

Informing, Engaging, Mobilising or Interacting: Searching for a European model of web campaigning

Presenters: Darren G. Lilleker (Bournemouth University) & Karolina Koc Michalska (CEVIPOF, Sciences-Po, Paris)

Authors: Nigel Jackson (University of Plymouth); Michal Jacunski (Uniwersytet Wrocławski); Darren G. Lilleker (Bournemouth University); Karolina Koc Michalska (CEVIPOF, Sciences-Po, Paris) Eva Schweitzer (University of Mainz); Thierry Vedel (CEVIPOF, Sciences-Po, Paris) and Maurice Vergeer (Radboud University)

Turnout figures alone for European parliamentary elections suggest there is widespread disengagement from matters relating to the European Union. Contests are frequently framed as either a referendum on incumbent governments or on the nation's relationship with the Union's bureaucracy. Campaigns often also reflect this narrative and so may lack relevance to citizen electorates. While campaigns are increasingly multi-faceted and use all communication tools available, many have suggested that the Internet possesses the capacity, if used to its full potential, to reengage citizens with politics. It would seem therefore that use of the Internet during European parliamentary elections could fulfil three objectives. Firstly, it could be used to engage citizens with the campaigns of specific parties. Secondly, it could be used to engage citizens with matters relating to the European Union. Thirdly, parties could use the contest as a testing ground for new techniques of campaigning. Traditionally the Internet has been used to disseminate information directly to citizens with little indication that parties have attempted to engage or interact with visitors to their sites. Barack Obama's campaign in the US in 2008 did offer hints of a new model, however this may have been perceived as particular for a US contest. Thus this paper enquires whether there is evidence from the European parliamentary contest of a new model of European political communication or if political campaigning on the Internet remains politics as usual.

This paper analyses the features present on party main web presences during the 2009 European Parliamentary Elections across four nations: France, Germany, Poland and the UK. The analysis focuses on the following six questions:

- 1) To what extent did all parties provide information for; attempt to engage with; attempt to mobilise; and provide an interactive experience for web visitors?
- 2) Can differences and similarities be explained party or nation specific characteristics?

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Introduction

This paper is derived from the Comparative European New Media and Elections Project (CENMEP), a study of the use of the Internet during the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections that encompassed twenty-three EU member nations. CENMEP was the successor project to the 2004 Internet and Elections Project (Jankowski et al. 2005), but differs from its predecessor, as described later in this article. Our aim is to conduct a study into the current state of play for political parties and new media regarding the 2009 contest across four countries: Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales but not Northern Ireland as few of the major parties stand in that country), France, Germany and Poland. This choice was deliberate and enables us to present data on countries both with a relatively large representation in the EP together with encompassing a wide spectrum of nearly 100 parties involved in the elections across the four EU member states. On the other hand in many respects these countries differ from one another in the field of political and party systems, voting customs, attitude towards EU and the development of the web infrastructure, thus we are able to present a rich analysis that test the use of new media across a range of national, political and institutional contexts.

Our study focuses upon two dimensions. The first is linked with the Web 2.0 features. The integration of sophisticated tools and new applications associated with Web 2.0 reached the mainstream on the World Wide Web in 2007 and 2008 (Phillips and Davies, 2009) and our aim is to examine cross-nationally whether that also holds for political parties as part of the evolution of campaign communication. Although this process seems to be determined, we aimed to assess empirically to what extent the most relevant political actors incorporate Web 2.0 into their online presences. The second dimension focuses on examining the structural and functional determinants that influence the use of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 elements. We are curious which political parties through their websites adapted to new challenges in political communication and consistently whether this process preserved existing differences between parties or whether Web 2.0 helps minor and fringe parties to compete equally. Furthermore, we wish to detect the extent to which party ideology is evidenced to have an influence on the communication styles of parties as reflected in their use of features within their websites.

This article now presents our conceptual framework, the methodology implemented in the course of participation in CENMEP and our specific analytical tools, a brief description of the campaign in every country and a cross-national comparison combined with the regression analysis.

Conceptual Framework

Considering the 2004 European Parliament elections across 25 countries, Lusoli (2005) suggested that three theoretical frameworks applied: normalisation versus equalisation; information versus engagement; and mobilisation versus reinforcement. We refine Lusoli's framework for the 2009 election to take into account three factors. First, Web 1.0 was the dominant, if not providing the only set of tools for Internet use, during the 2004 election. The introduction of Web 2.0 as a concept (O'Reilly 2005) potentially changes the relationship between the producer and consumer of online political messages. Second, within a Web 2.0 context, terms such as engagement and mobilisation appear to have a slightly different meaning from that within Web 1.0. Lusoli essentially equated engagement with interactivity, but we suggest that the interface between the sender and receiver of an online message can be further divided into engagement or interaction. Moreover, mobilisation for Lusoli refers to the use of the Internet to reach those not previously interested in politics. We suggest that the evidence of the 2008 U.S. Presidential election is that mobilisation as a concept should focus on the use of the Internet to encourage visitors to do something actively for the party (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Plehwe 2009). Finally, we assess whether ideology is an explanatory factor for party sites using different online features and tools and in particular how parties devote online space to informing, engaging, interacting with and mobilising site visitors. Our four part framework is, therefore: normalisation versus equalisation; information versus interactivity; engagement versus mobilisation; and party ideology.

Normalisation versus equalisation

The successful diffusion of any new technology is likely to lead to a discussion about the impact of that new innovation on existing power relationships, within both society and the body politic. Early optimists suggested that the greater use of the Internet by individual citizens would 'level the playing field' (Rheingold 1993; Stone 1996; Bimber 1998). This equalisation hypothesis implied that existing power elites' dominance was upheld by their greater access to the traditional media, but the Internet allowed other political actors to bypass the media and speak to voters directly. Initially, the equalisation hypothesis required only that

smaller political parties were more likely to have an Internet presence. Research has increasingly focused not just on whether such smaller political parties have a website, but more importantly how they use it. In particular, are smaller political parties more likely to utilise the interactive elements of Web 2.0 applications (Jackson and Lilleker 2009a)? To assess the equalisation hypothesis requires not just identifying who has a website, but assessing whether smaller parties build in features in order to compensate for the low attention paid to them by mass media.

The normalisation hypothesis, however, suggests that the use within politics of any technology merely reflects existing power relationships (Bellamy and Raab 1999), and so with the Internet there is 'politics as usual' (Margolis and Resnich 2000). Therefore, existing political and electoral inequalities are reinforced, not undermined, by the Internet (D'Alessio 1997; Agre 1998; Davis 1999). The access larger political parties have to the traditional media offline drive more traffic to their online presence, while their greater resources mean that websites will have more features and so overall provide a better experience for visitors. The normalisation hypothesis implies that the larger parties would be both the most likely to have an Internet presence, and that it would be the most technically sophisticated.

A middle ground exists between these two approaches, an ebb and flow taking into account country specific political cultures. The evidence for the normalisation hypothesis has been provided in candidate-centred countries such as America, whereas in party-centred countries, such as the UK the evidence suggests some support for equalisation (Gibson et al. 2002). Whilst the larger political parties do tend to dominate online in the UK, the smaller parties have been able to use the Internet to bypass the media. For example, in the 1999 European parliament elections smaller parties made as sophisticated use of their websites as the larger parties (Gibson and Ward 2000b), and in the 2005 UK General Election smaller parties gained members, secured some funds and directed activists in a way normally denied them (Jackson 2006b). Moreover, the evidence from the UK's permanent campaign between elections is that smaller parties, though not their elected politicians, are more likely to utilise the opportunities provided by Web 2.0 applications (Jackson & Lilleker 2009a & b). Studies in Germany find empirical evidence for the normalisation hypothesis in national elections (Schweitzer, 2008, 2010) as well as in EP elections (Schweitzer, 2009): there is a huge gap in website professionalism between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties in all dimensions of the homepages (information, mobilization, technical sophistication, interactivity). This gap

remains stable over time and is even wider in Web 2.0 as in Web 1.0 (Schweitzer, 2010). Vedel and Koc Michalska (2009) found similar results in a study of the 2007 French presidential elections where a visible gap was evidenced between major and minor candidates in their general online performance. It was notable that major and minor candidates did not perceive the rewards that online campaigning might offer in the same way. Minor candidates often restricted their online campaigns to creating and maintaining a basic website while major candidates not only used Web 1.0 applications widely but also introduced Web 2.0 features.

