6. Which sources do you use to get information on parties? (Source: *TheMarker* website)¹⁵



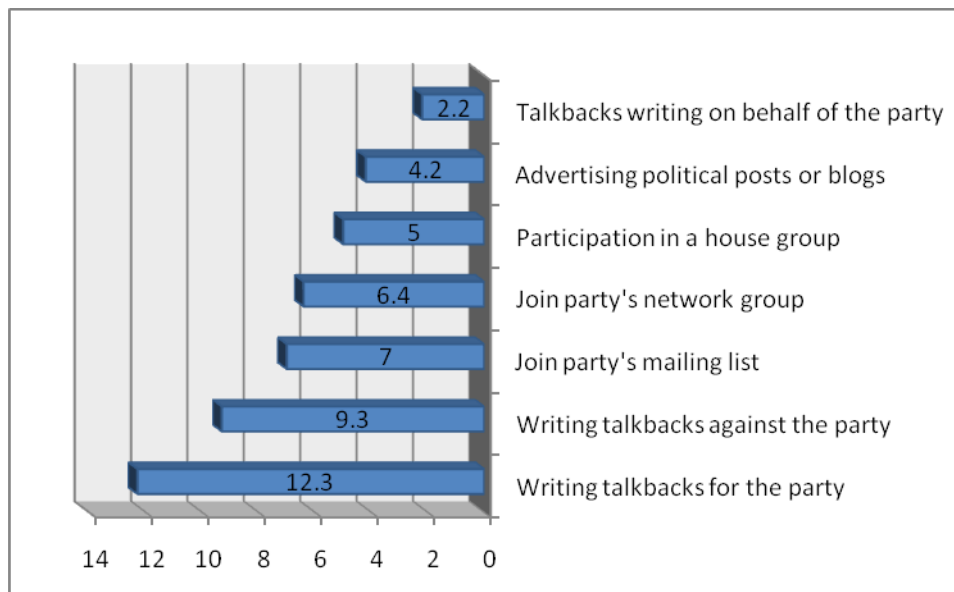
Graph 7. Did you visit a party's website in the past month? (Source: *TheMarker* website)¹⁶

¹⁵ <http://www.haaretz.com/captain/spages/1055638.html> (Hebrew).

¹⁶ <http://www.haaretz.com/captain/spages/1055638.html> (Hebrew).

Another survey was conducted in December 2008 by the *Netvision Institute for Internet Studies* in Tel Aviv University and the *Smith Institute* (Smith Institute 2008). The survey utilized a representative sample of 500 people, and shows similar patterns, where of the 62.1% who use the Internet, 86.6% stated that they never access political campaign sites.

The survey conducted by *TheMarker* and *Panels Institute* shows that in very few cases, exposure to a party's website translates into action. 10.7% from the visitors to parties' websites want to get information about volunteering, or to join a party. Only 4.3% enter the site to see how they can donate money to the party. Furthermore, only 27% of the surfers took some type of action that is related to the election. The most popular activity was writing a comment for or against the party (graph 8). 7% subscribed to party newsletters. 6.4% joined a network group. Only 1.8% contributed to the party through the Internet, and 1.2% created and uploaded a political video to the Internet. So, in spite of the efforts of a number of parties to use websites and social platforms in order to reach the voting public and engage it, it seems that the end results are far from impressive.



