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A Comparative Structural Analysis of Austrian and  
German Party Websites**

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Uta Russmann

University of Innsbruck, Austria

[uta.russmann@uibk.ac.at](mailto:uta.russmann@uibk.ac.at)

## Voter Targeting via the Web – A Comparative Structural Analysis of Austrian and German Party Websites

**Abstract.** The growth of parties' activities on the Web over the last decade has led to a more sophisticated use of websites and Web campaigns are more and more embedded in a general political marketing strategy. This study focuses on the question, to what extent political parties use the Internet to attract different target groups. The online audience can be seen as one mass or as carefully defined target segments as especially voters differ concerning aspects like party ties, age or gender. This paper analyzes the occurrence of online targeting on political parties websites during the most recent Austrian and German National Elections (2008/2009). Though this study found that on a general level the similarities between parties, also in the country comparison, are more striking than the differences, it also identifies that on a more specific level catch-all parties and client parties apply different targeting patterns. Client parties address the general public just as much as different target groups; whereas catch-all parties tailor their websites to a greater extent to specific target segments.

**Keywords:** campaigns; targeting; parties' websites; comparative analysis

### Introduction

Today, websites as a campaign communication medium are well established. (Druckman et al. 2007; Foot/Schneider 2006; Kluver et al. 2007; Ward/Gibson 2003; Zittel 2009). Campaigns are events geared toward persuading the voters (Herrnson/Campbell 2009: 11) and websites are instruments in the campaign media mix that offer great political potentialities. Voters can be made aware of parties and politicians, find campaign information and form attitudes about those running for political office, thereby strengthening their voting-decision, on this communication platform. Furthermore, the Internet is a tool that can facilitate interaction between political parties and citizens, and can mobilize supporters effectively and efficiently. The growth of parties' activities on the Web over the last decade has led to a more sophisticated use of websites and Web campaigns are more and more embedded in a general political marketing strategy (Drummond 2006: 181). In recent elections political parties not only "used computer technologies to communicate with targeted groups of voters via direct and electronic mail" (Steger 1999: 663). Parties use "e-marketing to inform their communication. (...) and respond to market intelligence in the way they design the political product they

offer, becoming market-oriented rather than primarily sales-oriented” (Lee-Marshment 2010: 1). The e-marketing of the Obama Campaign in the 2008 US presidential elections showed that the more the party, i.e. candidate customizes its Web campaign, the more effective and successful it will be (Cunha et al. 2003: 74).

Today, more than ever, “[p]olitical marketing is influencing the way political parties behave” (Lee-Marshment 2010: 3). Parties employ external consultants to guide and execute their campaign, they place ads on television, conduct polls and targeting has become a central part of parties’ campaign strategy. Politics is increasingly becoming market-oriented. In order to be successful and hence win elections, parties “have to understand their markets – the voters and their basic needs and aspirations and the constituencies they represent or seek to represent” (Kotler/Kotler 1999: 3). A campaign’s goal is to persuade the electorate. “At its basic level, targeting is the vehicle for allocating resources and providing information aimed at persuading voters.” (Blaimire 2003: 225) In the process of targeting, the electorate is not seen as a “homogenous and uniform” (Kotler/Kotler 1999: 9) group, “but rather consists of different segments, the behaviors of which have to be understood” (ibid.). Campaigns appeal to the members of a group (Blaimire 2003: 226) by segmenting the public into different target groups. According to Herrnson (2004: 164), traditionally voters “have been categorized on the basis of geography, religion, ethnicity, race, income, education, profession, and party identification (...). More recent classifications are based on combinations of age, ideology, and lifestyle”. A classical approach in politics is to segment voters in groups of age, gender, profession, education and ethnicity. Following this classification, in this study website users are segmented in age groups such as *young voters* and *seniors* and identity groups such as *women*, *men*, *gays* and *minorities*. In addition, there are special voter segments which are close to the party and can be mobilized through the Web: the *party members* and the *party supporters*. Another special interest group is the *mass media* as the media connects the party to the broader electorate; therefore, also the media is a very important target group to politics. Furthermore, the *general public*, i.e. the broader electorate has to be considered in Web targeting as many Web features just do not focus on any specific user group.

“A hallmark of postmodern campaigning is the use of new technologies that allow an interactive and highly targeted communication with voters.” (Ward 2009: 351) Certainly, in western democracies, traditional mass media (in particular television) is still the most influential campaign communication channel, but the Internet has created a new forum for political campaign. Any information, e.g. messages, audio or video can be customized “toward each individual voter or group of voters - information that we can be more certain is actually relevant to

their lives and can actually make an impact” (Fenn 2009: 134f.) and is communicated in direct ways cutting out the media (more of that below).