Apparently, this is a big difference to the empirical findings on e-campaigning in the UK. This suggests that we are able to hypothesise that all parties, independent of levels of support or previous electoral standing, will offer equally sophisticated (in terms of the overall feel and experience offered) web presences given the opportunities for impact within the context of an European Parliament election. However, we may also suggest we will find more of an ‘ebb and flow’ in terms of adoption of online features. This approach requires a more subtle understanding of how political actors use the Internet, taking into account what opportunities it provides them compared with other political communication channels.

Information versus interactivity

Researchers have consistently considered whether political actors’ online presence is merely content-led, or also seeks to develop longer-term relationships (Gibson and Ward 2000a; Rainie and Horrigan 2007). Where websites are essentially informational, then the focus is on what messages the party or candidate wants to impart. Hence, such websites are viewed merely as one-way communication channels, and have been criticised for being ‘virtual billboards’ (Sadow and James 1999) designed to impart political information such as party policies. The use of the Internet in the UK at the 2004 EP elections suggested primarily informing as the purpose for most party and candidate websites (Lusoli and Ward 2005). Whilst generally one-way content-driven websites are criticised because they do not fully utilise the opportunities the Internet presents, there is some evidence that many visitors to websites primarily want just information (Ward et al. 2005; Jackson 2008a), and that it can shape their voting behaviour (Tolbert & McNeal 2003; Jackson 2008b).

Interactivity is a contested concept, but O’Reilly’s (2005) view of an architecture of participation is placed at the core of Web 2.0 applications. As noted by Bimber and Davis

(2003) interactivity requires information flowing in multiple directions, hence we seek to identify whether two-way communication is potentiated. Rafaeli (1988) suggests that interaction requires participants to converse in a linear and logical way, and we suggest that this is a means of assessing online interactivity. In an era of Web 1.0 applications there was limited evidence of interactivity during election campaigns (Gibson and Ward 2000b; Bowers-Bowen & Gunter 2002; Lusoli and Ward 2005; Coleman & Ward 2005; Schweitzer 2008, 2010).

Theoretically the architecture of participation at the heart of Web 2.0 encourages a richer experience for the visitor and potentiates conversation between the host and visitor, and between visitors, so that ideas and opinions can be directly discussed through blogs, discussion forums and social networking sites (SNS). Such interactivity encourages the visitor to interact both with the host, but also potentially with other visitors. We may find that parties online presences will offer rich experiences that combines information with engaging features, as well as providing a range of opportunities for user-to-site and user-to-user interactivity.

Engagement versus mobilisation

We suggest that the terms engagement and interactivity have been intertwined, but that whilst both are based upon two-way communication, they are subtly different. Engagement played a key role in Obama's 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign in that it used tools such as filesharing which made the visitors experience more pleasant, and they probably stayed on site longer. Thus engagement can be linked to the notion of stickiness (Jackson 2003), and so features that make a site experientially stimulating, attractive and allow visitors to interact with features such as click-thrus, sharing, audiovisuals and interactive games come under this heading. This reinforces the distinction made by Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2004) between interactivity as a product, a low-level form of interaction with the site that shapes an experience, and interactivity as process which mirrors conversation and is thus redefined as interactivity. Interactive features allow visitors to interact in some way with the host or other visitors, and offer the potential for two-way or three-way participatory dialogue (Lilleker & Malagon, 2010).

We also suggest that the traditional use of the term mobilisation may not be applicable within a Web 2.0 era. Where Lusoli (2005) described a conceptual framework of mobilisation, this

meant then that it attracted those politically interested offline, we suggest that this term is better referred to the situation where the party/candidate seeks to mobilise visitors on their website. Such mobilisation includes donating money, joining a party and registering as a supporter. Engagement is more likely to be used as a way of encouraging repeat visits among those visiting a party for the first time, be it on- or off-line, so features linked to stickiness. However, mobilisation centres on the generation of resources from those already aware of the party. We suggest visitors may be drawn into a three stage process, from being engaged in the site and so the host to registering to receive further information, and then finally to become a more active supporter. While clearly this will not be a route taken by every visitor, this would be an ideal and so engagement and mobilisation should be key functions of party websites during elections and that websites will be used to both engage with visitors, as well as attempting to mobilise them into active support online or offline and pledging support at the ballot box.

Ideology

In theory party ideology not only shapes policy, but also the nature and modes of communication. Given the more communal and participatory ethos of social/liberal democratic parties there is an expectation for these to provide more engaging and interactive websites, while right-wing parties would be expected to adopt a more informative and less inclusive style. Sudulich (2009) studied four countries (Italy, Spain, Ireland and UK) and found that it was indeed left-wing parties which were more likely to exchange ideas with the electorate. Furthermore, in a comparison of the French presidential candidate's websites it was the left wing Segolene Royal that offered the more inclusive style as compared to the candidate-centred campaign of Sarkozy (Lilleker & Malagon, 2010). However, it is also noted that parties of the right have been quicker to adopt new technologies and may offer the more sophisticated sites (Copsey 2003), and adopt Web 2.0 specifically (Jackson & Lilleker 2009a), which to some extent was born out with the studies of Sudulich and Lilleker & Malagon; hence it will be interesting to assess if ideology does play a role. Evidence suggests that it would be parties of the left that offer more engaging and interactive sites with greater community inclusion, while parties of the right will be more informative and party centric and communication on their sites will be more closed and controlled.

Methodology

The data collection was part of the Comparative European New Media and Elections Project (CENMEP) the successor to the 2004 Internet and Elections Project (Jankowski et al. 2005). Whereas the 2004 project used web sphere analysis (Schneider and Foot 2002), and so sampled a wide range of political actors, CENMEP focused only on parties and candidates. This was because the 2004 project found that these were the actors most likely to make use of the Internet during an election campaign (Kluver et al. 2007).

Content analysis of the main party website, or specific campaign website if one was built, was conducted in the last seven days of the campaign. Up to a maximum of 214 features, dependent on the type of site, were identified as present or absent on the website using an online survey; data was transferred to a central database for cross referencing and tidying. Table 1 shows the number of parties included in the analysis across the four countries under focus here. All researchers initially analysed one website in order to assess reliability across all coders, any irregularities were checked and training given where necessary. First, the individual researchers conducted a pilot content analysis of a test website managed by the CENMEP organisers. Reliability tests were also conducted between research groups for each nation and a further test conducted three months later to test for consistency over time.

Table 1 Number of parties included in analysis by country

	UK	France	Germany	Poland
Number of parties	22	31	32	12
Number of parties that also stood in 2004	14	12	18	6

For the purposes of this paper we selected 95 features relevant to party websites. These were then grouped firstly as either belonging to Web 1.0 or Web 2.0; and also whether the main function was to provide information, encouraged visitor engagement; attempted mobilisation or allowed interactivity; a further set of features were classified as demonstrating technical sophistication only. The feature groupings were based upon previous coding schema developed for the analysis of party websites (Gibson & Ward, 2000a; Macmillan 2002; De Landsheer et al, 2005; Lilleker & Malagon, 2010). While we recognise that features do not

belong within eras and that Internet technologies have evolved over the last decades (Macnamara 2010); it is useful to situate features as belonging generally to the category of Web 1.0, the static, top-down brochureware style of web design, and the more interactive features consistent with Web 2.0 that offer an architecture of participation (O'Reilly, 2005; Chadwick, 2009; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009a). Recognising the extent to which Web 2.0 has been embraced by political parties is one way of identifying the role the Internet plays within their communication strategies, how seriously it is taken as a means of reaching voters, and the extent to which political party website design is consistent with broader trends in development across social and commercial organisation's websites. Following Farmer and Fende (2005, p.49) we have created indexes of the average number of features for each grouping (scores are calculated by dividing the number of indicators present by the total number of indicators of that grouping).