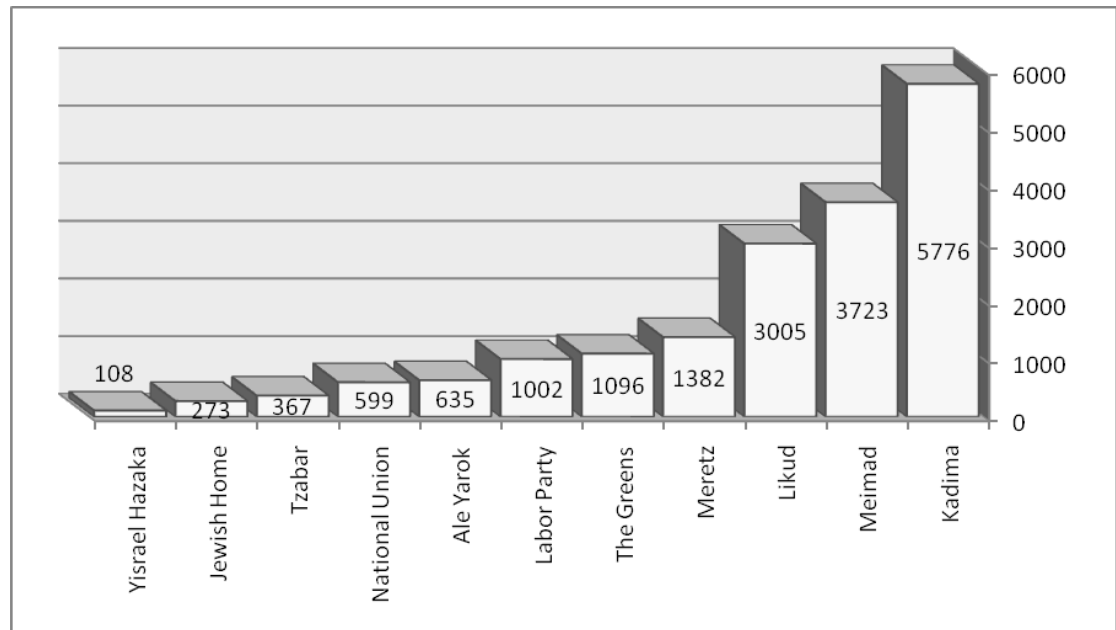
Graph 8. Which elections-related activities did you perform online? (Source: *TheMarker* website¹⁷)

A study by Caspi and Lev (2009) further demonstrates a significant assimilation gap of new media, between parties and constituencies.¹⁸ While many parties

¹⁷ <http://www.haaretz.com/captain/spages/1055638.html> (Hebrew).

utilize websites, mailing lists, and a plethora of web2 platforms, there is still a relatively low exposure of the public to such online arenas and involvement in them, a phenomena that the writers call "premature Americanization" of the campaigns.

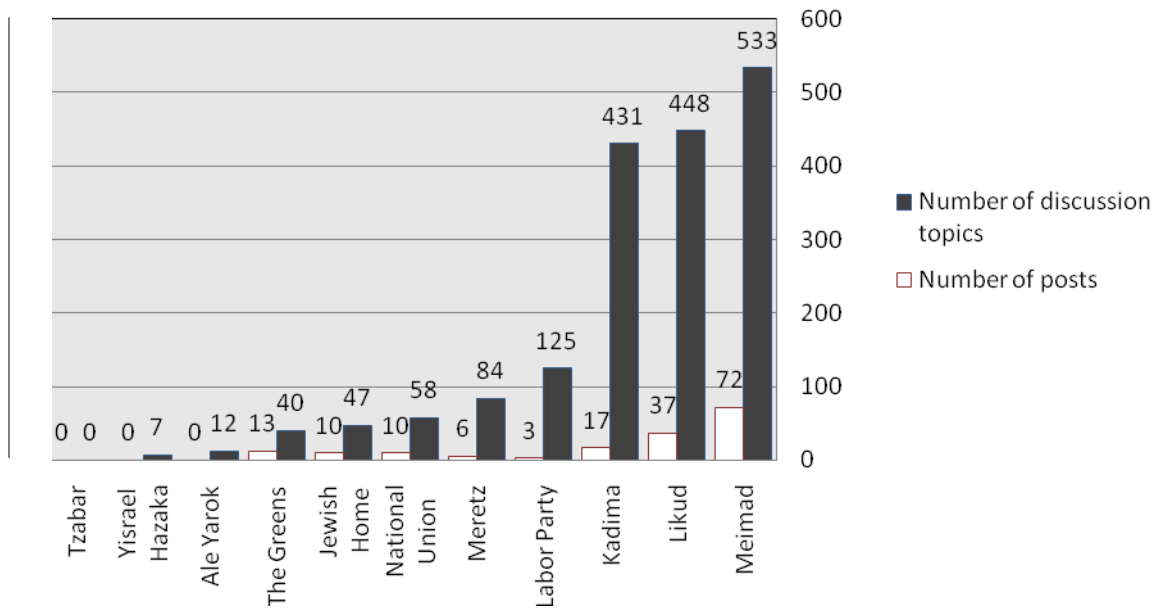
As graph 9 shows, the highest number of *Facebook* supporters is held by *Kadima* with 5,776 supporters, afterwards comes *Green Movement-Meimad* (that did not get into the Knesset) with 3,723 supporters, and third is *Likud* with 3,005 supporters.



