A Europe Wide Web? Political Parties' Websites in the 2009 European Parliament Elections

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Abstract

This paper investigates the characteristics of parties' websites during the campaign for the 2009 European Parliament elections. The study focuses on five Western and Southern European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom) and covers a total of fifty-five websites, which were analyzed in the last two weeks before the vote. The analysis was conducted through a standard coding scheme modelled after Gibson and Ward's (2000) seminal proposal, expanded in order to account for the developments in e-campaigning that have occurred thereafter, and integrated with the results of a meta-analysis of seven coding frames employed by previous researchers. Website features were divided into two main categories: those that provide information to users and those that facilitate their participation to the campaign both online and offline. The goals of this study are, first, to offer an updated mapping of the state of the art in Western European online campaigning and, second, to discover which variables affect the characteristics of party websites. This goal is achieved through regression analyses that correlate indexes measuring the amount of information and participation features in parties' websites with variables that measure system-level as well as party-level characteristics. Results show that system-level variables have no appreciable effect on party websites, while among party-level variables resources and incumbency do not significantly affect websites, but ideology has a strong effect on websites, as parties' belonging to the Socialist and Left-Libertarian families is strongly and positively correlated with both information and participation features on their websites.

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Introduction: Political Parties in the Digital Age

More than fifteen years after its first uses in election campaigns, the internet has become a standard, almost taken-for-granted component of parties' and candidates' communication toolkits. However, research on the political role of ICTs still suggests caution in evaluating their impact on campaigns and democracy. On the bright side, various studies based in the United States have found that visiting candidates' sites enhances both online and offline political participation (Park and Perry, 2008) and that online political engagement discriminates less than offline participation based on traditional SES variables (Jensen et al., 2007: 47); more generally, a meta-analysis of 38 US studies found that there is a positive correlation between internet use and political participation, although questions of endogeneity persist (Boulliane, 2009). On the less than bright side, most literature still subscribes to the notion that the political potential of the new media lies mostly not in changing attitudes and behaviours, but in reinforcing existing patterns of civic engagement and, conversely, in making it easier and less costly for political organizations and social movements to mobilize their supporters (Bimber & Davis, 2003). However, few scholars would disagree that the availability of the internet has enlarged the repertoires of political action for parties, activists, and voters, so that 'the distinction between being a citizen offline and being one online has started to dissolve' (Chadwick, 2006: 172) and that the new media have widened the pool of democratic competitors by reducing the costs of communication and organization and helping new political movements and entrepreneurs to harness the energies of supporters unattached to traditional structures (Ward and Vedel, 2006).

By contrast, most of the available research on Western parties' and candidates' adoption of ICTs has failed to detect a significant and widespread commitment to the participatory and mobilizing potential of the internet by traditional parties (Ward et al., 2003; Nixon et al., 2003). Political actors seem to mostly 'have simply transferred the existing framework from the real world to the virtual realm, using ICTs principally to improve the speed of organizational communication' (Bentivegna, 2006: 336). The classic explanation for such a timid approach is that parties and candidates are wary that embracing the democratic ethos of the internet could result in a loss of message control (Stromer-Galley, 2000). Consistently, research has shown that political actors are wary that interactivity might jeopardize control over their communications and that they are more eager to provide voters with information that can be centrally directed (Druckman et al., 2007; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Gibson et al., 2003). Another hampering force is what Ward and Vedel have termed the 'fear factor within mainstream institutions' (2006: 220): because parties are aware that both media and citizens have high expectations on their online performance and are prepared to

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fully scrutinize it, they overweigh the risks of a potential backlash when evaluating whether or not to experiment with online tools, which results in a slowing-down of innovation. These sombre assessments are in line with Margolis and Resnick's (2000) assertion that 'politics as usual' would prevail online and that a process of 'normalization' would empty the internet of most of its innovative potential. A case in point is the fact that, while theoretically the new media could level the playing field between smaller and larger parties, in reality the latter usually have stronger ICT infrastructures due to their superior resources. As theory and research developed, however, normalization has been found to be conditional on contextual factors such as a pluralitarian electoral system, a long democratic history, high technological development, and an unrestricted media environment both online and offline, while equalization, the opposite of normalization, has generally been found in countries with a long democratic history and a more open online than offline media environment (Strandberg, 2008: 238).

In general, while still limited to smaller and more politically idiosyncratic audiences than traditional mass media, the internet can help strengthen parties' organizations and reinvigorate their relationships with members and supporters, which a vast literature has found to be weakening over the last decades (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). While the evidence previously summarized suggests that political actors have overall been reluctant in pursuing such a route, this tendency may be subject to change, as indicated, first, by the increasing relevance of 'Web 2.0' environments as relevant 'third places' (Chadwick, 2009) which have become so pervasive in citizens' everyday social lives that politicians cannot avoid them, and, secondly, by the success enjoyed by candidates who embraced the new media, such as Barack Obama in the 2008 Presidential campaign in the United States (Vaccari, forthcoming).

However, there is increasing awareness that ICT adoption by political actors should not be conceptualized as a uniform process, but, rather, that it depends on the incentives that decision-makers perceive to have in employing the new media in the particular contexts, both internal and external, in which they operate (Druckman et al., 2007; Sudulich, 2009). The broadest formulation of such hypotheses has been offered by Nixon and colleagues (2003: 241), who have claimed that adoption of ICTs by political parties may depend on three factors: the technological development, the socio-political environment (including electoral laws, types of elections, and party system structure) and internal variables (such as party resources, incentives, and philosophical orientation). Anstead and Chadwick (2008) have offered a first specification of how institutional factors may impact online campaigning in the United States and United Kingdom.