The feature groupings allow us to understand the key motivations for parties having a website, and the combination of functions they perform. While informing may be seen as consistent with the Web 1.0 era, and one of the key functions party websites have played historically (Gibson and Ward 2000; Bowers-Bowen & Gunter 2002; Lusoli and Ward 2005; Coleman & Ward 2005), parties still need to provide a range of informational items to site visitors which can aid voter choice making. As shown in Table 2 (see next page), such features include providing news pages, providing a party history, online versions of programmes and manifestoes and basic details on voting procedures. Thus we would not expect to find a reduction in the amount of information presented and do not normatively suggest a high number of these features would be inappropriate. However, information can be presented using more engaging formats than the plain text that has been common across political sites. Websites have increasingly become technologically advanced to make them more engaging to their visitors. Various audiovisual elements, such as videos, pictures, sounds and music, graphics and animation can be offered as ways to make information more entertaining and have been viewed as essential to strategies of interactive or e-marketing and labelled by Stromer-Galley (2004) as interactivity-as-product; features that allow some degree of interaction with the site through various mouse-clicks (Bucy, 2004).

In the wake of Obama's success in the US 2008 Presidential contest, mobilisation could be expected to be the key function of party websites. Mobilisation covers a range of activities, demonstrating active support for the party in terms of promoting it across websites,

downloading posters for windows or volunteering cash or time; each of which form a crucial part in the process of party ‘get out the vote’ strategies (Gerber & Green, 2005).

Table 2 Grouping of Features (italics denote Web 2.0)

Information	Engagement	Mobilisation	Interactivity	Technical Sophistication
- <i>weblog</i>				
- news				
- press clippings				
- press releases				
- newsletter				
- archive			- <i>blog comment facility</i>	
- speech section	- <i>news rating facility</i>		- <i>wiki</i>	
- list of upcoming events	- <i>video TV Spots</i>		- <i>collaborative programme</i>	
- text archive	- <i>videos of conferences</i>		- <i>collaborative party history</i>	- <i>online speech archive</i>
- video archive	- <i>videos of appearances</i>	- <i>personal events calendar</i>	- <i>collaborative features</i>	- <i>tag cloud</i>
- audio archive	- <i>videos of home/private</i>	- register as volunteer	- <i>links to SNS</i>	- animations
- photo archive	- <i>video rating facility</i>	- guest book	- <i>promote via SNS</i>	- download podcasts
- newsletter archive	- <i>webcam feed</i>	- register for events	- <i>social bookmarking</i>	- download speeches
- other information archive	- <i>photo rating facility</i>	- subscribe to events	- <i>chat facility with party</i>	- language switch
- party standpoints	- <i>political Games</i>	- join party	- <i>chat facility with others</i>	- translate function
- documents available to all	- <i>apolitical Games</i>	- promotional material	- <i>forum</i>	- font resizing
- documents for registered visitors only	- <i>prioritise/rank function</i>	- donate function	- <i>video comment facility</i>	- read out loud function
- documents for party only	- <i>photo gallery</i>	- shop	- <i>video sharing channel</i>	- change bandwidth
- party history	- <i>public photos</i>	- site registration function	- <i>photo comment facility</i>	- download PDFs
- code of conduct	- <i>personal photos</i>	- site members area	- <i>contact facility</i>	- search
- party achievements	- <i>share by email</i>	- party members area	- <i>news comment facility</i>	- embedded search
- FAQs	- <i>audio features</i>	- register as voter	- <i>questions invited</i>	- press release via RSS
- national political info	- <i>streaming audio</i>		- <i>short poll</i>	- press release via email
- EU political info	- <i>newsletter</i>		- <i>large poll</i>	
- voting procedure info	- <i>register to e-mail</i>		- <i>poll results published</i>	
- regional sites	- <i>chat archive</i>			
- register for mail				

A further feature grouping that may be more prominent as a result of the Obama campaign, as well as its prominent position within Web 2.0 features, is interactivity. We classify all features, from posting an email address to having a forum, as allowing some form of

interaction to take place between the party and site visitors or, in the case of a variety of Web 2.0 tools such as social networking sites, the party and a range of site visitors in an ongoing narrative. The final feature grouping identifies features which demonstrate nothing more than the technical sophistication of the site. This new category posits that features such as web feeds, sliding banners, the downloading of engaging features, language switches and other accessibility tools and embedded search engines offer a very low level of engagement and actually demonstrate a level of investment rather than the presence of a strategy. Such features, however, can provide an air of professionalism, in a similar way to the adoption of any new communication technique (Lilleker & Negrine, 2002), and so can be used as an indication of the importance of the Internet within the overall communication strategy.

Campaign Contexts

In all four countries the EP election took place between 4th and 7th June 2009. In contrast to other national or regional races, in France, Germany and Great Britain there is closed list system. Citizens could only cast one vote for the party. Candidates cannot be chosen directly; rather parties decide in advance on the number and ranking of their potential delegates. These delegates are determined by internal selection procedures. On the contrary in Poland a preferential voting method was employed and it was possible to choose candidates from lists presented by parties. In all countries the final allocation of seats is considered only for parties that have gained more than five percent of the valid votes. In addition, France, United Kingdom and Poland are divided into constituencies (8, 11 and 13 respectively), Germany is not divided into constituencies in EP elections. Other countries characteristics are presented in table 3 with knowledge and opinion toward the EU presented in Figure 1.