During the last years, studies of Web campaigning typically focus on the contents of parties’ and candidates websites. This research project goes a step beyond. The central question in this article is *to what extent political parties use the Internet to attract different target groups*. The online audiences can be seen as one mass, on the one hand or as carefully defined voter segments, on the other hand. To examine (voter) targeting via the Web, we analyze political parties’ websites during the 2008 Austrian National Elections and the German National Elections in 2009. A comparative analysis will not only shed light on this understudied question, moreover data of two countries will identify comparative patterns of website usage in campaigns between countries and parties and will assure that the conclusions drawn about voter Web targeting are more than just arbitrary. In doing so, this paper provides greater insight into the world of Web campaigning.

From a political marketing perspective, I start in the next section with a literature overview on why and how political parties target their voters. In the second part, I explore my research question empirically with a structural analysis of party websites before discussing the results. The article concludes by summarizing the principal findings.

## **Parties and Web Targeting**

Austria and Germany have multi-party systems with two to three major parties and a couple of minor parties. A classical approach to classify the political parties is by segmenting them in so-called catch-all parties and client parties. The German major parties of SPD, CDU and CSU as well as the Austrian major parties of SPÖ and ÖVP are following a catch-all strategy. Today, they are often characterized by appealing to core voters as they do not adhere to strong ideological principles or social bases of party support. The ideological differences between parties have also been reduced due to partisan dealignment. In general, the party manifesto does not reflect a profound ideological conviction or a clear policy goal and the party’s electorate and members are very heterogeneous. Parties rather concentrate on issues with little resistance (e.g. education). (Kirchheimer 1990) The development from strong ideological principles in the early days of the parties towards addressing the views of the median Austrian and German voters, reached its peak in the late 1990s in a strategic shift of parties’ politics; reconciling right-wing and left-wing politics and thereby addressing the view of the more general public. Especially, the Social Democrats showed this attempt to dominate the center ground when Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Toni Blair (New Labour)

proposed *The Third Way*. (Norris 2001) Client parties still have a more consistent idea of what the party stands for than catch-all parties. The German minor parties of FDP, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (The Green Party) and Die Linke (The Left) as well as the Austrian minor parties of FPÖ, Die Grünen (The Green Party) and BZÖ are aiming at a more specific voter clientele. These parties promote a more specific ideology by focusing on special issues such as the Green Party is highlighting the importance of an environmental approach to economic issues etc.

Since the mid-1970s, voter turnout in elections in western democracies has continuously declined and there has been an increase in the volatility of party preference (Saalfeld 2007: 86f.). Voter participation has decreased from about 90 percent in the mid-1970s elections to about 79 percent in the recent Austrian National Elections in 2008 and to an even greater extent, to about 71 percent, in the 2009 German National Elections. In Germany, and to an even greater extent in Austria, political parties have to deal with an ongoing decline in party identification and party membership (Dalton 2000: 25; Niedermayer 2007: 370ff.). “The real battle is then waged for the votes of the undecided and those without ideological predilections. Within such an understanding of politics and the political process, political campaigning is intended to persuade and mobilize voters.” (Lilleker/Negrine 2006: 36) Based on an analytical framework, Rohrschneider (2002: 377) argues that especially catch-all parties “are increasingly forced to appeal to floating voters by means of modern campaign instruments”.

According to Dalton (2000: 36), the decline in partisanship among better educated and politically sophisticated is higher than among people with low education and less interest in politics. Data for the 2008 Austrian National Elections shows that relatively well-educated people are more likely to be reached by the Internet than less educated voters. Some 22 percent of all Austrian adults with higher education say that the Internet is an important campaign source when they consider whom to vote for. Whereas in this role the Internet serves as an important information resource for only 8 percent of the less educated. (AUTNES 2009) Despite the fact that better educated people use the Internet to a greater extent when searching for political information than the overall population, the number of people who turn to the Internet when searching for political information has constantly increased over the last years (van Eimeren/Frees 2009).

Parties compete more and more for the voter’s attention and they are forced to implement marketing strategies. Winning an election involves systematically targeting different voter groups. Parties and candidates need to reach out to the public, they need to inform, communicate with and thereby convince their voters. Today, it’s mainly the media – television, newspapers, radio and the Internet – that gets out the parties’ messages and influences the vote. For the parties websites are a direct way of informing their prospective voters, bypassing traditional mass media. In particular, for smaller parties the Web bears great potential

for attracting voters as the traditional mass media is giving them less coverage than the major parties. Moreover, most often party websites are visited by non-party members. Karlsen (2010: 46) reports in his study of voters' Internet use for electoral information during the Norwegian elections in 2001 and 2005 that "only 15 percent of the voters who got information from a party website were party members". Websites are allowing more penetration and targeted communication and thereby to reach pretty precise mapped audiences (Benoit/Benoit 2005). According to Lilleker and Negrine, parties „must somehow ‘connect‘ with voters, and depending on how and where they seek the information on which to base their decisions, they will accept one party or candidate as more acceptable than another." (Lilleker/Negrine 2006: 36)

The primary goal of political parties is to maximize votes. (This article does not claim that parties follow on a single model by concentrating only on voter-seeking, they rather employ a mix of different strategies of which winning votes is a primary one in a campaign.) Vote-seeking parties "most likely adopt a top-down communication strategy" (Römmele 2003:13) by pushing "targeted information toward specific subgroups in society" (Römmele 2003: 12). By *customizing* the different information the party can meet the demands of the voter market.