Few comparative studies, however, have tried to empirically test these theoretical insights, as most of the literatures has adopted a single-country focus. One major exception is the research

coordinated by Kluver, Jankowski, Foot, and Schneider, where nineteen national 'web spheres' across Europe, Asia and the US were studied in order to assess the impact on political websites (belonging not only to parties and candidates, but also to government, party, press, NGOs and labour) of variables such as human, technological and political development, as well as political culture and site producer types. These scholars found that producer type had the greatest impact on websites, from which they concluded that trans-national dynamics linking similar types of political actors (e.g., parties) had a greater impact on their websites' characteristics than national factors. They also found that differences in political culture among the countries they studied affected the production of websites by political actors, as countries where citizens declared greater levels of political participation and engagement were also found to have websites that were more informing and provided more connections to other realms. Finally, they found that technological development had a positive impact on the amount of features in the websites they studied (Foot et al. 2007). This evidence suggests, first, that political actors such as parties develop websites that are different from those of other actors in the public arena and thus should be studied for their specific characteristics; secondly, that country-level variables do not necessarily impact the production of online platforms more than other characteristics that are shared by parties in different countries. In other words, the question of *standardization* as well as *cross-country sources of differentiation of online campaigning practices* across different parties and different countries deserves closer attention than has been devoted to it so far because of the small number of available comparative studies. This research attempts to start filling in this gap by focusing on five Western and Southern European countries in the 2009 European Parliament election.

Online Campaigning in the 2009 European Parliament Election

The 2009 elections for the European Parliament (EP) offer a valuable opportunity to address the issues discussed in the previous section. First of all, they enable us to study online campaigning at a time in which all countries were simultaneously involved in an election, thus allowing to control for factors related to the passage of time by keeping it constant (which is not possible when studying countries that hold elections at different times) and to observe countries when parties and citizens are more active and mobilized than at 'peacetime' between campaigns. Second, the EP elections involve a large number of countries and citizens in a relatively homogeneous area, which ensures the comparability of our cases and allows us to follow Boudon's (1984) recommendation to avoid excessively grand generalizations and to instead develop more easily testable 'local theories'. Third, the EP elections occur outside of the United States, which is the context in which most of the

research on internet campaigning has been conducted so far, potentially resulting in biases and not easily generalized findings. Fourth, despite their relative similarities, European countries also feature significant differences between them with respect to relevant variables such as technological development, interest in the election, political culture, timing of the electoral cycle, and the ideological make-up of government and opposition. In sum, the EP elections present us with a satisfactory degree of both commonalities and variations among the countries involved.

In order to comply with Boudon's recommendation to build testable 'local theories', however, a further restriction of our universe is necessary. The European Union, while internally homogeneous at the continental level, includes quite a diverse set of member countries. In particular, stark differences exist between Western/Southern and Eastern countries: while most Western and Southern countries have been members of the EU for a relatively long time, Eastern countries have only joined the Union between 2004 and 2007, when ten and two countries, respectively, became members. Moreover, Eastern European countries are relatively young democracies and their party systems are not easily compared to those of more established democracies (see e.g. Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006). While a comparison between younger and older members, as well as younger and older democracies, is certainly a worthwhile enterprise, in this study we have opted for (relative) homogeneity over heterogeneity, thus limiting our focus to Western and Southern EU countries that were already members of the Union before the 2004-2007 enlargements. Furthermore, while analyzing all countries that correspond to this profile would certainly have been useful, resource scarcity forced us to direct our attention to the five most populated countries within this realm: France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These represent 61.5% of the EU voting-age population and 49.6% of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) elected in 2009, and their internet users, according to World Bank 2008 statistics, amount to 201.2 million people, or 65.5% of the whole online population in the EU (which in 2008 combined for 306.9 million).[1] Moreover, among countries that were members of the EU before the 2004-2007 enlargements, the countries selected for this study comprise 78.5% of the voting-age population and 68.2% of MEPs elected in 2009, and their internet users in 2008 constituted 77.9% of the online population of the countries that were members of the EU before 2004 (which in 2008 amounted to 258.2 million).

EP elections, however, must be considered in their specificities and not be conceptualized in the same way as national general elections, which are the focus of most country studies in the field. As highlighted by various authors (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996; Marsh, 1998; Hix & Marsh, 2007), European elections are 'second-order elections' where the stakes are perceived to be lower than in general elections by both citizens and parties. Consequently, voter

interest, mobilization, and turnout tend to be lower than in general elections; larger parties tend to lose votes because citizens are less eager to employ strategic voting than in general elections; incumbent parties tend to perform poorly because citizens use these elections to express their dissatisfaction towards their governments; and, finally, the closer the EP vote is to the general election, the smaller the incumbent parties' decline tends to be, as at the beginning of an electoral cycles the parties in government enjoy the honeymoon period, while at the end of the cycle citizens' perception of the stakes in play tends to increase. The 2009 European elections were no exception to this rule: turnout in all the 27 member countries hit a record low at 43% and was only marginally higher (46%) in the five countries included in this study. Moreover, large parties and governing parties had poorer performances than in the previous national general elections, apart from Italy, which had had its national election in 2008 and was thus very early in its five-year national electoral cycle, and Germany, where the electoral cycle was approaching its end, as general elections were due in the Fall of the same year.

The implications of the second-order nature of the 2009 EP elections for this study are, first, that we should not expect parties to be investing as heavily as possible on internet campaigning, as they had less interest in the outcome of the EP election than in the general election and they could anticipate that voters would also be less eager to engage with the campaign both online and offline; secondly, we should expect parties and voters to be more involved in the EP elections, and thus in online campaigning for it, the closer the EP elections are to the next national general election; thirdly, we should expect smaller parties to be more eager to intensely campaign for the EP election than larger parties, as they should be aware that voters in second-order elections are less strategic in their behaviour and more benevolent towards smaller parties than in national general elections (thus reducing the gap with larger parties and contradicting the main claim of the normalization hypothesis); finally, we should expect parties that are in opposition in national government to campaign more intensely than incumbent parties, as the former should be aware that voters in second-order elections tend to be willing to use their ballots to punish governing parties.[2] Based on these expectations, as well as others derived from existing theory and literature, we have developed a set of hypotheses to be tested in this study, to which we now turn.

Research Hypotheses and Methodology

The purposes of this study are, first, to map the diffusion of online campaigning across Western and Southern EU countries and, secondly, to understand the causal dynamics that promote or hinder the

development of online electioneering in the region. Our dependent variable is thus constituted by a series of measures of features that are included in parties' websites.

Our first step was to identify a corpus of party websites to be analyzed. Based on electoral returns of previous national elections and news on the upcoming EP election, we identified a total of 55 parties or organizations that could be expected to be relevant in the 2009 contest: 14 for France, 7 for Germany, 16 for Italy, 10 for Spain, and 8 for the UK.[3] Party websites were analyzed between 25 May and 6 June 2009, when the election took place. It must be noted that in France, Italy, and Spain, various small parties that normally run independently in national elections chose to run within unity lists or within major-party lists in the 2009 EP elections because of vote thresholds for the election of representatives in their electoral laws. In these cases, we tended to include both the websites of the original parties and, when present, the websites of the unity lists.