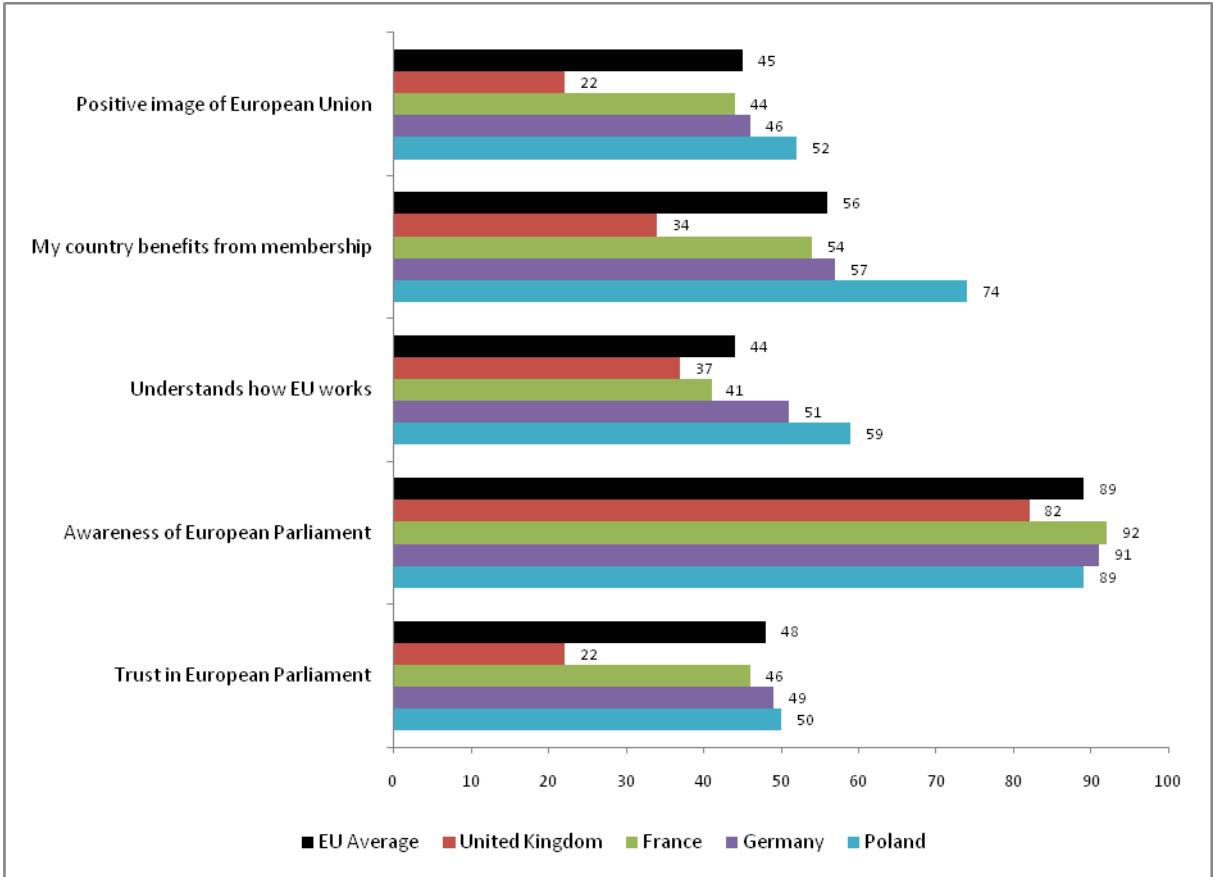
Table 3 Country's characteristics

	GB	FR	GER	PL
Years in the EU	36	52	52	5
Number of seats in EP	72	72	99	50
Turnout in 2004 (in %)	38.9	42.76	43	20.42
Turnout in 2009 (in %)	34.7	40.63	43.3	24.53
Number of country's residents (in millions)	59.8	62.1	82.0	37.8
Country's GDP*	116.2	107.9	115.6	56.4
internet connections (in % of population)**	76.4	69.3	65.9	52
Number of parties (or coalitions) taking part in EP elections	22	31	32	12
Number of parties which already stood in 2004 elections	14	12	18	6
number of candidates to EP	798	2967	1061	1293

*data is expressed in relation to EU-27 = 100. sources: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>

** <http://www.internetworldstats.com>

Figure 1 Public opinion and knowledge towards EU and European Parliament



Source: Eurobarometer 71.0

Great Britain

European campaigns are usually party-oriented and the campaign is highly centralized. The main campaign phase encompassed the last four weeks before Election Day. Besides posters and newspaper or magazine ads, televised election broadcasts are allowed. These are normally shown on the four main channels (BBC1 and 2, ITV and Channel 4). Election broadcasts are subject to the same regulations that apply to state or national elections. Specifically, this includes the rule of “graded allocation”, i.e. major parties receive more space for advertising than minor or fringe parties based on votes received at previous contests; all parties are allowed at least one broadcast. Major parties buy additional print advertising space, which has no restrictions, but are not permitted to buy spots on commercial television channels. Funding for parties is reliant entirely on donations, thus free channels such as the Internet, which also have no restrictions placed upon them, are seen as attractive campaign tools. As the first election of the Web 2.0 era, with platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or Social Networking Sites available for campaigning, the Internet gained some attention. In particular regarding its viability to engage voters; however the campaign was largely overshadowed by other political

events. British politics was engulfed in the MP's expenses scandal which affected all political parties. The Daily Telegraph drip-fed revelations of MP's excesses on a daily basis for much of May 2009, and these were picked up by much of the mainstream media and bloggersphere. Thus, the EP election was framed as not only a referendum on Britain's Labour government or the UK's membership of the EU, but also a referendum on the efficacy of the party system in general. This may have benefited parties outside of Westminster, but had little overall effect on either the patterns of voting or turnout. The EP election remained a second-order campaign: Voter turnout (34%) was about half as low as in previous national elections. There was a lack of engagement with the politics of the EU and the media focused on national issues. The UK's opposition party, the Conservatives viewed the contest as a prequel to the 2010 general election; Labour as incumbent government played down the significance of the result which placed them third. The Conservatives, ahead in the polls for three years, were the clear winners with the UK Independence Party, a party with no seats in the national parliament coming second. For the first time the far right, neo-fascist British National Party, gained sufficient votes to have two MEPs.

France

French election campaigns are highly regulated in four specific areas: political advertising, campaign finance, targeted canvassing and elections coverage by media. There is a permanent ban on paid-for political advertising on TV and radio. Paid advertising through print media, posters or the internet (for instance in the form of sponsored links or banners) is also prohibited during the three months before the ballot. Campaign donations and expenditure are capped; for the 2009 European election the cap was 1,150,000 Euros for each list. Lists which have received at least 3% of the votes cast are entitled to a reimbursement by the State of half of their electoral expenses. While individuals may contribute to lists up to a total of 4,600 Euros, contributions by corporations, advocacy groups or any other legal entity are not allowed. However, political parties may financially support lists (as long as donations do not exceed the expenditure cap). While canvassing is allowed in French campaigns, it is not a frequent practice. This is due to the 1978 Computer and Liberties law which forbids the storage in a digital form of data concerning the political, philosophical or religious opinions of any individual. As a result, targeted canvassing by mail or telephone is very difficult in France. Moreover, the French political culture tends to establish a strict separation between the private and the public spheres and voters are often resistant to political intrusions into their homes.

When reporting on the campaign in their newscasts or other programs, audiovisual media (public and private alike) have to treat lists and candidates in an equitable way. Although the term equitable has not been precisely defined by French law, it is generally understood as proportional to the public support gained by candidates or lists as registered in opinion polls. In addition, lists are granted free airtime on public television and radio to broadcast their own programs. In the 2009 campaign, lists endorsed by political parties represented at the National Assembly or at the Senate were allocated a total of 20 minutes (broken down into 10 minutes segments). Other lists were only allocated 3.3 minutes provided that they were present in at least 5 districts (17 lists qualified for this). This provision may explain the high number of lists in the French EP campaign as well in other campaigns, since some organizations or candidates may use these contests to get free access to a nationwide audience. Lists which were present in less than 5 districts did not receive any airtime. Altogether these regulations explain some of the features of the French campaign. While forms of direct communication are somewhat limited, candidates have by law easy access to television and radio, and, compared to other countries, they do not need to deploy sophisticated strategies to catch media attention. As a result, the campaign is mainly designed for television; this however, gives the larger political groupings a significant advantage. The results of the elections confirmed the domination of the UMP (Majorité Présidentielle – 29 seats). The surprise was that the Parti Socialiste (the main opposition in National Parliament) and Europe Écologie (fringe party lead by Daniel Cohn-Bendit) both gained 14 seats.

Germany

European campaigns are usually party-oriented and highly centralized in their conduct with only slight regional differences in the 16 federal states. The hot campaign phase usually encompasses the last four weeks before Election Day when posters are put up on the streets, political ads are printed in newspapers and magazines, and party spots are allowed to be broadcast on public and private television or radio stations. These campaign channels are subject to the same advertising regulations as in the UK. However, major parties are also able to buy additional advertising space, for example on commercial television channels, due to their privileged financial status: They receive larger sums of state subsidies based on their vote shares in past elections. On both private and public stations, parties' TV spots are announced and highlighted as "political advertising" which is seen as a practice detrimental to their persuasive effects. In recent years, parties have therefore lost interest in this traditional mode of electioneering. There are currently no legal restrictions for e-campaigning in

Germany which offers a strong incentive for all political actors to go online. In 2009, e-campaigning received special attention in the Federal Republic since Web 2.0 applications, such as YouTube, Twitter, or Social Networking Sites, were used for the first time by German parties. Nevertheless, the EP election remained a second-order campaign: Voter turnout was about half as low as in previous national elections. People were unfamiliar with parties' election programs and their candidates and did not take an interest in European policy issues. This was reflected in the low amount of media coverage and the strong national focus of the campaign. The latter was amplified by the ongoing financial and economic crisis that led parties to concentrate on questions of unemployment, taxes, and bank supervision. Moreover, the EP election was seen as a strategic test field for Germany's national elections that were to follow in September 2009. In fact, the results of the EP election foreshadowed the later outcome of the national races: The Conservatives (CDU/CSU) and the Liberals (FDP) won the election by a wide margin and took over 54 of Germany's 99 seats in the European Parliament.