"Customization is where the true value of the Internet can be unleashed. The Internet provides the perfect technological interface for providing information tailored to each user's specific needs, and designed to address the issues most salient to his or her decisions as to which candidate to vote for." (Fenn 2009: 135)

Furthermore, the party has to keep in mind, a website that does not offer information that is actually relevant to the voters' lives will not make an impact on them and people will most likely not visit the party's website another time. For the German National Elections in 2009, parties already started as early as up to nine month before Election Day with new or re-launches of their websites (Hagen 2009: 34); enough time to customize their websites to the different target segments. Whereas Austrian parties were compelled to put together their Web campaign in a couple of weeks, respectively days, as due to early elections they started less than three month prior Election Day with organizing their campaigns.

Unlike any other channel the application of the Internet to campaigning makes two-way flow of communication possible. By integrating features such as a chat or a forum on the party's website, the Web provides one of the cheapest and fastest ways to communicate with the voter. This bottom-up communication strategy is giving the electorate an opportunity to provide feedback, ask questions and

leave comments on what they think of the party and their actions. Targeted two-way communication

”provides a way to get potential voters more involved in a campaign, to allow them to feel like they have a stake in the process, and to canvass public reaction to issue positions and messages, potentially giving campaign professionals valuable information that can be used to alter or re-focus campaign themes and platforms” (Fenn 2009: 135).

However, most communication from websites is still one-way in nature than two-way interactive, rather following a top-down than a bottom-up information strategy (Margolis et al. 1999; Ward et al. 2003: 19).

Empirical data on political voter targeting and how political parties and candidates themselves evaluate this subject is rare (Rohrschneider 2002: 367). Moreover, the majority of the existing studies examine this phenomenon in an offline surrounding. According to Karlsen (2009: 198), who interviewed party secretaries of the seven largest parties in the 2005 Norwegian National Elections, “parties consider the internet to be a channel for winning voters as well as mobilizing activists”. Nonetheless, parties have not developed a Web strategy of how to tailor campaign messages to specific voter segments in Norwegian campaigns (Karlsen 2009: 194). One reason for such a ‘cautious behavior’ might be that the interviewed Norwegian party secretaries are uncertain of the effects of the Web in the campaign – “although the internet is considered a communication channel for winning voters by getting the message across without the distortion in the traditional media” (Karlsen 2009: 198).

What we do not know so far is, do political parties on their websites address a general audience or are they aiming at specific voter groups? After all we can find a variety of features on parties’ websites. The research project focuses on a macro perspective by investigating how parties emphasize the Web’s targeting possibilities: *To what extent are parties addressing specific target groups with the utilized features and techniques on their website?*

The exploratory study addresses the following hypotheses:

H1: Catch-all parties address a more general audience on their website; whereas client parties rather tailor the utilized features on their website to specific target groups.

H2: Austrian parties address a more general audience on their website; whereas German parties tailor the utilized features on their website to specific target groups.

## Data and Methodology

The study investigates voter targeting on the Web by analyzing Austrian (SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, BZÖ, Green Party) and German (CDU, SPD, FDP, Green Party, The Left (Die Linke)) political parties' websites of the most recent National Elections: the Austrian National Elections, which took place on September, 28<sup>th</sup> 2008 and the German Federal Elections, which took place exactly a year after the Austrian elections on September, 27<sup>th</sup> 2009. The parliamentary, electoral, party and media system in Germany and Austria are very similar (Hallin/Mancini 2004), which provides a solid basis for a cross-national analysis. Moreover, Austria and Germany are quite close in terms of Internet development and usage.

In order to conduct the multi-level comparison of party websites, in each country, four weeks prior to Election Day the websites of the parties in parliament were downloaded and saved weekly. The weekly download was done in order to track the changes that occurred during the „hot phase“ of the campaign. A comparison of the websites shows a few changes over the four week period. However, in the context of the research question, these changes are rather negligible, therefore the following presentation and discussion of results focuses on the websites downloaded in the middle of the “hot phase” of the campaign, i.e. two weeks prior election day. (For Austrian websites: 09-16-2008; for German websites: 09-15-2009).