In order to devise quantitative measures of party websites' functions, we followed Gibson and Ward's seminal work (2000), which suggested to identify basic functions of political websites, operationalize variables that measure specific content features, code websites for the presence or absence of these variables, and then develop cumulative indexes to measure how websites perform the identified functions. However, each study has employed different sets of variables and, even more importantly, has constructed indexes that measured different functions of internet campaigning, thus making it difficult to compare results.

In order to analyze candidate websites, we originally devised a coding scheme consisting of 92 variables, most of which dichotomous, to measure the presence or absence of a particular characteristic, with a few ordinal-level variables to provide a more refined measure of the degree to which a website performed a certain function. The websites were analyzed in all their publicly accessible pages, as well as in those areas that required a registration to be viewed. Areas that could be reached only after overcoming higher hurdles, such as having donated money, were excluded. The coding was performed by the author. About two-thirds of the variables were drawn from studies cited in the previous paragraph, while one-third consisted of new variables that we introduced to account for online tools that were not relevant when earlier research was conducted.[4] These include blogs, social networking tools (either hosted on the website or on external platforms such as Facebook and MySpace), event-organizing tools (either hosted on the website or on external platforms such as MeetUp and Eventful), volunteer recruitment tools (such as interfaces to invite one's email contacts), publication of user-produced audiovisuals (either hosted on the website or on external platforms such as YouTube), subscription to mobile phone alerts, and syndication of content through RSS feeds. Including these variables allowed us to ensure that the most relevant technological developments were accounted for and to acknowledge the fact that online

campaigning increasingly occurs through 'Web 2.0' platforms where people gather and interact spontaneously and politics merges with citizens' everyday digital lives. While our study addresses such platforms only to the extent that candidates reproduced them or linked to them in their websites, it must also be acknowledged that parties' main goal in harnessing Web 2.0 environments is not to confine their encounters with voters to these platforms, but to draw more users to their official websites, where the terms of the interaction are defined by their staffs, engagement can be more easily turned into tangible resources, and the resulting transactional data are owned by the party rather than a company.

After collecting the data, our goal was to create additive indexes that could summarize relevant dimensions of party websites that could then be treated as dependent variables in multivariate regressions. In order to achieve this goal in a way that would be as comparable as possible to the existing literature, we conducted a meta-analysis of different coding frames employed by seven relevant studies of online campaigning (Farmer & Fender, 2005; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Galati & Williams, 2007; Gibson et al., 2003; Latimer, 2009; Lusoli & Ward, 2005; Norris, 2003) in order to ensure that our classification was as consistent as possible with other researchers'. The first relevant decision regarded the amount of dimensions that were to be considered in aggregating our data. While Gibson and colleagues (2003) suggested that five dimensions of website functions be taken into consideration (information provision, campaigning, resource generation, networking, and participation) and Foot and Schneider (2006) defined four functions (informing, involving, connecting, and mobilizing), other classifications employed in the literature are more parsimonious and 'distinguish between passive informational content and those features or tools that facilitate user manipulation of, or interaction with, the content, other users, and/or the campaign enterprise' (Galati & Williams, 2007: 2-3). We thus decided to refer to the least common denominator among the studies that we considered and thus to aggregate our data into two mutually exclusive dimensions termed *information* and *participation*. Because not all authors in our meta-analysis had studied what Gibson and Ward (2000) called 'site delivery' (that is, the 'glitziness' of its stylistic features and some measures of accessibility, navigability, responsiveness, visibility, and update frequency), we decided not to include it in our study and thus to exclude all variables in our coding frame that other authors had employed to measure this dimension.

Based on these decisions, we then used the results of the meta-analysis to assign our variables to the information and participation dimensions (see Appendix A). When scholars had used more than two categories to classify items related to information and participation, we had to conflate them into our two dimensions. Thus, Gibson et al.'s (2003) 'campaigning', 'participation', and 'resource generation' were treated as participation; Foot and Schneider's (2006) 'connecting'

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was treated as information while 'involving' and 'mobilizing' were classified as participation; Galati and Williams' (2007) 'engagement' and 'mobilization' were both considered as participation, and so forth. By contrast, little changes were required to match our classification with Norris's (2003), which divided features into 'information' and 'communication' (which we treated as participation). When we found partial disagreement among the coding schemes, we resorted to majority rule.[5]

These procedures led us to classify 23 variables in the information dimension and 21 in the participation one. We then took an additional step with the purpose of updating our coding frame to the developments in technology and campaigning that have occurred since the latest study that we included in our meta-analysis (which referred to the 2006 US Congressional elections) was conducted, and also to include some relevant features of party websites that have never been taken into consideration by previous scholars. The first two variables that we added had to do with parties' responsiveness to email, an often overlooked component of an effective web campaigning strategy that is nevertheless quite relevant because '[t]he sender of the message feels slighted if after sending the message no response or feedback is given back to the sender' and thus political actors 'risk giving participants a negative impression by not replying to email messages' (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002). To test email responsiveness, we sent two emails to each party (using the party's national language) from fictitious accounts: one asked about its positions on taxes, the other requested how the sender could get involved with the EP campaign. We measured response rates and times for both emails and included the variable for the policy email within the information dimension, while the variable measuring the volunteering response was considered to be part of the participation dimension. The availability of party podcasts, which in 2009 were a relatively novel addition to online campaigning, was also included in the information dimension. Three other variables were added to the participation dimension: the possibility to upload user-produced audiovisuals (through proprietary platforms or via YouTube), the possibility to subscribe to mobile phone alerts, and the average number of emails that were sent weekly to email subscribers. The resulting coding frame thus featured 50 variables, 25 each for information and participation. Additive indexes for these two dimensions were then constructed by adding the values of all variables that composed them, resulting in a maximum possible score of 30 for both indexes (see Table 1 for each variable's values). These indexes were then entered as dependent variables in multivariate regression models, which were constructed based on our hypotheses and research questions, to which we now turn.