Poland

In 2009 twelve parties, including ten committees, registered candidate lists in every constituency. The declining number of parties participating in the elections was not followed by a decrease in the number of candidates. Moreover it has been noticed that the social and political importance of European elections is perceived as very low, as has been confirmed by the outcome of the elections and by the several surveys. The lower turnout however does not necessarily imply a decline in interest in the elections by domestic political actors. The closer they are to general elections, the more likely they will campaign. On the other hand, compared to 2004, we observe that electorate continuously tends to withdraw from various forms of political participation. Most of the countries, including Poland, faced the so-called Euro-Gap (Rose, 2004). The length time of the official campaign is 90 days, but in practise it is most intensive in the last two weeks, because the advertising in public television is allowed 15 days before the election day. Campaign budgets are earned from various sources: credits, own resources and donations. It has been however noticed, that only parliamentary parties were able to perform effective fund-raising. Offline campaigning is regulated precisely and most of the parties follow laws comparable to those regulating other elections. Subsequently, successful parties can count on refund from state subsidies. The online campaigning still seems to be beyond the reach of the legislature, it is only required that the "election materials should contain a clear indication, from whom they came from".

The election campaign was characterized by intense individual campaigns run locally, supported by central party office through the mainstream media. Most of the parties implemented their communication strategies with the use of the already tested means of advertisements: television, outdoor and selected below the line or ambient media. The potential of the Internet was not exploited widely. Online campaigning was characterized by the appearance of new modernized and technically advanced sites, their presence within social networking sites and microblogs, and use of free media, particularly YouTube. Also there was a growing popularity of Google Adwords instead of typical ads (pop-ups, banners etc.) in the largest nationwide portals. Major newspapers and TV stations reported on election campaign, although while covering its progress, they focused on personal issues and inter-party conflicts, which overshadowed the European dimension of the contest. The elections saw a triumph for the ruling party Civic Platform 25 seats. Two oppositional groupings, composed of left-wing coalition (SLD-UP) and conservative party (PiS) received 22 seats.

General Overview of Website Features

As Table 3 shows, overall we find most groups of features used equally across websites. Sites may still offer a greater Web 1.0 than Web 2.0 experience, but Web 2.0 features are clearly becoming important elements within the design of political websites. Across the four nations we see features that invite visitor engagement being most used, but only marginally. Websites are used to inform visitors and to mobilise them, so as would be expected they are about persuading and encouraging support, both as part of the campaign as well as at the voting booth. Interactivity lags slightly behind, though not as much as the small group of features classified as denoting the technical sophistication of the site.

Table 3 Average index of features

	information	interaction	engagement	mobilisation	technical sophistication	Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Average	.20	.18	.21	.20	.15	.21	.16
Great Britain	.21	.22	.21	.27	.10	.20	.20
France	.21	.19	.22	.21	.16	.22	.16
Germany	.24	.16	.18	.20	.20	.23	.13
Poland	.16	.15	.23	.10	.13	.17	.14

Comparing across nations offers a slightly more complex picture. All nations use a greater amount of Web 1.0 features than those classified as Web 2.0 apart from the GB where on average there is parity between the two modes of Internet communication. The GB parties equally offer the greatest number of features designed to mobilise visitors and which permit some degree of interactivity. Poland leads the way in offering engaging features, with French parties equally focusing on these features. German parties appear to remain mainly in an era of informing and top-down, monologic communication with features which provide information far exceeding those which fall in the other categories.

Overall, there is an impression of parity, with the data from Poland suggesting a lower level of sophistication based on the number of features within Polish party sites as compared to the UK, France and Germany. However, arguably there are few real patterns detectable within this data; hence we turn to comparison by country and party and to regression analysis prior to introducing the results of cross-national and cross-feature analysis.

In the figures 2 and 3 we show the use of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 features by political parties depending on their ideology. As we can see in figure 2, with the exception of the Great Britain, the extreme parties, both right and left performed worst on Web 1.0 than the more centrist parties. Left wing parties, with the exception of Poland, performed better on Web 1.0 than those on the right wing. On contrary, right wing parties scored much better for Web 2.0 performance (again with the exception for Poland) (table 3).

For Web 1.0 the highest scores were the German left and right parties and French left wing parties (score above .25). The worst performers were Polish extreme left parties (.08). For Web 2.0 the highest performance was among English centre and extreme right parties, the worst was among Polish right and German extreme right parties.

Next figures 4 and 5 show the online performance of major and minor parties in parliament as well as the fringe parties (being outside the National Parliament during the electoral campaign). In all four countries major parties performed better on Web 1.0 features. There is a visible difference between major and minor parties (highest for Poland .17 and lowest for the Great Britain.03). However the pattern of difference between minor and fringe parties is not that clear. It is relatively little for Poland and France (.01 and .02 respectively) but in contrast high for the Great Britain and Germany (.11 and .20 respectively). The best

performance among major parties was the German parties (.45), among minor parties the British (.26) and among fringe parties the French (.21).

For Web 2.0 features, the picture is completely altered. In Great Britain and France the major parties have the best scores, in Germany these are the minor parliamentary parties and in Poland there is a similar performance between the major and minor parties. In all countries the fringe parties are scoring much lower (with the highest difference for Germany .12). Among major parties those that score highest are from the Great Britain (.29) and the lowest from Poland (.16). British fringe parties have the best scores (.18) while German fringe parties score lowest (.10)