While most of the recent research has focused on the features found on websites, this paper as outlined above goes a step beyond by considering Web targeting strategies. The structural analysis of campaign websites is focusing on the key functions of Web campaigning: informing (47 features), participating/involving (8 features codifying online political discussion and measuring voter opinion), connecting/networking (21 features measuring internal and external links on a website), and mobilizing (15 features measuring the Web's potential to recruit supporters, the possibility to donate and to order campaign materials). These functions reflect the behavior of the producers of the sites themselves, in this case, the political parties. For each function a comprehensive template of campaign website features and techniques was developed, integrating a number of variables of related studies (in particular, Foot/Schneider 2006; Gibson/Ward 2000) (see Table A1 in the Appendix). This approach centres on the concept of a website as a unit of analysis. The determining factor is the main root address (URL). Therefore, the single website (including all links and pages associated with it) of a political party is defined as unit of analysis. Each website is evaluated according to the coding scheme. First, we analyze which features parties use to appeal to voters. To allow for quantitative comparison, following the practice of previous studies of parties online, each element is assigned a score: 0 for absence of the website element and 1 for presence of the element. Second, we codify and



measure if the Web features are addressed at a general audience or more specific groups. The research project aims at the following target segments: party members (1), media/press (2), supporters of the political actor (3), citizens in general (i.e. the broader electorate) (4), young voters (age group) (5), seniors (age group) (6), women (identity group) (7), men (identity group) (11), minorities (identity group) (8), gays (identity group) (9), and other specific users/identity groups (to be described) (10). The website analysis is conducted out of a user perspective. By this, we are looking at each website with the eye of the parties' website user, e.g. the voter. The coders were asked to identify all the targeted user segments for each website feature. The target group has to be codified as specifically as possible. Coders have to judge whether one or more specific target groups are aimed at or is the content tailored to "all" visitors. In case, a feature is aimed at more than one voter group, coders have to check all those that apply. If no specific target group can be identified, we code 4 = *citizens (in general)* for "all" visitors.

To test inter-coder reliability, one website of each country was coded by three coders. In case of disagreement, each coder was asked to independently code the items one more time. If they still did not reach consensus, the disagreement was resolved by discussion. Overall, inter-coder percentage agreement for each of these items falls within the acceptable range, with the vast majority at or above 85 percent.

**Website of the SPÖ (16.09.2008) (Percent Agreement)**

	<b>Presence/Absence of Features (Average)</b>	<b>Target Group(s) (Average)</b>
Practice of Informing	.85	<b>.90</b>
Practice of Participating	1.0	<b>.92</b>
Practice of Mobilising	.87	<b>.88</b>
Practice of Connecting	.87	<b>.91</b>

**Website of the Green Party (16.09.2008) (Percent Agreement)**

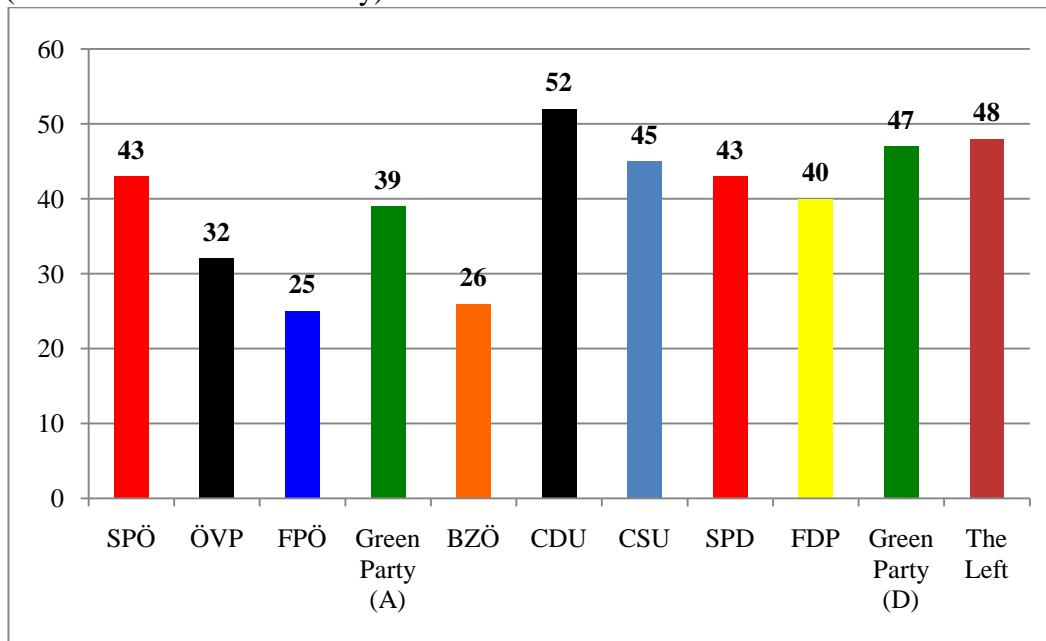
	<b>Presence/Absence of Features (Average)</b>	<b>Target Group(s) (Average)</b>
Practice of Informing	.84	<b>.84</b>
Practice of Participating	1.0	<b>.86</b>
Practice of Mobilising	.87	<b>.75</b>
Practice of Connecting	.90	<b>.915</b>

## Results

To what extent are political parties in Austrian and German National Elections addressing specific target groups with the utilized features on their websites? Figure 1 reports the overall number of features found on the analyzed websites. In general, German parties provide more services for the website user than Austrian parties. This difference might be due to a relatively short period of time in which Austrian parties were compelled to put together their Web campaign. Due to early elections, parties had to face a very short campaign period of less than three months until Election Day. German parties started already at the beginning of the election year with new or re-launches of their websites (Hagen 2009: 34). As a group, catch-all parties do not display more features on their websites than client parties.