Graph 9. Parties with the largest numbers of *Facebook* supporters (Source: Caspi and Lev 2009)

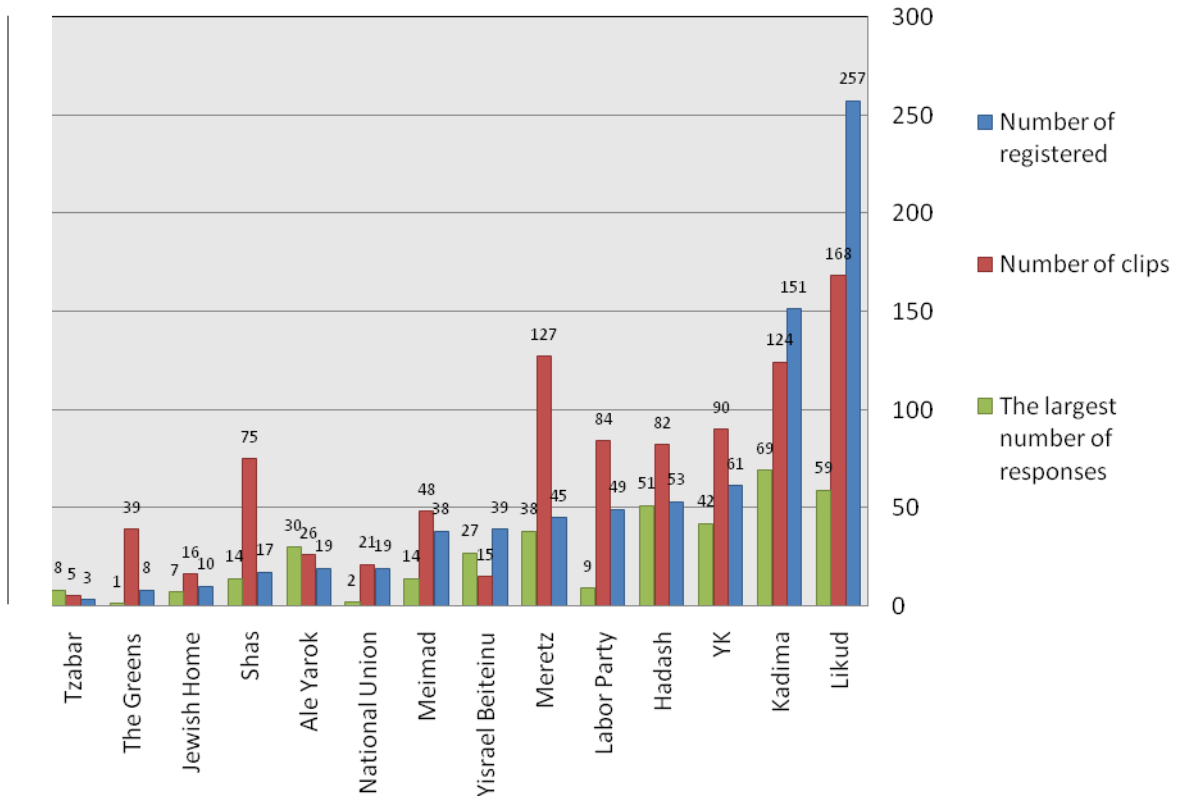
The number of posts and discussion threads in *Facebook* was also slim by all opinions. Here, *The Green Movement-Meimad* led the way; its *Facebook* profile had 72 threads of discussion, with 533 posts. The *Likud* had 37 threads and 448 posts, and *Kadima* had 17 threads and 431 posts. As graph 10 shows, the number of discussion threads and posts to other *Facebook* are significantly lower, almost negligible.