Figure 2 Web 1.0 index according to ideology of party and country

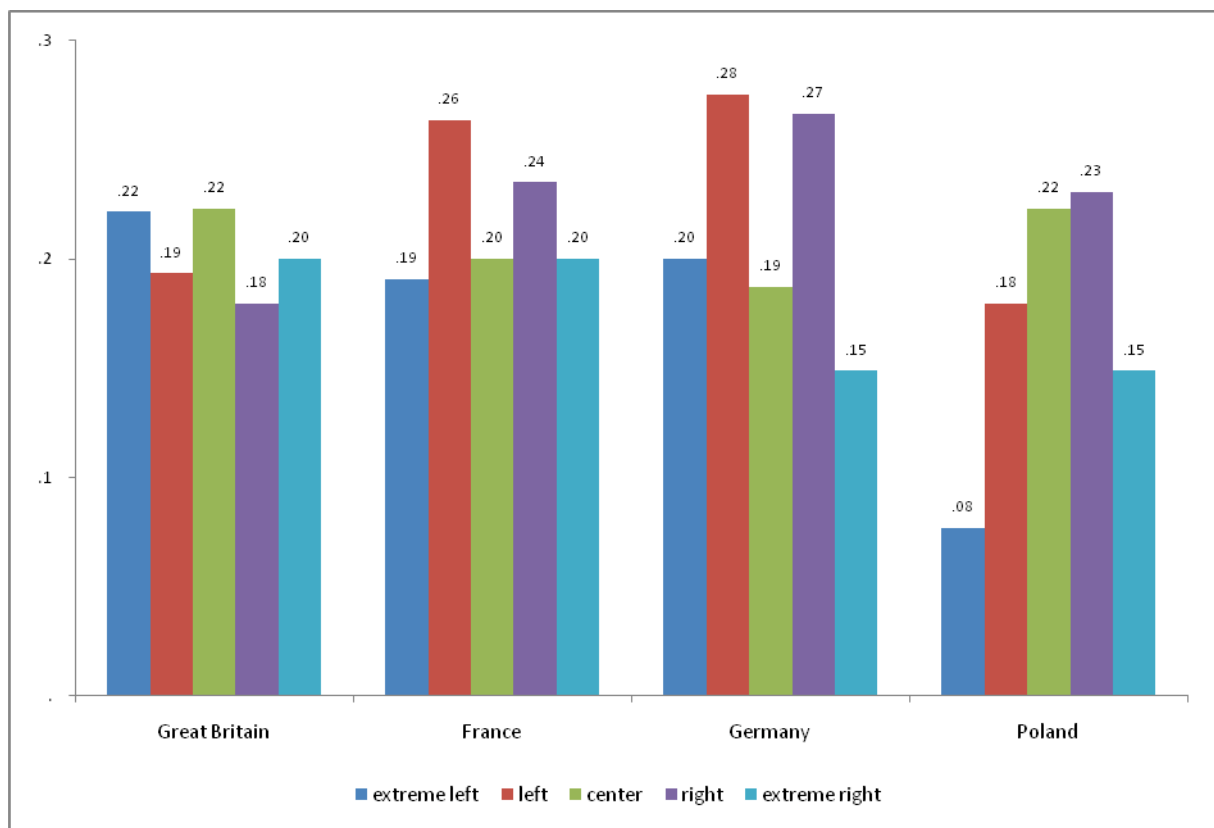


Figure 3 Web 2.0 index according to party ideology and country

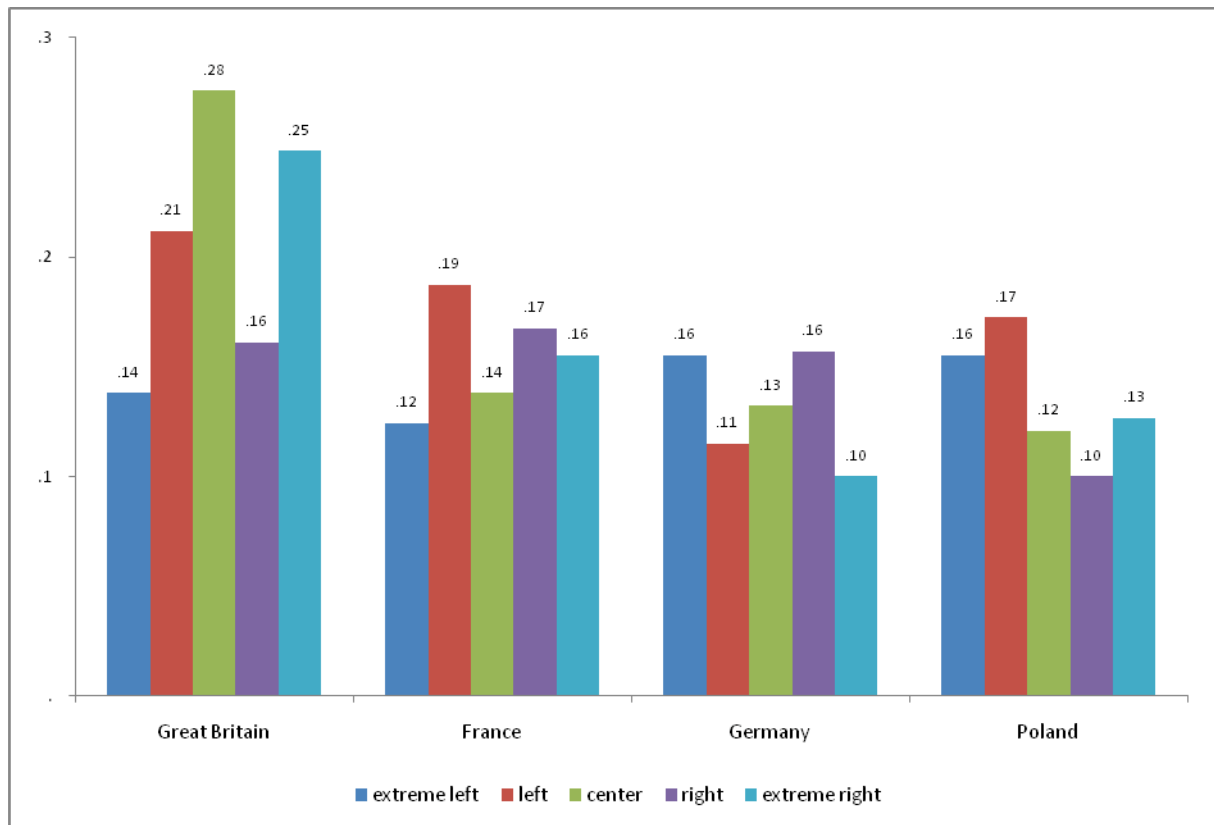


Figure 4 Web 1.0 index according to party size and country

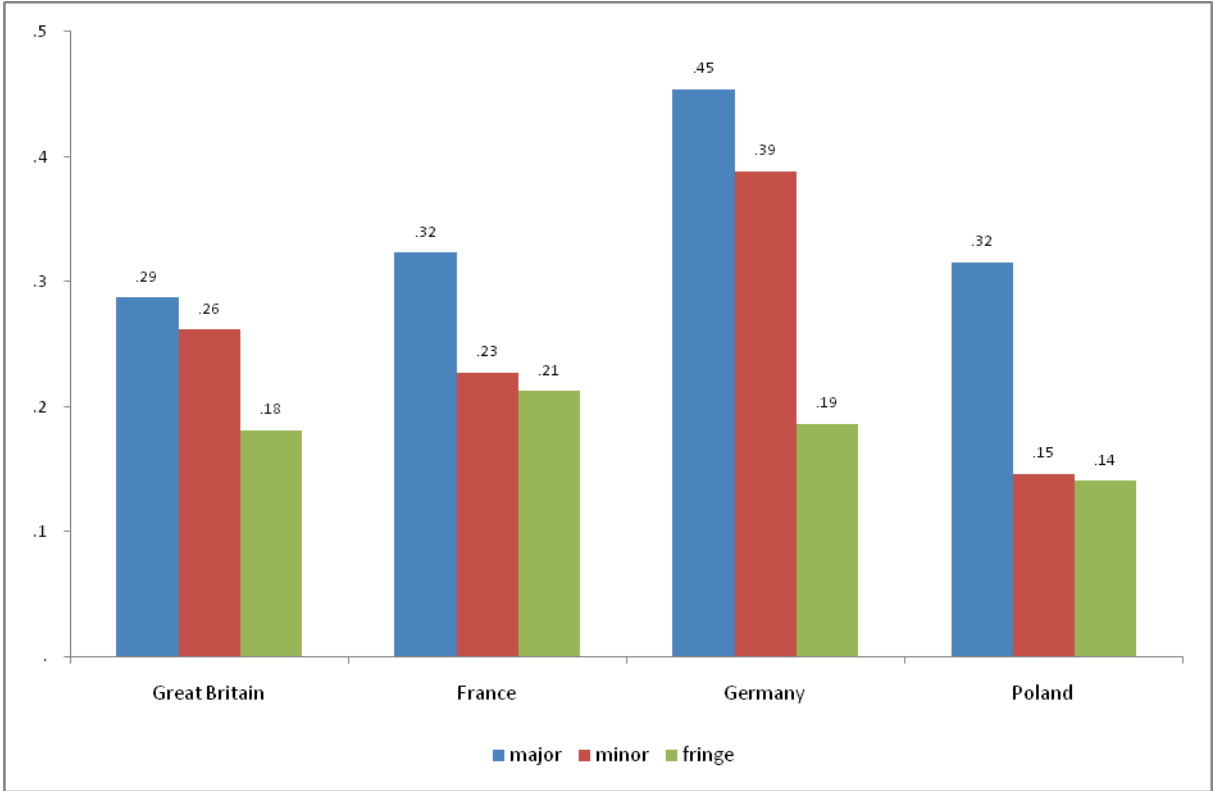
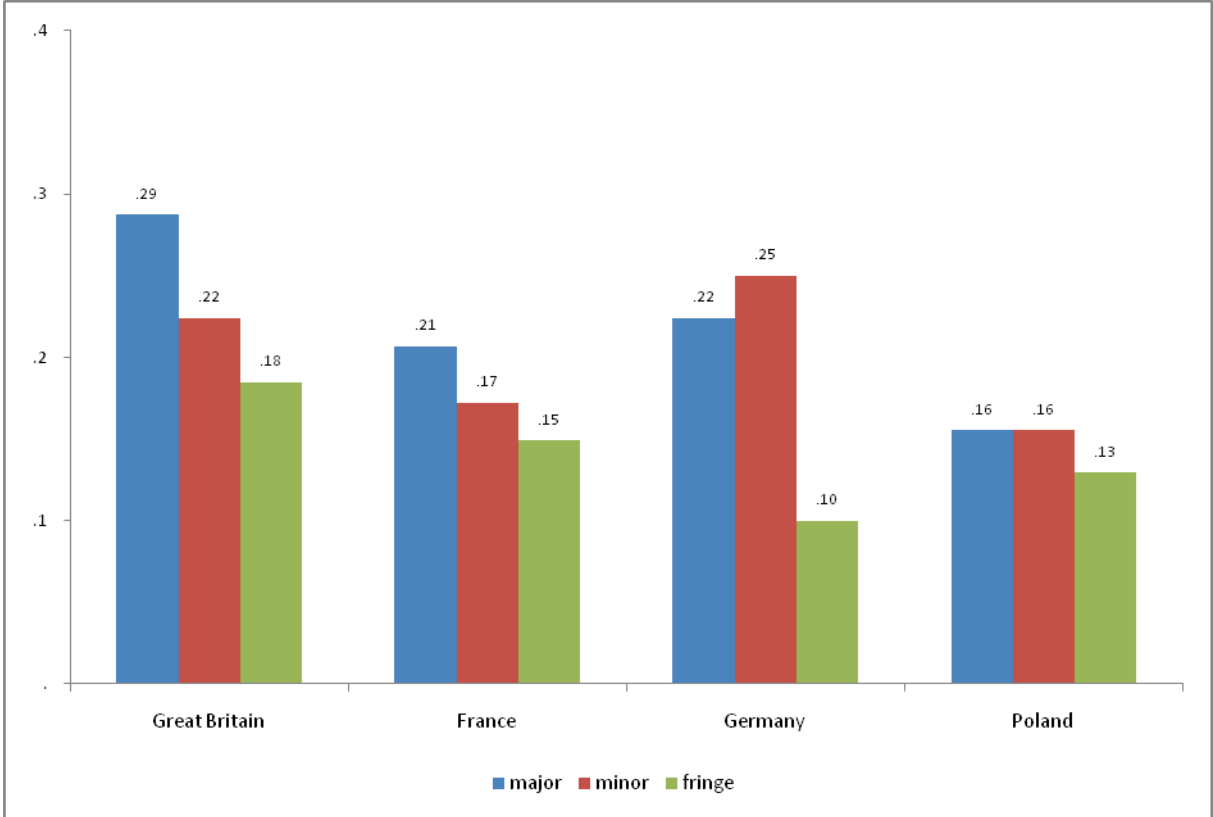