Our first hypothesis addresses the proportion of information and participation tools in parties' websites. Because both theory and research have identified a reluctance by parties and

candidates to harness the participatory potential of the web and a greater confidence with using the internet to provide one-way information, we predict that:

> *H1: Website functions that entail disseminating information will be more common in party websites than functions that allow users to engage in online dialogue and to autonomously participate in the campaign.*

Our other hypotheses and research questions have to do with online campaigning as a dependent variable in multivariate causal models and will be tested through Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions in which the indexes of information and participation will be the dependent variables. We divide our analysis into three levels, which correspond to three sets of independent variables: country-level structural variables, party resources and incentives, and party ideology. We will assess the relevance of these three groups of variables by entering them at separate steps in two hierarchical regression models, one for information, the other for participation.

Country-level variables allow us to test expectations related to technological development, political culture, political participation, and national electoral cycle. The related hypotheses are as follows:

> *H2: Technological development will be positively correlated with the information and participation indexes of party websites.*
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> *H3: Political culture, measured as positive attitudes related to both the national and European political institutions, will be positively correlated with the information and participation indexes of party websites.*
>
> *H4: Electoral participation, measured as voter turnout in the 2009 EP elections, will be positively correlated with the information and participation indexes of party websites.*
>
> *H5: The closeness of a country to the next national general election will be positively correlated with the information and participation indexes of party websites.*

H2 is premised on the idea that parties will have greater incentives to campaign online if the internet has achieved a high level of diffusion in their countries. We estimated technological development by averaging three measures provided by Eurostat for the year 2009: the percentage of households with internet access, the percentage of households with broadband access, and the percentage of frequent internet users, defined as individuals who claim to log on every day or almost every day on average within the last three months before the survey.[6] The resulting variable

thus ranged from 0 to 100 and the country values were 56.67 (France), 66.33 (Germany), 44 (Italy), 48 (Spain), and 68.67 (UK).

H3 is premised on the notion, verified by Foot et al. (2007), that the degree to which citizens have positive attitudes toward their political institutions will provide an incentive for parties to campaign online, as they will likely find responsive audiences therein. We constructed a measure of political culture that includes attitudes about both national and European institutions, derived from pre- and post-electoral surveys conducted by Eurobarometer.[7] The index was calculated by averaging the percentages of respondents that in each country answered positively to four questions related to their countries (trust in parties, trust in national government, satisfaction for the way democracy works in one's country, belief that one's voice counts in one's country) and four related to the EU (trust in the EU, trust in the European Parliament, satisfaction for the way democracy works in the EU, and belief that one's voice counts in the EU). The resulting variable thus ranged from 0 to 100 and the country values were 43.62 (France), 49.88 (Germany), 37.12 (Italy), 46.75 (Spain), and 29 (UK).[8]

H4 is premised on a similar notion as H3, as parties can be expected to campaign more intensely online as well as offline if voters are more eager to participate in the election. We measured participation as the percentage of voter turnout for each country. The resulting variable thus ranged from 0 to 100 and the country values were 40.63 (France), 43.29 (Germany), 65.05 (Italy), 44.9 (Spain), and 34.7 (UK).

Finally, H5 is based on the differential effect that the national electoral cycle has on the behaviour of voters and parties in second-order elections: the closer the next national general election, the more parties will intensify their campaigning operations, making the EP elections a test of the strength of their electoral machines. By contrast, the farther the next national general election, the less mobilized parties' campaign organizations will be. We measured electoral cycle by subtracting the year in which the next national general election was to be held to 2009, and then dividing the result by the duration of the term of the national parliament in each country. The resulting variable thus ranged from 0 to 1 and the country values were 0.4 (France), 1 (Germany), 0.2 (Italy), 0.25 (Spain), and 0.8 (UK).

Before turning to the second group of variables and hypotheses, we want to highlight that the great diversity among the countries that we studied, shown by the variations in the independent variables that were just presented, illustrates the appropriateness of our case selection.

Our second group of hypotheses, related to party resources and incentives, are as follows:

H6: The amount of resources enjoyed by a party will not be significantly correlated with the information and participation indexes of its website.

H7: Incumbency in national government will be negatively correlated with the information and participation indexes of a party's website.

H6 is premised on the considerations that we presented in the previous two paragraphs regarding normalization theory and second-order elections. Because the EP elections were held with proportional electoral systems even in countries, such as France and the UK, where national general elections are held with pluralitarian systems, the main condition found by Strandberg (2008) for normalization, that is, a pluralitarian electoral system, does not occur. Moreover, in all the countries that we analyzed the offline media environment is somewhat more regulated than the online media environment, which meets one of the main conditions for equalization found by Strandberg. Finally, due to the low-stakes nature of EP elections, smaller parties may have a greater incentive to campaign intensely than larger parties, as the former should be aware that their efforts have a greater probability of being rewarded in second-order elections. Given the lack of publicly available comparable measures of party finances, we used vote share as a proxy for party resources, as is quite common in research in this field. Because the results of the EP elections are often discordant from those of national general elections, and thus less reflective of the real strength of a party, we entered two variables in the model, one measuring the percentage of votes achieved by each party in the 2009 EP election, the other measuring the percentage of votes obtained by each party in the previous national general election (2007 legislative elections for France, 2008 for Italy and Spain, 2005 for Germany and UK).[9]

H7 is premised on the considerations presented beforehand that lead us to suppose that parties in opposition tend to be more eager to experiment with new campaigning tools such as the internet, particularly in a second-order election that tends to reward opposition parties. We measured incumbency as a simple dichotomy whose value was set at 1 for parties included in national governing coalitions and 0 for parties in opposition.