¹⁸ Graphs are adapted, with permission, from Caspi and Lev's and presentation in the conference "Online Campaigning in Israel", Ariel University Center, March 8th, 2009. The presentation is available at conf09.arieluc.org/



Graph 10. Number of posts and discussion threads in largest *Facebook* groups (Source: Caspi and Lev 2009)

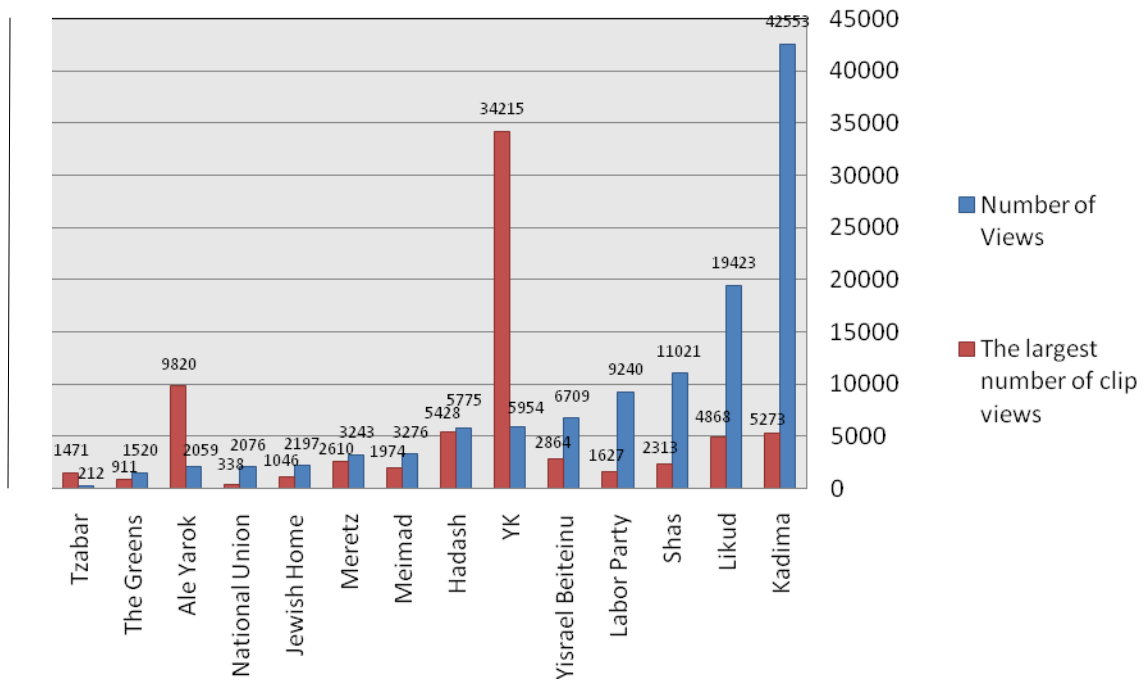
Except for Facebook, significant usage was made of the video-sharing platform *YouTube*. Twenty parties made use of *YouTube*, but the number of file uploads by parties and users was slim (see graph 11).



Graph 11. *YouTube* usage in the 2009 general campaigns (Source: Caspi and Lev 2009)

Graphs 11 and 12 demonstrate the *YouTube* dominance of the *Likud*. The *Likud* uploaded 168 videos and its channel had 257 subscribers. *Meretz* came in second in terms of the number of videos uploaded (127), but it had only 45 subscribers to its channel, where only 38 comments were made. Channel views (graph 12) are unimpressive either.¹⁹

¹⁹Note that usage of *YouTube* in the municipal campaigns was slim; roughly a sixth of the candidates in Jewish authorities uploaded one or more videos to the site, and audience reaction was negligible. For analysis of *YouTube* usage in municipal campaigns, see Lev-On (2010b).