Figure 5 Web 2.0 index according to party size and country



Results of Regression Analysis

To better explain the data gathered during the 2009 campaign to the European Parliament we have created a model to explain the website features present in political parties' online campaigns. The model is composed of six main components. First, it contains country dummies which allow us to capture the differences between countries (it is a substitute for controlling for many other characteristics rendered impossible given the small number of countries – 4 – involved in the study). Secondly, we include a variable capturing the party's scale of involvement in elections (ratio of number of party's candidates in 2009 EP elections to general number of seats in parliament per country). Next, we use a variable describing the proportional size of a party (the ratio of party's seats in the national parliament to the general number of seats in the national parliament) which indicates the importance of the party (a proxy for being a parliamentary or a fringe party) and can be considered as an indirect indicator of the party's financial situation (this indicator was not available for each party). Subsequently, there are party specific characteristics: its ideology, the attitudes toward European Union variables. The continuous dependent variables are five functional indexes: providing information, allowing interactivity, encouraging visitor engagement, attempting mobilization and demonstrating technical sophistication.

Model A from Table 4 indicates that the most informative are the major parties, which was expected as they are more active in both national and international politics and thus can provide more information in general. Provision of news appears also to be more important for parties with the highest involvement (highest number of candidates per seat) and those with an extreme left ideology. As can be seen in model B the most interactive parties were those who were more engaged in elections. Parties having a higher number of candidates were willing to invest in a wider range of more sophisticated communication tools which could attract higher number of voters (such as party's social networking profiles or having videos on video sharing sites). Interactivity also played an important role in online strategies of pro European parties. Engaging features were most important for major parties, in most competitive races and for left ideology parties (model C). It is not surprising since such elements as videos, podcasting, audio streaming, photo galleries or online games require resources, both financial and in terms of requiring experienced staff to create these elements and the appropriate technology. It can be provided by parties with solid financial sources, seriously considering success in the elections. Party size was also a significant variable influencing mobilization (model D). Interestingly, the only significant variable explaining the

technical delivery (model E) was the experience in participating in previous European elections (2004). Such parties may have appreciated the role of the well prepared and efficiently run websites, providing users with easily downloadable materials, search systems or easy accessible tag clouds. Moreover they could reuse already existing platforms. The investment into the technology necessary for the running of the websites is similar across different party sizes and their ideologies; it does not change with their engagement in elections.

Table 4 Regression of party online performance during 2009 EP elections

	A	B	C	D	E
	information	interactivity	engagement	mobilisation	technical sophistication
Country specification (compared to Poland)					
United Kingdom	3.358***	2.992***	.793	2.308***	-.633
France	2.646***	1.590**	.750	1.627**	.483
Germany	4.451***	2.090**	.458	1.574*	.921
Party characteristics					
party involvement	1.038**	.758**	.811*	-.050	.094
proportional size of party	5.626**	3.350	5.504**	4.759***	1.187
political ideology (compared to centre)					
extreme left	1.898**	.128	.078	.087	-.061
left	.531	-.530	1.871**	.286	.669
right	1.079	.259	.752	.001	.204
extreme right	1.043	.689	.625	.839	-.260
Attitudes towards the EU (compared to neutral and single issue party)					
supporting EU	.189	.985*	.567	.512	.352
against EU	-.398	-.524	.420	-.829	-.062
election history					
stood in 2004 elections	.297	.051	.193	.361	.938**
Constant	0.328	0.635	1.379	0.661	1.134
R2	.276	.257	.302	.314	.307
Adjusted R2	.173	.151	.202	.217	.208