Our final step is to include party ideology in our model. Various authors have suggested that, for reasons related to organizational ethos (Sudulich, 2009), internal incentives, or philosophical orientation, different parties may approach online campaigning differently in order to meet the preferences and interests of their leadership and constituencies. While various country-level studies have suggested that particular types of parties (e.g., green and progressive parties) tend to outperform other parties online, the fact that they focused on individual countries does not warrant generalizations. Therefore, we formulate our proposition related to party ideology as a hypothesis

suggesting correlation between ideology and online performance, but we do not set *ex ante* expectations on which parties should perform better on the internet, thus addressing the second part of the issue in a research question rather than a hypothesis:

> *H8: Party ideology will be significantly correlated with the information and participation indexes.*
> *RQ1: Which ideology, derived from classification of parties in party families, will be most strongly correlated to indexes of information and participation, all else considered?*

In order to answer these questions, we developed a classification of the parties included in our study based on the party families typology presented by Vassallo and Wilcox (2006). We thus classified 9 parties as Communist and Radical Left, 4 as Green, 7 as Socialist and Democratic, 4 as Left-Libertarian, 11 as Christian-Democratic and Conservative, 2 as Liberal, 10 as New and Radical Right, and 8 as Regionalist. We then recoded this categorical variable as a set of 7 dummy variables to be entered into the regression, leaving Regionalist parties as the reference category.[10]

Findings

Our first hypothesis claimed that parties would be more eager to offer information than to encourage participation on their websites. Table 1 allows us to test it by showing the mean values of the information and participation indexes, as well as of all the variables that compose them. Websites were indeed more informative than engaging, but the average information index is just one point greater than the participation one, so the difference is not striking: H1 was thus only partially upheld. What is more relevant is that the average website reaches only half the theoretically available score for both indexes, which implies that parties did not particularly invest in new media for the 2009 European election. In particular, email response rates and times were strikingly low. While variance exists within our universe, as shown by the standard deviation values, the average scores reflect the central tendencies quite accurately, as the median is 16 for information and 15 for participation.

[Table 1 about here]

Our indexes also allow us to draw a comparison between the five countries we studied. As Figure 1 shows, Spanish websites were the most informative, while German ones were the most engaging.

On average, Italian websites were both the least informative and the least engaging, but it must also be noted that it was the country in which most websites were analyzed, including many small parties', while by contrast Germany was the country where the fewest parties were analyzed. Germany was the only country in which on average the participation index was higher than the information index, while the reverse was true for all the remaining countries. Again, however, the differences, while appreciable, are not extremely striking: Spain's average information index was 3.14 points higher than Italy's, while Germany's mean participation index was 6.8 points higher than Italy's.

[Figure 1 about here]

To test our remaining hypotheses and research questions, we ran two hierarchical OLS multivariate regressions, respectively, with the information and the participation index as the dependent variable. We entered variables related to technological development, political culture, electoral participation, and national electoral cycle in the first step; past and present party electoral strength and incumbency in the second step; finally, party ideology in the third step. The results of the regressions are shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

As can be seen from the bottom of the table, while the R^2 values grow steadily as the complexity of the models increases for both information and participation, the adjusted R^2 values increase for participation, but not for information. Thus, our models are much more effective in predicting participation, where more than 40% of the variance is accounted for, than information. If the reason lied in the poor conception of the model, it would be hard to explain why it predicts participation quite satisfactorily. Another possible interpretation may be that information features are now quite standard in party websites (as shown by the lower standard deviation for the index of information compared to participation, see Table 1) and thus less conditional on internal and external contextual factors, an argument that Sudulich (2009) also makes.

The models strongly refute all our hypotheses related to system-level contextual variables (H2-H5). Technological development turns out to be *negatively* correlated to both indexes in five out of six models, although the coefficients are never statistically significant. The same counterintuitive pattern is found for voter turnout. The political culture variable is positively

correlated to the dependent variables in all but two models, but again it never reaches statistical significance. Finally, the electoral cycle variable shows a strong correlation in the predicted (positive) direction, but it too fails to achieve political significance. The evidence thus provides us with a set of remarkable null findings at the system level.

Moving to the hypotheses related to party resources and incentives, no appreciable correlation was found between vote shares in both the 2009 European election and the previous national general election and the two website indexes, although the signs of the coefficients are positive in five out of eight models. We can thus conclude that our hypothesis regarding the lack of correlation between party resources (measured as vote shares) and the information and participation indexes (H6) is upheld. By contrast, the hypothesis related to incumbency (H7) is rejected because the coefficients are never statistically significant. The signs are in the expected (negative) direction for the participation index, but not for the information index.

The party ideology hypothesis (H8) is the one that is most clearly supported by the data. Three out of seven ideological categories are significantly[11] correlated to the information index and four categories are significantly correlated to the participation index. Moreover, entering the variables measuring party ideology substantially increases the model's goodness of fit. We thus conclude that party ideology is strongly and significantly correlated with the information and, especially, the participation index.

The variables entered in Model 3 also allow us to answer our research question related to the impact of different party families on information and participation (RQ1) by examining the coefficients for the ideological dummy variables. Taking Regionalist parties as the reference category, the index of information is positively correlated (with weak statistical significance) with membership in the Socialist and Democratic, Left-Libertarian, and Communist and Radical Left party families. The index of participation is significantly and positively correlated with membership in the Socialist and Democratic, Left-Libertarian, Christian-Democratic and Conservative, and Green party families, in order of coefficient magnitude. While the coefficients for all these ideological categories are statistically significant, among the two main European party families the coefficient for Socialist and Democratic parties is double that of Christian-Democratic and Conservative parties for participation and 1.67 times greater for information. Moreover, the second highest correlation with both the information and participation indexes involves the Left-Libertarian party family. These data lead us to answer RQ1 by concluding that progressive parties (i.e. Socialist and Democratic as well as Left-Libertarian) tend to be significantly more active in online campaigning than conservative ones (i.e. Christian-Democratic and Conservatives as well as Liberal) even after controlling for both system-level variables and internal resources and incentives.

Another interesting finding from our data is that extreme parties, both left-wing and right-wing, do not seem to be particularly keen on internet electioneering, at least in the context of the EP elections. This contradicts the recurring claim that fringe parties may be expected to be more active online because they have less access to the mainstream media and cultivate relatively small cadres of dedicated supporters who eagerly engage with one another on the echo chamber of the internet.