Graph 12. *YouTube* usage in the 2009 general campaigns (Source: Caspi and Lev 2009)

Let us conclude with a word of caution. The data clearly demonstrates that parties' presence on various web platforms was not popular among Internet users, but this does not mean that the Israeli public does not look for politics online. Gal Mor argues in the "post-mortem" of the 2009 elections that the Internet "was the favorite medium by Israelis in the last minutes before the election round-up. More than a million and a half Israelis went online to update with the election results."²⁰ Yet if we judge interest solely on to the traffic to party campaign websites, there is still a long way for the parties to go in order to transform the general interest in online politics into exposure to party campaigns and involvement through them.

Even in the municipal arena, one should not conflate lack of exposure to candidates' online campaigns with lack of public interest in online political

²⁰ Mor, Gal. "Elections 2009: Post-Mortem". *Holes in the Net*, February 13th, 2009. <http://www.holesinthenet.co.il/archives/1723?p=1723?src=popular> (Hebrew).

information. A nice example comes from the ultra-Orthodox community, one of the least connected publics in Israel. The local elections and especially the elections to the mayorship of Jerusalem where the Haredi vote was split between the ultra-Orthodox candidate Meir Porush and the secular Nir Barkat, invoked much interest among the ultra-orthodox public. A day after the results were known, a record-breaking amount of visits were recorded in the leading ultra-Orthodox site *BeHadrei Haredim*. According to Google analytic data, 1.5 million pages were viewed and 50,000 unique visitors entered the site which is 30% more than average. Unprecedented traffic was evident in the forums of the site, in this case 50% more than the average daily traffic.²¹

Informal Party Activist Sites

Let me highlight one last interesting phenomena in the margins of election campaigns, which is the presence, alongside the formal campaign sites, of informal activist sites that identify with certain parties, but are not formally associated with them (see Gibson, Greffet and Ward 2009).

Such sites exist alongside the official sites of the party or campaign, and are often identified with the party and its platform, but the two are not necessarily allies. The activist site *Likudnik*,²² run by Aric Ziv, is a good example. Ziv was crowned in a story by *Haaretz* as “the most important member in the Likud,” yet he has no formal role in the party, nor was he running for elections in the primaries. The site itself is “half underground, half representative.”²³ One the one hand, the site presents information about the party, its branches, key figures, and Knesset members. On the other hand, it is “the website of the Likudniks” that is, Likud members, not of the Likud. It often deals with internal party politics, recommends candidates during primary season, and has even criticized the party chairman during and after the elections. For example, the site levied much criticism on elected-PM Netanyahu’s cabinet choices.²⁴

Another good example is *Kadima*, the party that won the largest number of votes. *Kadima*'s activist site is called “Yalla Kadima” and, unlike the formal sites of many parties, had been vibrant with much activity throughout the years when *Kadima* has been a key coalitional partner. The evidence of its centrality to

²¹ Source: press release from Global Networks, the site owner. <http://www.prweb.co.il/view.php?pressId=T1Rneg==> See also Ettinger, Y. (2008). “The Tribal Fire is Disoriented in *Beharei Hadarim*.” *Haaretz*, December 1st, 2008. (Hebrew). <http://www.haaretz.com/captain/spages/1041122.html>

²² www.likudnik.co.il (Hebrew).

²³ www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1043742.html (Hebrew).