*p<.10. **p<.05 ***p<.01

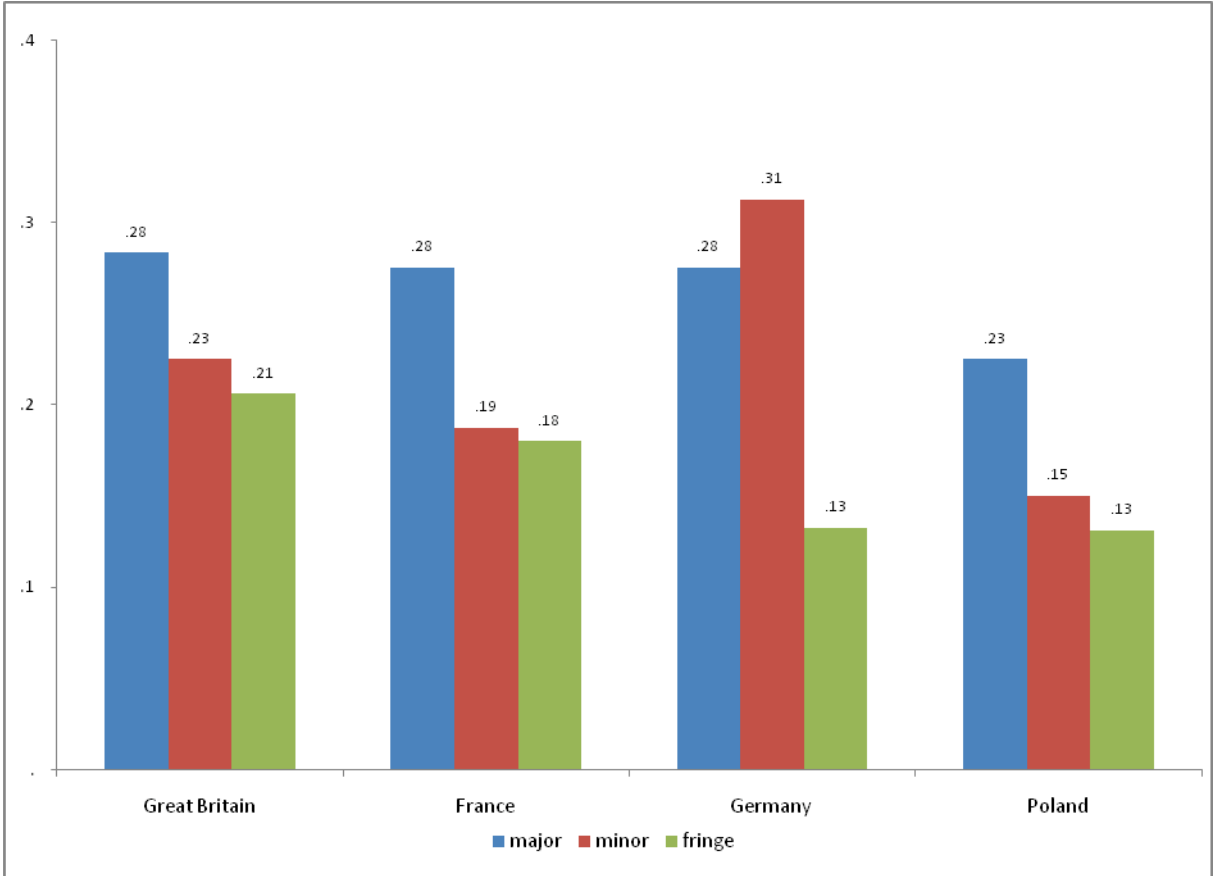
Dependant variables, continuous: information (0 to 16), interactivity (1 to 11), engagement (0 to 11), mobilization (0 to 7), technical sophistication (0 to 7).

Post regression tests were run to check for additional differences between countries (not shown). As it is visible in the models the strongest differences are between the established members of the European Union (Great Britain, Germany, France) on one side, and Poland as a new member on the other. This difference remains significant for information, interactivity and mobilization provision. There are also significant differences between United Kingdom and France in the provision of interactivity (GB higher than FR) and technical sophistication (FR higher than GB), between Germany and France in information delivery (GER higher than FR) and between Germany and Great Britain in technical sophistication (GER higher than UK).

Discussion

Regression analysis offers evidence for the normalisation hypotheses, on the whole the parties expected to have the greatest resources also offer the richest visitor experiences on their websites. Therefore, on the whole, it appears that offline inequalities are evidenced online also and so there is little evidence of equalization. However there may also be some evidence of an ebb and flow, particularly in the case of minor parliamentary parties in both Germany and Poland. These parties appear, on average, to be embracing Web 2.0 features to a greater extent than the major parties; possibly in an attempt to gain greater media attention for their innovations and to compensate the lack of publicity in comparison to major parties. These parties, at least in Germany, are also more interactive (see Figure 6); though in all other cases minor and fringe parties lag behind the higher resources major parties. Due to the nature of the contest as a second order election it may also be the case that we are observing trends at their least developed. Parties may recognise the lack of interest, evidenced by low turnouts, and so make less effort in their campaigning. Equally for GB and Germany, where there are national elections pending, the parties may have been reluctant to construct sophisticated sites full of innovation if there was a chance that they would be copied prior to what they would see as the main contest. While the reasons are hard to explain fully, our data suggests that all parties are increasing their overall use of sophisticated tools for engagement but that the resources enjoyed by the major/experienced parties hide innovations made by the smaller/newer ones.

Figure 6 Interaction index according to party size and country



Ideology seems to play a key role in determining communication style. Parties with extreme left wing ideologies have a more informational style than all the rest. This is possibly due to strict ideological doctrines and so they are more engaged in persuading than any form of collaborative or conversational communication. Given this it is unsurprising that the more catch-all parties on the moderate left, parties with more liberal ideologies who are more likely to have inclusive and communitarian political platforms offer more engaging experiences on their websites. One minor anomaly is that parties of the extreme-right seem more interactive, though this is not statistically significant. Perhaps this is due to them using their sites to build communities of individuals with ideas that are marginalised within the media and political debate. The UK British National Party have a forum which acts as a focus of sharing ideas and countering negative media coverage, it may also encourage some to voice ideas and opinions that would be deemed politically incorrect in other spaces that allow debate. Thus the right may provide spaces for participation in order to break the spiral of silence that surrounds their white/national supremacist doctrines.

Perhaps as a corollary of the fact that left libertarian parties are more engaging, a striking finding is that there is a clear difference in the communication styles of parties with a pro or anti stance on the European Union. Anti-EU parties tend to be more informational and least likely to offer features that encourage interaction; Pro-EU parties, in contrast, are most likely to be interactive. Perhaps the reasons for pro-EU parties being more interactive is firstly to gain some public opinion data from those who are supportive of the EU, particularly in strongly Eurosceptic nations like the United Kingdom. Here, these parties may employ a strategy around interactive features in order to start debates on membership. The anti-EU parties tend to simply push slogans and largely offer negative messages regarding various aspects of the European Union and so tend to demonstrate a more propagandistic and persuasive mode of communication.

Conclusions

While political communication may appear to remain locked in a largely Web 1.0 style of top-down monologue across websites, this would be an unfair observation. While political parties within GB, France, Germany and Poland may not have embraced all the features introduced within the era of Web 2.0 there is clearly a move in that direction evidenced. There is a greater balance between the features embedded in websites and also between the range of experiences they offer visitors. While parties still supply a lot of information, this is necessary: it would be very strange for any party not to display its policies and arguments on its website. The monologue approach to transmitting data is being balanced out by the use of features that allow for information to be delivered in a more engaging way, for example the use of videos showing a range of contexts. Equally parties are using a range of features to get visitors to their sites involved in the campaign; techniques that try to get them onto the loyalty ladder and increase their attachment to the party. Finally interactivity is no longer the least likely set of features to be provided by parties within their online communication. While this may cover a range of different types of interaction, not all of which conform to the classical definition of a conversation, interactivity is increasing as a feature of political party websites. Therefore we suggest there has been a significant step forward since the 2004 EP election contest. The steps towards using certain features seem to be constrained by resources, and they may also be fairly tentative; but clearly political party websites can no longer be described as static or boring any more. The features that seem to have most revolutionised the step towards interactivity are the growth of social networking and file-sharing sites. These provide means for free dissemination of information while also giving online users the

opportunity to have a conversation between themselves or with the party leaders and staff but within the walls of a profile created by that party. While these are currently a bandwagon in terms of parties adopting them, and this is possibly influenced heavily by Obama. It may be a signal of a new style of political communication followed by candidates and parties across Europe. This kind of diffusion of campaign innovations from the U.S. to other countries (also known as “Americanization hypothesis”) has been observed for other strategies and tools in electioneering as well (e.g. Swanson & Mancini 1996; Plasser 2000).

Parties’ web presences may offer a rich experience that combines engaging features with the delivery of information, persuade through a range of tools of mobilisation, but also provide spaces for participation. While this was not yet a striking feature of the 2009 EP election campaign, it was evidenced and could well be the observation of a trend that is set to take hold within politics.

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