Discussion

Before discussing our findings, we must acknowledge that they are limited in at least six important ways. First, the geographic scope of our research involves only five countries and the results can at most be generalized to Western and Southern EU countries, thus leaving out newly accessed members, particularly Eastern European. Second, our data was collected during an electoral campaign and thus cannot tell us anything about how parties operate online during 'peacetime', which comprises most of the lifetime of citizens and institutions in a democracy. Third, we studied EP elections, whose second-order nature makes them different from national general elections for both parties and voters. Fourth, we collected our data on the eve of the election and thus cannot account for the developments occurring during the campaign. Fifth, we analyzed party websites, which do not by themselves exhaust the environments in which candidates, parties, and citizens interact online, including social networking sites, blogs, and other 'third places' (Chadwick, 2009). We thus cannot generalize our findings to the activities of parties in this larger realm, nor can we extend them to individual candidates for MEP. Sixth, and final, we analyzed the *production* side of online campaigning, that is, the output of party communications, but not the *(active) consumption* side, that is, the multiple ways in which citizens engaged with the campaign online. Therefore, we cannot be sure whether our findings about parties can be generalized to voters, which would be a particularly interesting research question to delve into given the large disparities related to ideology that we found.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study offers some relevant and novel insights towards the building and refinement of a 'local theory' of online campaigning in Western and Southern Europe. The first is that the null findings related to system-level variables suggest that, as Foot et al. (2007) found in a larger sample of countries, a certain degree of *standardization* in online campaigning is occurring that makes national contexts less relevant than features shared by parties in different countries. Although we studied a set of relatively homogeneous countries, we saw that they differ significantly on all the system-level independent variables that we included in our models, which makes it more likely that these findings can be generalized at least to other Western

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and Southern European countries. The implication for future research is that system-level variables may still be considered as important control variables, but can be expected to have smaller predicting value than micro-level variables.

The second relevant finding is that, at least in EP elections, online campaigning is not necessarily home court for larger parties as normalization theory suggests. Smaller parties are not necessarily at a disadvantage on the web, especially if they belong to progressive families. While we caution that the low-stakes nature of the EP elections might be partially responsible for this occurrence, we maintain that internet electioneering seems to constitute a more equal competitive environment than other campaign realms such as mass media. Future research should not take this finding for granted and continue scrutinizing the merits of the normalization theory during general elections, as well as in local and referendum campaigns and in 'peacetime' between elections.

The third and arguably most relevant finding is that party ideology is strongly related to the number of information and, especially, participation tools available on party websites, and that it is mostly moderate left parties that actively engage their online publics, while moderate right parties tend to be more timid in their internet ventures. While ideology per se is only part of the story, in the sense that online campaigning may also be affected by other internal party variables such as organizational ethos (see Sudulich, 2009) and constituencies' preferences and characteristics (see Druckman et al. 2007), which were not considered in our models, this finding can have momentous implications for party competition because Western and Southern European moderate left-wing parties appear to be taking the internet more seriously than their moderate right-wing competitors and that may result in (still to be empirically assessed) electoral advantages for these parties. It must be acknowledged that these findings may be time-specific rather than immutable, as shown, for instance, by the fact that Conservatives in the 2010 UK general election have been judged to have devised a more effective new media strategy than Labour (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2010: 25-29), although an analysis of party campaign engagement micro-sites (Gibson, 2010) still found Labour to offer many more opportunities to participate than Conservatives and Liberal-Democrats. When judging the significance of our findings, their limitations must also be acknowledged to the extent that online campaigning increasingly integrates various internet environments other than websites, such as social networking sites, that were not comprehensively addressed in this analysis. Given these caveats, future research should investigate the causal mechanisms behind these findings, continue monitoring online competition, and scrutinize the relationship between parties' ideology and their online presence in a wider geographical context and throughout all the various moments of democratic life.

Conclusions

The history of campaign communications has already shown asymmetrical trends of development among different party types and families. As mass bureaucratic leftist parties thrived in Western Europe, Duverger (1954) wrote that their electoral success would generate a 'contagion from the left', forcing conservative parties to adopt similar models. In the following decade, Epstein (1967) observed that conservatives were embracing televised campaigning more effectively than progressives and predicted an upcoming 'contagion from the right'. These prophecies turned out to be speculative, as parties had to reconcile the need to adopt campaigning and organizational innovations with the imperative to satisfy the preferences of their leaders and loyalists. This is why some performance gaps that could be found in certain campaign media at a given point in time lasted longer than contagion prophecies predicted.

We can paraphrase Duverger and Epstein and hypothesize that a new 'contagion from the left' will occur, this time in online electioneering, but how long the process is going to take is an important empirical question to be answered by future research. If competition is the driver of innovation, and if political competition is the key to a viable and effective democracy, then the process will naturally generate winners and losers. The question is to what extent, and for how long, the losers will succumb.

Appendix A – Meta-analysis of Seven Coding Frames

Variable	Farmer & Fender 2005	Foot & Schneider 2006	Galati & Williams 2007	Gibson et al. 2003	Latimer 2009	Lusoli & Ward 2005	Norris 2003	Decision
Time required to answer a policy question by email								Information
Podcasts								Information
Party history				Information			Information	Information
Leader profile and biography				Information			Information	Information
Endorsements		Connecting		Information	Content	Information		Information
Candidate profiles	Campaigning	Informing	Content	Information	Content	Information	Information	Information
Party structure/who's who	Networking			Information			Information	Information
Values and ideology				Information				Information
Issue positions, policy statements	Information	Informing	Content	Information	Content	Information	Information	Information
Speeches and statements	Information	Informing		Information	Content	Information	Information	Information
Press clippings	Information							Information
Election site				Information				Information
Voting information		Connecting	Engagement	Information	Content	Information		Information
Position comparison to opponents					Content	Information		Information
Data, statistics, dossiers on public policies				Information				Information
Frequently Asked Questions		Informing			Content			Information
Internal links	Marketing	Connecting		Networking	Content		Information	Information
External links	Campaigning	Connecting		Networking	Content			Information
Campaign news updates	Networking/Participation	Informing	Content		Content			Information
Audio clips	Information	Informing	Content	Delivery	Content	Sophistication	Information	Information
Video clips		Informing	Content	Delivery	Content	Sophistication	Information	Information
Pages for interest groups (business, etc.)							Information	Information
Pages for identity groups (minorities, etc.)							Information	Information
Pages for age groups (youth, etc.)								Information
Pages for voters in different geographic areas				Campaigning			Information	Information
Time required to answer a volunteer offer by email								Participation
User-produced audiovisuals (also via YouTube)								Participation
Average number of emails sent weekly								Participation
Mobile phone updates sign-up								Participation
Contact information	Networking	Involving	Content	Participation	Interactivity	Information	Communication	Participation
Events calendar	Campaigning	Involving	Engagement	Information	Interactivity	Information	Information	Participation
RSS feeds			Engagement					Participation
Downloadable materials	Campaigning	Mobilizing	Mobilization	Campaigning	Interactivity	Engagement		Participation
Email updates sign-up		Involving	Engagement	Campaigning	Interactivity		Communication	Participation
Online polls				Participation				Participation
Online debates with leader/campaign/officials		Involving	Engagement		Interactivity	Engagement		Participation
Free discussion forums, chat rooms				Participation	Interactivity			Participation
Solicitation of questions via web or email				Participation		Engagement	Communication	Participation
Blog		Involving	Engagement	Participation	Interactivity			Participation
Users' comments allowed on every page			Engagement					Participation
Social networking tool (or link to Facebook, etc.)			Engagement					Participation
Volunteer sign-up	Recruiting	Involving	Engagement	Resource generation	Interactivity	Engagement	Communication	Participation
Online party membership				Resource generation		Engagement	Communication	Participation
Online fundraising	Recruiting	Involving	Engagement	Resource generation	Interactivity	Engagement	Communication	Participation
Online gadget store	Campaigning		Mobilization	Resource generation	Interactivity		Communication	Participation
'Tell a friend'		Mobilizing	Mobilization			Engagement		Participation
Voter registration, absentee ballot request	Participation	Connecting		Campaigning		Engagement		Participation
Event-organizing tool (or link to MeetUp, etc.)			Mobilization					Participation
Offline distribution of online-gathered materials (leaflets, etc.)	Marketing	Mobilizing	Mobilization	Campaigning		Engagement		Participation
Online distribution of materials (electronic cards, etc.)				Campaigning		Engagement		Participation