²⁴ “Silvan is out- Steinitz in the Treasury Office”. Op-ed, *Likudnik*, March 31st, 2009, www.likudnik.co.il/article.aspx?articleID=6096&categoryID=146 (Hebrew).

internal party affairs was made clear in another *Haaretz* story, on the intense fight between candidates to publish materials on their behalf on a leaflet initiated by *Yalla Kadima*'s owners, and the price hike that followed the competition.²⁵ This site is also very far from the traditional image of party journalism as a tool for party leaders to express their opinions and strengthen their position in the party (Caspi and Limor 1999). For example, the site conducted a comprehensive study of the primaries for the head of *Kadima* which were held in September 2008, and was surrounded by rumors about corruption and manipulations.²⁶

Discussion

The data presented in the article portrays the Internet as an emerging medium for political marketing. The awareness of the Internet's potentials exists, as well as the willingness to divert budgets for Internet campaigning. Parties' presence in a variety of Internet platforms confirms its perceived importance. In the general elections, almost all the parties used websites, and so did half of the candidates in the municipal elections in the Jewish sector.

Still, extensive differences in the character and scope of the political usage of the Internet are evident in a number of cross-sections: between the large and better-represented parties and smaller parties; between Internet uses in the general elections and in the municipal elections; and in the municipal elections, a group of socio-economic and strategic variables seem to impact the probabilities of having a website.

Even among candidates and parties that *did* have a website, data clearly shows that many sites mostly functioned as upgraded message boards, or publicity leaflets. In most of the parties' websites, there were very few interactive functions that, according to many, add a unique or differentiating factor when campaigns move online. Note also, that in many cases Internet campaigning happened right before the elections, ceasing immediately after it (Haleva-Amir forthcoming). This holds not only for the parties that competed in the general elections, but also for the candidates in the municipal elections.

The lack of interaction is in itself worthy of discussion. Beyond a lack of awareness by many candidates of their ability to involve the public and decentralize their campaigns, it seems that online public involvement is a cause for concern for a significant number of candidates with which the topic was addressed (see also Stromer-Galley 2000). For example, one of the candidates

²⁵ Moualem, Mazal. "The Price of Publicity in *Kadima*: 60 Thousand NIS for a Magazine Cover Picture, 12 Thousand Onsite". *Haaretz Online*, December 5th, 2008. www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1043939.html (Hebrew).

²⁶ "Part A- Investigating Kadima Primary Outcomes". Op-ed, *Yalla Kadima*, January 18th, 2009. www.yallakadima.co.il/article.asp?item_id=9511 (Hebrew).

explained that he established a forum on his site, just to discover after only three weeks that it "became bogged down by cursing and vandalism from the voters of the competition, rather than reaching out to new voters". It seems that fear of hostile user comments, or even planted sabotage by the competition, combined with the fear of the impact that such content would have on visitors who sympathize with the campaign, are factors that may discourage a greater use of more web technologies.

The above findings join findings from earlier studies that demonstrate lack of interactive usage of the Internet for political purposes, for example in personal MK sites (Haleva-Amir forthcoming), and in the sites of municipal authorities (Purian-Lukach forthcoming). Note that the overwhelming majority of municipal candidates took down their sites shortly after the elections, which illustrates their view of them as goal-oriented campaign tools, not means to establish a long-term relationship with constituencies.

On the municipal level, a variety of variables seem to impact the possibility that candidates set up a website. First and foremost is the question of whether the candidate is an incumbent or not, as arguably incumbents require less means to expose themselves to constituencies. Various characteristics of the particular municipal races (such as number of eligible voters) and of the constituency may also impact a candidate's decision on whether to set up a website or not.

The digital divide is another source of concern for the implementation of online bi-directional democracy. In the context of the current study, it is manifest in the negligible percentage of websites for candidates who compete in non-Jewish municipalities, vs. 50% among candidates who compete in Jewish municipalities. In spite of the gradual penetration of the Internet to the non-Jewish sector, it is evident that it is still hardly used as a tool for political marketing. Arguably, these findings demonstrate that the vision of bi-directional online democracy may not equally benefit different groups in the population.