**Figure 1**

Number of Website Features on Austrian and German Party Website  
(2 Weeks Prior Election Day)



Hypothesis 1 aims to examine differences in targeting strategies on websites of and between catch-all and client parties' across countries. Contrary to the hypothesis as shown in Table 1 (considering the number of mentions of target groups to a single feature), catch-all-parties (SPÖ, ÖVP, SPD, CDU, CSU) do not concentrate on the general public, i.e. the broader electorate (34%). They rather address the different specific target groups (66%). Client parties (FPÖ, Green

Party (A), BZÖ, FDP, Green Party (G), The Left) tailor the utilized features on their website to the specific target groups (48%) just as much as to the general public (52%).

**Table 1:** Comparison of Web Targeting of Catch-all and Client Parties

	General Public	Specific Target Groups
Catch-all Parties (n=355)	<b>34%</b>	<b>66%</b>
Client Parties (n=301)	<b>52%</b>	<b>48%</b>

Note: Each feature can be aimed at more than one target group (multiple answers); therefore percentages correspond to the number of identifications: n = Number of Identifications of Target Groups.

Table 2 illustrates the analyzed results for each party's website. Considering each analyzed target group as a single group, parties' websites are aimed at the general public – except for the German Social Democrats. The data displays that after addressing the general audience most parties are tailoring the utilized features on their sites at their party members and supporters: Around 40 percent of identifications of target groups within the analyzed features apply to the broader electorate and about 20 to 25 percent (each) to party members and party supporters. Moreover, for those features that are tailored at more than one target group, results indicate that there is an overlap of these three voter groups, i.e. the general public, party members and supporters (see Appendix Table A1). The German Social Democrats only address four of the analyzed voter segments and those almost alike: 29 percent of the identifications refer to party supporters, 28 percent to party members, 22 percent to all citizens and 21 percent to the media.

Comparing the specific target groups, results in Table 2 illustrate that following the two target groups with strong party ties, party members and supporters; parties particularly make an appeal to attract the media via their websites. As outlined above, the mass media connects the party to the broader electorate and therefore can be considered as one of the most important target groups to politics. Overall German parties put a greater focus on addressing the mass media online than Austrian parties.

Political parties only distribute a handful of specific information and services for voter groups such as seniors, women, minorities, gays and others. (For example, in the group of others we coded those of the electorate who vote as a *postal voter* as SPÖ, ÖVP, CDU and CSU provided information on this subject in the coded section *Information on Electoral Law and Voting Procedure* (see Appendix Table A1).) Overall, young voters still have the greatest chance to find information and communication specifically targeted at them (more of that below). The results show, that – if at all - most likely the Austrian Social Democrats

**Table 2: Targeted Groups on Austrian and German Party Websites during National Elections (2008/2009)**

	<b>General Public</b>	Party Members	Media/Press	Party Supporters	Young Voters	Seniors	Women	Men	Minorities	Gays	Other Target Groups
<i>Austrian Party Websites</i>											
<b>SPÖ</b> (n=89)	<b>30%</b>	25%	6%	25%	6%	2%	2%	0%	1%	2%	1%
<b>ÖVP</b> (n=49)	<b>39%</b>	24%	8%	22%	0%	2%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%
<b>FPÖ</b> (n=50)	<b>40%</b>	22%	4%	26%	2%	2%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%
<b>Green Party (A)</b> (n=47)	<b>68%</b>	0%	0%	15%	4%	2%	2%	0%	2%	4%	2%
<b>BZÖ</b> (n=40)	<b>38%</b>	20%	15%	15%	8%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<i>German Party Websites</i>											
<b>SPD</b> (n=78)	<b>22%</b>	28%	21%	29%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>CDU</b> (n=79)	<b>46%</b>	22%	10%	22%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
<b>CSU</b> (n=60)	<b>38%</b>	27%	13%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%
<b>FDP</b> (n=57)	<b>54%</b>	18%	9%	19%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Green Party (G)</b> (n=61)	<b>48%</b>	18%	13%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%
<b>The Left</b> (n=46)	<b>63%</b>	15%	2%	15%	0%	2%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%

n = number of coded features.

Note: Each feature can be aimed at more than one target group (multiple answers); therefore percentages correspond to the number of identifications.

and Green Party are trying to reach out to specific audiences. This illustrates one more time that we cannot distinguish between catch-all and client parties regarding different Web targeting strategies. Overall, German parties are using the opportunity to speak to the different voter segments to a lower extent than the Austrian parties.