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Table 1 – Mean Values of Information and Participation Variables and Indexes (*N*=55)

	Range	Mean	Std. Dev.
Campaign news updates[1]	0-4	1.62	1.13
Time required to answer a policy question by email[2]	0-3	1.04	1.22
Video clips[3]	0-1	0.98	0.13
Internal links	0-1	0.96	0.19
Speeches and statements	0-1	0.93	0.26
Issue positions, policy statements	0-1	0.91	0.29
External links	0-1	0.87	0.34
Values and ideology	0-1	0.87	0.34
Party structure/who's who	0-1	0.84	0.37
Press clippings	0-1	0.82	0.39
Candidate profiles	0-1	0.73	0.45
Leader profile and biography	0-1	0.65	0.48
Pages for voters in different geographic areas	0-1	0.64	0.49
Party history	0-1	0.64	0.49
Audio clips	0-1	0.60	0.49
Election site	0-1	0.53	0.50
Data, statistics, dossiers on public policies	0-1	0.45	0.50
Pages for age groups (youth, etc.)	0-1	0.45	0.50
Voting information	0-1	0.44	0.50
Endorsements	0-1	0.35	0.48
Podcasts	0-1	0.31	0.47
Position comparison to opponents	0-1	0.25	0.44
Pages for identity groups (minorities, etc.)	0-1	0.22	0.42
Pages for interest groups (business, etc.)	0-1	0.22	0.42
Frequently Asked Questions	0-1	0.11	0.31
INFORMATION INDEX	**0-30**	**16.42**	**4.12**
Average number of emails sent weekly[4]	0-4	1.56	1.33
Time required to answer a volunteer offer by email[5]	0-3	1.18	1.32
Contact information	0-1	0.95	0.23
Events calendar	0-1	0.89	0.31
Email updates sign-up	0-1	0.89	0.31
Downloadable materials	0-1	0.89	0.31
RSS feeds	0-1	0.80	0.40
Social networking tool (or link to Facebook, etc.)	0-1	0.75	0.44
Offline distribution of online-gathered materials (leaflets, etc.)	0-1	0.71	0.46
Solicitation of questions via web or email	0-1	0.67	0.47
'Tell a friend'	0-1	0.65	0.48
Blog	0-1	0.62	0.49
Online party membership	0-1	0.58	0.50
Online fundraising	0-1	0.56	0.50
Online distribution of materials (electronic cards, etc.)	0-1	0.56	0.50
Volunteer sign-up	0-1	0.49	0.50
Free discussion forums, chat rooms	0-1	0.45	0.50
User-produced audiovisuals (also via YouTube)	0-1	0.42	0.50
Online gadget store	0-1	0.42	0.50
Users' comments allowed on every page	0-1	0.31	0.47
Online polls	0-1	0.22	0.42
Event-organizing tool (or link to MeetUp, etc.)	0-1	0.22	0.42
Mobile phone updates sign-up	0-1	0.18	0.39
Online debates with leader/campaign/officials	0-1	0.13	0.34
Voter registration, absentee ballot request	0-1	0.11	0.31
PARTICIPATION INDEX	**0-30**	**15.22**	**5.60**

Figure 1 – Country Averages for Information and Participation Indexes (*N* in Parenthesis)

[1] No news story = 0 points; 1 or 2 = 1; 3 or 4 = 2; from 5 to 7 = 3; more than 7 = 4.
[2] One business day = 3 points; 2-4 business days = 2; one business week and more = 1; no answer = 0.
[3] For this and all other variables unless specified, 0 = feature is absent; 1 = feature is present.
[4] No emails = 0 points; between 0 and 1 = 1; 1 = 2; 2 = 3; 3 or more = 4.
[5] One business day = 3 points; 2-4 business days = 2; one business week and more = 1; no answer = 0.
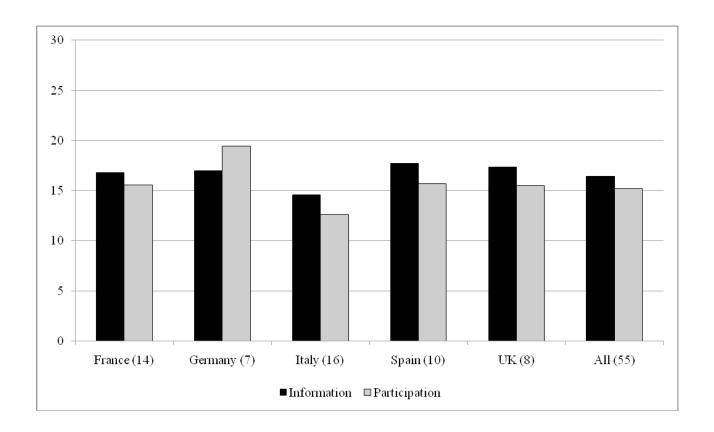
Information ■ Participation ☐

Table 2 – Results of Regression Equations Predicting Information and Participation Indexes
(*N*=55 in Model 1, *N*=52 in Models 2 and 3)