Also, data shows that constituencies do not arrive in large numbers, either to candidates' or parties' websites, or to their spheres in web 2.0 platforms. Yet, the fact that a lot of traffic does not get routed to official campaign sites does not mean that the public is not interested in online politics. In many cases, the public may look for political information on news portals or general interest websites, where people browse on a daily basis. It seems that parties that can reach the audience where it already is instead of trying in vain to channel it to their own spheres, may be able to market their message more effectively. This issue deserves further study.

Another open question is the impact of online political campaigning on voters. The study does not deal with this issue specifically and further studies are required here as well, but evidence suggests that the impact of parties' and

candidates' Internet activity on voters is weak at best. At the municipal level, analysis shows no correlation between website ownership and getting elected. On the national level, the case of The *Green Movement-Meimad*, which based its strategy on online interactive campaigning, became the strongest force in the "bloggers' Knesset" but remained outside the Israeli Knesset, also shows a similar disconnect.

Still, it is important to repeat that Internet sites are becoming a standard political tool and that many web 2.0 platforms are being created and used by parties and candidates, although often web presence is short-lived and often ceases shortly after the elections. But here too signs of change are evident by a small number of early adopters. Perhaps the buzz and publicity gained by candidates who used the Internet in a more creative and bidirectional fashion will pave the way for many others to recognize the potentials of the Internet during campaigns, and possibly even after it.

Why is it, then, that the awareness and usage of the Internet increased during the 2008/9 campaigns, compared to earlier campaigns in Israel where parties demonstrated much thinner web presence? (Lehman-Wilzig 2004; Atmor 2008). I would like to point at three key explanations. First, the medium is maturing; the Israeli Internet became, in the past few years, a central tool for information search, for creating and maintain social ties, for consumption, and more. If the people are "out there" and are carrying out numerous and various activities online, why not reach out to them during the campaigns?²⁷

Second, outside of the political arena, one can clearly see the rising dominance of participatory sites based on user-generated content. From Wikipedia to YouTube, Facebook and a variety of other social networks, web 2.0 is gaining popularity.²⁸ In addition, "conventional" web sites are introducing a growing number of interactive features to their toolbox. In the popular web 2.0 platforms, the main "burden" of production falls on users. These platforms are perfect for the Israeli parties, in light of the heavy financial debts that many of them face. The growing reliance on user-generated content, which is streamlined

²⁷ A 2007 Dun and Bradstreet survey shows that 72% of Israeli household are connected to the Internet, 95% of whom have a broadband connection. Adult Internet users are on average 37.4 hours online per month, the second highest rate in the world. See: "The Israeli surfer is ranked second in the world in terms of monthly hours of Internet browsing". DB press release, December 5th, 2007. <http://www.dbisrael.co.il/NewsShowHeb1.asp?idnum=412> (Hebrew).

²⁸ A February 2009 TIM survey reports that YouTube (47.6%) and Facebook (38%) are on the fourth and sixth places, respectively, in the list of popular sites in Israel. See: Shitrit, Sharley, "TIM Survey, February 2009: Ynet and Nana Continue to Rise, a Boost for TheMarker, Mako Declines". Ice, March 15th, 2009, http://www.ice.co.il/pop_print.asp?pgId=129875&catId=4 (Hebrew). See also: Cohen, Maayan. "250,000 New Internet Users in 2008". *Haaretz*, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasite/spages/1055634.html> (Hebrew).

into platforms established by parties, also nicely corresponds to the ongoing trend of the transformation of the Israeli political system from mass parties to "skeletal", electoral parties (Goldberg 1992).

The third reason for the rise of the Internet in the Israeli election campaigns of 2008/9 seems to be other campaigns that took place in a similar time period but in different parts of the world, notably the Internet-based campaign of US elected-President Barack Obama. Obama's campaign was present in a myriad of Internet arenas, and placed heavy emphasis on participation, fundraising, activist recruitment and mobilization (Stallings-Carpenter 2010). The successful campaign attracted a flood of imitators of the campaigning strategy, website design, slogans and audio jingles, and more (see two Israeli examples below, one from the national level, another from the municipal level).