The party comparison of Austrian websites reveals a basic targeting pattern for all parties with an exception of the Green Party. Unlike predicted, the Green party aims primarily at the general public (68%) and this to a greater extent than any other Austrian party. As a whole, with an exception of the Green Party, it seems that Austrian parties use the same targeting strategies by aiming at the general public, their party members and supporters rather than on different age and identity groups.

Hypothesis 2 aims to investigate, whether Austrian parties address a more general audience than German parties who therefore rather tailor the different Web features to specific groups. The country comparison shows hardly any differences between Austrian and German political parties. Considering the number of mentions of target groups to a single feature, Table 3 indicates that in both countries parties address about 40 percent of the Web features at the broader electorate and about 60 percent is tailored to different target groups. With regard to the assumption that *German parties address specific target segments to a greater extent than the general audience on their websites*, part of the conclusion in H2 is supported. But differences are rather minimal.

**Table 3:** Comparison of Web Targeting of Austrian and German Parties

	General Public	Specific Target Groups
Austrian Parties (n=275)	<b>41%</b>	<b>59%</b>
German Parties (n=381)	<b>43%</b>	<b>57%</b>

Note: Each feature can be aimed at more than one target group (multiple answers); therefore percentages correspond to the number of identifications: n = Number of Identifications of Target Groups.

There are also no evident differences between catch-all and client parties in the country comparison. Table 4 shows only fairly slight variations and the findings for Hypothesis 1 are also confirmed in an international comparison. The results indicate a clear pattern for the two countries: Considering the number of mentions of target groups to a single feature, Austrian and German catch-all parties tailored about one third of Web features to the general public and about two thirds to different target segments. Client parties in Austria and Germany concentrate in their Web campaign on both groups almost alike.

**Table 4:** Comparison of Web Targeting of Austrian and German Catch-all and Client Parties

	General Public	Specific Target Groups
<i>Austrian Parties (n=275)</i>		
Austrian Catch-all Parties (n=138)	<b>33%</b>	<b>67%</b>
Austrian Client Parties (n=137)	<b>49%</b>	<b>51%</b>
<i>German Parties (n=381)</i>		
German Catch-all Parties (n=217)	<b>36%</b>	<b>65%</b>
German Client Parties (n=164)	<b>54%</b>	<b>46%</b>

Note: Each feature can be aimed at more than one target group (multiple answers); therefore percentages correspond to the number of identifications: n = Number of Identifications of Target Groups.

This brief comparison of websites illustrates that Web targeting strategies of political parties in Austria and Germany do not differ to a great extent. The online communication does focus on different target groups, but is mainly tailored to those segments with close party ties: party members and supporters. In short, the online communication is not tailored to the requirements of specific age or identity groups.

### Targeting of First Time Voters

Political parties can hardly predict which voter segments will visit their website. However, there is a group of voters who they most likely reach with their Web campaign as they use the Internet for political purposes to a greater extent than the general population: the young voters. In particular, the most recent Austrian National Elections in 2008 brought a novelty for European countries as voting age was reduced to the age of 16. For example, to mobilize this new voter segment of first time voters the government, interest groups and others launched a few websites like *www.waehlen16.at* to provide them with information. In this section I explore in which way and to what extent Austrian and German parties focused on targeting young voters or the so called *digital natives*.

The 2009 German National Elections show that the young population is an important voter segment: 63 percent of age 21 and under cast their ballot in the last elections (*www.bundeswahlleiter.de*). These findings suggest that young voters are indeed interested in politics and democratic processes. Moreover, the Internet was their main source of political news during the 2009 campaign (German Longitudinal Election Study 2009). Karlsen (2010: 42) reports that 28 percent of Norwegians aged 17 to 24 visited a party website in search of political information in the 2005 Norwegian National Elections. To an even greater extent do young voters (41 percent) that are online every day acquire campaign information from a party website. The Web has great potential to reach young voters and

encourage them to participate in politics (Drummond 2006: 183). On the basis of survey data from 15 EU member states, Norris (2003: 39f.) addressed the Web's potential for young voters already in 2000: If the group of young people

“who usually have lower than average levels of civic engagement (...) is finding new sources of information and political communications online from news, party and government websites, then this could have important consequences for the future of democracy, though the longer process of generational turnover”.

However, the results for the analyzed party websites show that Austrian and German parties do not use their websites as a tool to strengthen the relationship between the party and the young voters (see Table A1 in the Appendix). All parties offer information on the two issues of *education* and *the young* in their policy section (e.g. *Themen von A bis Z*) as well as in their party manifesto. However, this is more of a general presentation of the parties' agenda. Only the Austrian Social Democrats (e.g. *Wählen mit 16*) and the German Green Party offer specific information for first time voters (as to how, where and when to vote). While all political parties link to their national and local youth organizations, only the Austrian Social Democrats ([www.ichbinwien.at](http://www.ichbinwien.at)), the Austrian Green Party (<http://dagehtwas.at>), the BZÖ (a local youth platform “orange.panthers” of the BZÖ in Styria), the German CDU and CSU ([www.mitmischen.de](http://www.mitmischen.de) – the youth platform of the German Bundestag) connect to other website specifically targeted at first time voters or the young electorate. In addition, the FPÖ tries to mobilize the young voters with a Rap performed by their top candidate Heinz Christian Strache, the HC-RAP. The Austrian Green Party has a forum in which people can share their internship experiences, except this is not campaign specific information. On the website of the German Green Party, young people can search for upcoming events (e.g. parties and concerts).

