Mapping Web Interactivity: A Comparative Study of Congressional Campaign Websites

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of interactive communication and dialogic relationship building strategies on political campaign Web sites. In contrast to presidential races that often feature substantially more sophisticated campaign Web sites, congressional candidates’ ability and willingness to use the Web as an electioneering tool has varied greatly. The present research sought to address two broad research questions: 1) how candidates from the same electoral districts used their Web sites during the 2006 and 2010 congressional elections; and 2) to what extent could several candidate and district level variables explain the differences in Web utilization. A typology was proposed to examine the first question, while content analysis was performed to collect empirical data that addressed the second question. Results indicate that while the use of interactive Web strategies may be concentrated among candidates with certain characteristics in 2006, the adoption of social media in political campaigns has trickled down from the presidential level, and that interactive tools have become a norm in the 2010 congressional election, with virtually no observable differences emerging among candidates. Theoretical and practical implication for online political public relations is discussed.

Keywords: 2006 Congressional Campaigns, 2010 Congressional Campaigns, Campaign Websites, Interactivity, Political Public Relations

INTRODUCTION

As information communication technologies (ICTs) continue to expand into our everyday lives, more and more people are also relying on the Web to find political information and to engage in political activities. During the 2008 presidential election, for example, some 55% of Americans used the Internet to get involved in the political process or to learn about politics. More recently, with the rise of social media and mobile phone applications, it was found that nearly 22% of online adults used social networking sites to connect with the campaign.

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in the 2010 midterm elections (Pew, 2011). On the other side of the equation, candidates running for public offices have been using a variety of web-based applications to disseminate campaign materials and to mobilize supporters. In fact, conventional wisdom suggests that the first thing that most political candidates should do when declaring their candidacy is to set up a Web site (Sey & Castells, 2004; Tremayne, 2007).

Many scholars (e.g., Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002; Tedesco, 2006) have argued that the Web’s interactivity is one of the key reasons behind the growing popularity of Internet e-campaigning. The utilization of interactivity can also increase users’ liking and affinity towards a candidate (Sundar, Hesser, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 1998; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). From a public relations standpoint, interactivity is also central in building dialogic relationships between an organization and its various publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002). Yet despite these benefits, studies have found that candidates do not necessarily make use of interactive Web sites as part of their campaign strategies (Stromer-Galley, 2000). This discrepancy between potential advantages stemming from and actual implementation suggests that the influencing factors and implications of interactivity on campaign Web sites may deserve further attention. In addition, although there is a steady stream of research (e.g., Foot & Schneider, 2002, 2006; Kamarck & Nye, 1999; Puopolo, 2001; Williams & Tedesco, 2006) on the impact of political campaign Web sites on information dissemination, fund-raising, or voter mobilization, many of these studies only examine campaigns at the presidential level or focus solely on a few candidates as case studies.

The present research seeks to bridge this intellectual gap by investigating how political candidates use their campaign Web sites at the congressional level over two midterm election cycles. First, we propose a typology drawn from previous studies of interactivity in political campaign Web sites. Then, we apply this typology to explore how Web interactivity was employed by candidates in the 2006 and 2010 U.S. House of Representative elections. Finally, we test the above results against a set of candidate and district level variables to identify patterns and trends that could explain the variation in the levels of Web interactivity utilized by different candidates.

THE INTERNET AND POLITICS: MOVING FROM INFORMATIONAL TO INTERACTIVE DOMAINS

Studies on the use of the Internet in political campaigns emerged in the U.S. in the mid-1990s when candidates began to use the Web to provide traditional campaign materials such as biographical information or press releases (Crocco & Firestone, 1996). With the emergence of Web 2.0 and digital communication technologies in the subsequent years, the Web’s growing political significance can be seen in the different ways that it has shaped the contemporary political process – from how people learn about politics (e.g., Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980), or how they interact with one another or engage in conversations about politics (Scheufele, 2002), to how campaigns use various online platforms to garner resources and mobilize supporters (Zhang et al., 2010).

For example, studies have noted that the Web has become an important information source, supplementing newspapers and television news (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Jeffres, Atkin, & Neuendorf, 2012; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Scheufele, 2000) to make up for the media diet of today’s audience. In line with uses and gratifications theory, scholars have also found that people with different political attitudes, demographic backgrounds, and Internet experiences are drawn to different aspects of the Web as an information source (Atkin et al., 2005; Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Tewksbury, 2005), reinforcing a “daily me” dynamic, one characterized by the consumption of personalized information (Bucy et al., 2007; Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012; Negroponte, 1995). Moreover, social networking sites and
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