	Information			Participation		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Technological development	-0.362	-0.085	-0.529	-0.150	0.123	-0.283
	(0.512)	(0.529)	(0.602)	(0.677)	(0.642)	(0.630)
Political Culture	-0.038	0.048	-0.090	0.136	0.268	0.115
	(0.138)	(0.145)	(0.164)	(0.183)	(0.175)	(0.172)
2009 Turnout	-0.227	-0.147	-0.333	-0.098	0.035	-0.134
	(0.183)	(0.188)	(0.219)	(0.243)	(0.228)	(0.229)
National electoral cycle	7.597	1.286	9.874	7.851	3.660	12.026
	(11.733)	(12.229)	(13.761)	(15.514)	(14.820)	(14.394)
% Votes in previous general election		-0.013	-0.105		0.068	-0.126
		(0.104)	(0.138)		(0.127)	(0.145)
% Votes in 2009 election		0.035	0.069		0.145	0.216
		(0.108)	(0.128)		(0.130)	(0.134)
Incumbency in national government		0.965	1.632		-3.074	-2.793
		(1.918)	(2.114)		(2.324)	(2.211)
Communist and radical left			3.802 #			2.333
			(2.179)			(.2.279)
Green			2.945			4.545 *
			(2.080)			(2.176)
Socialist and Democratic			5.734 #			10.541
			(2.944)			**
						(3.079)
Left-Libertarian			4.887 #			8.489 **
			(2.720)			(2.845)
Christian-Democratic and Conservative			3.430			5.182 *
			(2.377)			(2.486)
Liberal			4.141			3.267
			(3.674)			(3.843)
New and Radical Right			2.730			2.243
			(2.222)			(2.324)
R^2	0.091	0.146	0.268	0.140	0.356	0.588
Adjusted R^2	0.018	0.011	0.010	0.071	0.253	0.432

Note: *b* values are shown (standard errors in parentheses). ***p≤0.001 **p≤0.01 *p≤0.05 #p≤0.10

[1] See http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER?cid=GPD_58 (accessed 3 August 2010).

[2] Furthermore, various US-based studies have highlighted that, among Congressional candidates, challengers tend to be more active online than incumbents, possibly because the latter have other media resources at their disposal while the former need to take advantage of any possibly opportunity to communicate with voters (see Galati & Williams, 2007: 457-8; Hernson et al., 2007: 37).

[3] The list of parties is as follows. France: Debout la Republique, Desirs d'Avenir (Ségolène Royal's organization, did not run in the EP election), Europe Ecologie, Front de Gauche, Front Nacional, Libertas, Lutte Ouvriere, Mouvemént Dèmocrate (Modem), Nouveau Centre, Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, Parti de la France, Parti Radicale de Gauche, Parti Socialiste, Union pour un Mouvemént Populaire (UMP). Germany: CDU, CSU, Gruenen, Die Linke, FDP, NPD (did not run in the EP election), SPD. Italy: Fiamma Tricolore, Forza Nuova, Italia dei Valori, La Destra, Lega Nord, MPA, PCdL, PDCI, Radicali, PRC, Partito Democratico, Popolo della Libertà, Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà, UDC, Lista Comunista, L'autonomia. Spain: Bloque Nactionalista Gallego, Coalicion Canaria, Eusko Alderdi Jeltzalea, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, Convergencia y Uniò, Izquierda Unida, Partito Popular, Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol, Iniciativa Catalunya Verts, Unión Progreso y Democracia. UK: Conservatives, Green Party, Labour, Liberal-Democrats, Plaid Cymru, British National Party, Scottish National Party, United Kingdom Independence Party.

[4] We also point out that some variables included in Gibson and Ward's and other studies were not included in our coding scheme. The most relevant exclusions involved variables measuring 'networking', which various authors (especially Gibson et al., 2003, and Foot & Schneider, 2006a) assessed by coding different types of external links, while in our study we only included two variables related to the subject, one measuring the presence of internal links, the other of external links.

[5] We excluded variables that we coded but which were absent from all seven coding frames included in our meta-analysis, as well as variables that were present in less than 10% of the websites and six residual variables that measured the presence of various types of features other than those specified in the coding frame, which did not generate uniformly interpretable results.

[6] See http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/information_society/data/main_tables (accessed 3 August 2010).

[7] See http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm (accessed 3 August 2010).

[8] We also devised some exploratory models that included two separate political culture variables, one measuring attitudes toward national institutions, the other toward EU institutions. Because the results obtained with these variables were not appreciably different from those obtained with one comprehensive variable, we decided to include only the EU-national compound variable to avoid overloading our model.

[9] The fact that some parties coalesced into unity lists to avoid being excluded from representation due to vote thresholds in the EP electoral law made it complex to assign values on these variables to parties that had run independently in the previous general election and in unity lists in the 2009 EP election. For example, in France the Parti Radicale de Gauche had run independently in 2007, but had some of its candidates included in the lists of Parti Socialiste in 2009. In order to estimate the vote share that the PS and PRG *might* have achieved had they run individually in 2009, we calculated that in 2007 the two parties had obtained 24.73% (PS) and 1.32% (PRG) of the vote. Thus, they combined for 26.05%, of which 94.9% was obtained by PS (24.73/26.05) and 5.9% by PRG (1.32/26.05). We then estimated the 2009 vote shares for PS by multiplying the 2009 PS (with PRG candidates) vote (16.48%) by the previously calculated 2007 shares of the vote, thus obtaining 15.64 (16.48*0.949), and did the same to estimate PRG's 2009 vote share. The reverse was done when two parties had run a unity list in the previous national general election, but then ran separately in the 2009 EP election, as was the case

for the Radical Party and the Democratic Party in Italy, for instance. While this procedure does not aspire to provide an exact estimate of the vote shares of parties, we believe it is suitable when used to estimate vote shares as a proxy for party resources.

[10] Alternative strategies to classify parties based on their ideology may have been employing expert surveys of party policy positions or using parties' affiliation with EP groups. The first strategy was discarded because the available data would be slightly outdated and because, while these classifications are ordinal, we did not postulate a linear relationship between left-right policy positioning and online campaigning. The second strategy was attempted in exploratory models and discarded because, first, often the groups in the EP do not fully represent their member parties' national ideological positioning and, secondly, the resulting variables produced less satisfactory adaptation of the model to the data when entered in lieu of the ideology variables.

[11] By the standard of $p \leq 0.10$.