Figure 1. Obama's and the Likud's sites (source: Edo Keinan, <http://www.room404.net/?p=15309>)²⁹

²⁹ See also http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/15/world/middleeast/15bibi.html?_r=1



Figure 2. Screenshots from the websites of *Barack Obama* and *Rotem Reani*, running for head of *Tel-Mond* municipal council (6827 eligible voters. Source: Edo Keinan, <http://www.room404.net/?p=15309>)

The Obama campaign gained massive publicity due to its innovative usage of the Internet in both races for the democratic primaries and the presidential elections. But the participatory and collaborative understanding of the intersection of new media and politics, is largely lacking in the Israeli realm where, for example, the overwhelming majority of municipal campaign websites were taken down immediately after the elections are over, and most parties have made scant use of their websites during the regular sessions of the Knesset (Haleva-Amir forthcoming). When the public is consulted online, it is never about heavyweight policy issues, but rather about marketing issues, like picking logos or jingles.

Conclusions

The general and municipal election campaigns surveyed here, demonstrate that we are in the middle of a process that is turning the Internet from an esoteric propaganda medium into a key arena of publicity and marketing. The audience does not consume the goods offered on parties' and candidates' Internet arenas,

interactive applications are scantily used, and little emphasis is put on the Internet for recruitment, mobilization and get-out-the-vote efforts. In many cases the online activity of political actors is goal-oriented and short-term, and ceases within a few days after the votes were counted.

Still, change is coming. This is evident with the rise of awareness regarding the use of the Internet as a political tool and the willingness to invest resources. And of course the significant rise in online presence in a variety of Internet platforms, focusing on the bigger and more salient parties and candidates.

Looking back one may realize that the years 2008/9 brought about significant changes in political campaigning, and Obama's campaign techniques seems to slowly penetrate outside the US as well. Even if the adoption of such campaigning techniques embodies a "premature Americanization" (Caspi and Lev 2009), it may still hint at a shift of the political center of gravity onto the Internet. This shift may have far-reaching implications in a variety of domains, including party organization, parties' communication patterns with constituencies, the scope and character of user involvement in general and municipal politics, the sources of funding of candidates and parties, and more.

The present work demonstrates the need to make a progress in reference to both the theoretical study, and the practical regulation, of online campaigning. In the practical level, the ongoing migration of campaign communication to the Internet makes a demand from regulatory agencies. In Israel, the difference between the highly regulated "traditional media" campaign environment, and the nearly anarchic "new media" one, is striking. The only mention of the Internet in the campaign regulation legislation involves the ban to publish results of public opinion polls five days prior to the elections, which seems anachronistic in light of the fast information propagation and anonymity online. Furthermore, the fact that campaign activities online are nearly unregulated compared to offline campaign activities, suggests that audiences that are exposed to campaign communication mostly online, receive it free from the restriction imposed on audiences who receive political information mainly from traditional media outlets.

Future campaign regulation legislation should also address some "gray areas", for example: can campaign activists appear on the official websites of MKs or mayors? In this regard, should there be a distinction between sites that were established and supported by public finance, and those that were established by the candidates without such financial assistance? And what about sites that endorse certain parties or candidates, but are not officially affiliated with them, such as the activists' sites "Likudnik" and "Yalla Kadima" which were described above? And what about campaign activists in social networks such as Facebook, which are often carried but out by individual supporters, who identify with the parties or the candidates, but are not officially affiliated with them?

In the theoretical level, the paper is a first step towards explaining when and how political candidates use the Internet during low-visibility as well as high-visibility campaigns. A theory of technology usage in low-visibility campaigns may take into account strategic, environmental, and even individual-level variables (such as attitudes and literacy of politicians and their advisors) that may influence the scope and character of Internet usage by candidates.

It is clear that Internet penetration into politics takes place in a variety of contexts and patterns across candidates, sectors and regions, and a more complete theory can assist in recognizing and analyzing such patterns. Analyzing such patterns is also significant in order to assist political institutions and practices in adjusting to the renewing campaign media environment.

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