The presented results show that political parties do not tailor much content to the young electorate. All parties display broadly the same picture: neither do they offer special information for first time voters, nor try to engage with their new potential voters. Among the Austrian parties the SPÖ provides the most services to first time voters. Even though, usually, it is the older electorate that votes for the catch-all party, whereas the younger voters tend to cast their ballot for the minor client parties ([www.bundeswahlleiter.de](http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de), [www.sora.at](http://www.sora.at)). Among the German parties the Green Party targets young voters more than any other party on their website. “Campaigning (..) is about communicating a ‘reason to vote’ that is tailored to each particular target audience at the time they are most attentive and through the medium that they are most likely to be attuned.” (Tringali 2009: 133f., see also Kotler/Kotler 1999: 13) Websites are an important campaign tool to reach

out to the young electorate as to a very great extent the *digital natives* receive information on politics from the Internet.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The Web has provided political parties with new opportunities to connect with the electorate. As pointed out above, only a few studies empirically investigate parties' targeting strategies and even fewer focus on voter targeting via the Web. To fill this gap in our knowledge, the study presented in this article was guided by the general research question: *Are parties actually aiming at differing segmented groups on their websites?*

The results we obtained provide no general support for the hypotheses which are based on the current literature on *offline* political marketing strategies and which are adopting on developments of party membership and voter participation over the last decades. Catch-all parties tailor the utilized features on their websites to specific target groups to a greater extent than to the general audience. Client parties address the different target segments just as much as the general public.

Following the general public, party members and party supporters are the two other most targeted audiences by the political parties. Special identity or age groups are seldom targeted through party websites. The country comparison identifies the same basic patterns of parties Web targeting behavior for Austria and Germany. The reason for this political approach may lie in the fact that parties, particularly catch-all parties, have to deal with an ongoing decline in party membership and a trend of increasing volatility. In general, a party can count on the vote of its party members and supporters, but once not addressed they easily turn their back on the party. Although, this political development should be a motivation for political parties to design better Web targeting strategies, especially, for reaching out to first-time voters. The comparison of parties' websites shows that neither in the 2008 Austrian National Elections nor in the 2009 German National Elections parties took a chance of the great possibilities of participating with and mobilizing the *digital natives* via their websites.

Another explanation for the presented results of a) almost identical patterns on targeting strategies for the Austrian parties and b) a targeting strategy of German as well as Austrian client parties towards the general electorate, would be, that parties do not have a Web targeting strategy. Certainly as proposed by many scholars (see for example Drummond 2006, Fenn 2009), parties increasingly embed their Web campaign in a general political marketing strategy, making decisions on their Web appearances, giving detailed information about their organization or taking the opportunity to raise funds. But yet, political parties have



not started to focus on the voters. Even though, as Kotler and Kotler (1999: 13) propose: “The first rule of effective campaigning is for the campaign to reflect the interest of the voters.” Winning an election also involves in the online setting systematically targeting of different voter groups.

Moreover, none of the observed parties tries to stand out. Fenn (2009: 134) points out and as discussed in the first part of this article, the quality of the website is very important as people who are visiting the website are already the ones with an interest in politics and the party. “Yours has to be the one who people want to pay attention to and become involved with” (Fenn 2009: 136). Above presented results of a Norwegian representative study (Karlsen 2010: 46) show that over 80 percent of those visiting a website are non-party members, i.e. people a party most likely still has to convince of their policies and messages.

Overall, the similarities between the parties, also in the country comparison, are more striking than the differences. However, there are some limitations, as the dataset does not include interviews with parties Web strategists and campaigners, which would give at least some insight to the inner working of the political parties. Also specific information on Internet users’ behavior is missing. Asking individuals how they use party websites during campaigns, e.g. which information they are looking for and in what political activities they engage in online, would examine what specific target segments do online. Further exploration should include such measures to fully understand Web targeting strategies and processes and therefore, be able to judge the overall success of political Web campaigns.

This research is a first attempt to address the gap in our knowledge about parties’ Web targeting strategies and herein contribute to the understanding of Web campaigning processes. Obviously, the Web becomes more important with each election cycle to political communication. (The 2008 U.S. Presidential Elections showed this to a great extent.) In the future, (Austrian and German) political parties will be expected to implement the Web campaign in their professional and sophisticated political marketing strategies and thereby, hopefully, create websites that allow interactive and highly customized communication with their potential voters.

## Appendix

**Table A1: Framework of Structural Elements of Web Sites**

Numbers in columns apply to the following target groups: party members (1), media/press (2), supporters of the political actor (3), citizens in general (i.e. the broader electorate) (4), young voters (age group) (5), seniors (age group) (6), women (identity group) (7), men (identity group) (11), minorities (identity group) (8), gays (identity group) (9), and other specific users/identity groups (10).

	<i>SPÖ</i>	<i>ÖVP</i>	<i>FPÖ</i>	<i>Green Party (A)</i>	<i>BZÖ</i>	<i>SPD</i>	<i>CDU</i>	<i>CSU</i>	<i>FDP</i>	<i>Green Party (G)</i>	<i>The Left</i>
<b>Practice of Informing (47 features)</b>											
<b>General Information on Politics and Elections</b>											
Information on the Political System	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Information on Electoral Law and Voting Procedures	3, 5, 10	-	3, 10	4	-	4	10	4, 10	-	-	4
Information and Position on Current Issues	4	4	4	4	4, 6	4	4	4	4	4	4
<b>Information on the Party</b>											
Information on the Party's History	1, 3, 4	-	-	-	-	1, 3, 4	4	4	4	4	-
Information on Party Structure and Organization	4	-	-	4	-	1, 3, 4	4	1, 3, 4	4	4	-
Information on Party Members	4	4	-	4	-	1, 3, 4	4	4	-	-	4
Search Engine on Politicians	4	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-
Speeches and Statements by Politicians	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Interviews with Party Members	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	4	4
Information on Party Organizations	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9	-	-	-	-	-	4	1, 3	-	1, 3, 4	-
Information on Party Foundations or Charity	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-
Official Documents	-	-	1, 3, 4	4	1, 3, 4	1, 3	1, 3, 4	4	4	1, 3, 4	-

Information on the Party Program	1, 3, 4	-	1, 3, 4	4	1, 4	1, 3, 4	1,3, 4	4	4	1, 3, 4	-
Election Manifesto	3	1,3, 4	1, 3, 4	4	3	1, 3, 4	4	4	4	1, 3, 4	4
Government Program	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Party Achievement (Record)	1, 3, 4	2	-	-	1, 3	-	4	4	-	-	-
Comparison with Opponent's Record	-	-	4	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	4
Information on Party Conventions	1	-	-	-	-	1, 3	1,3, 4	-	4	-	-
Party Members in the Media	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	1,3, 4	1,3, 4	-	4
Broadcast Times of Party Spots	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Photo Archive	4	1,3, 4	1, 3, 4	4	4	-	4	4	-	-	4
<b>Information on the Top Candidate</b>											
Top Candidate's Profile and Biography	1, 3	-	1, 3, 4	4	4	1, 3, 4	-	4	-	4	-
Speeches and Statements by the Top Candidate	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	4	4
Interviews with the Top Candidate	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	4	4	-
Comparisons with opponent's achievement and record	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
News on the Top Candidate	-	-	-	4	-	1, 3, 4	4	4	4	4	-
Photos of the Top Candidate	-	1,3, 4	-	4	-	-	4	-	-	-	4
Campaign Diary of the Top Candidate	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-
Tour Calendar of the Top Candidate	1, 3, 4	4	-	4	4	1, 3, 4	1,3, 4	-	-	1, 3, 4	4
Interviews with the Top Candidate	1, 3, 4	-	-	4	-	-	1,3, 4	-	-	-	4



Discussion Forum	1, 3	-	-	-	-	-	1,3, 4	4	4	3, 4	-
Chat Room	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Chat with the Top Candidate, the Party Leader or Party Officials	1, 3, 4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Opinion Section</b>											
"Opinion Board"	4	4	-	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	-
Opinion Polls	-	-	4	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-
Online Petition	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-
<b>Practice of Mobilizing (15 features)</b>											
Sign-up to Volunteer	-	1,3	-	3	-	1, 3	1,3	-	1,3, 4	1, 3	1, 3, 4
Online Party Membership	3	1,3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	-
Online Possibility to Supporting the Party	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Endorsement	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	4	-	-
Tell a friend	-	-	4	4	-	3, 4	4	-	4	4	4
E-Cards	3	1,3, 4	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-
Online Letter to the Editor	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-
<b>Donation Section</b>											
Donation Information	-	1,3	-	-	-	1, 3	1,3	-	-	-	1,3
Online Fundraising	1, 3	1,3	-	3	-	1, 3	1,3	1,3	1,3	1, 3	1, 3
Friend raising	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Order Campaign Materials</b>											
Download Banners	-	-	-	3	-	1, 3	1,3, 4	1,3	1,3, 4	-	1,3
Download Posters	-	1,3	-	-	1, 3	1, 3	-	-	-	-	1,3
Electronic Paraphernalia	-	1,3	4	3	1, 3	-	3	1, 3	1,3, 4	-	1,3



Links to the Media Organizations	4	-	4	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	4
Link to Portal Site	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Links to Citizens' Sites	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Commercial Links	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Link to Search Engine	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Link to Any Other External Site	4	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-

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