Chapter 9

An Evaluation Framework for MPs Websites: The Case of Greek Members of Parliament

Georgios Lappas
Technological Educational Institution of Western Macedonia, Greece

Prodromos Yannas
Technological Educational Institution of Western Macedonia, Greece

ABSTRACT

The use of the internet as an important political marketing tool has been recognized by elected representatives as their websites become more and more active, while their maturity level grows. Providing an evaluation framework, which underlines among other important issues the maturity level of the website on the web, we offer ways members of parliament (MPs) can upgrade their web activities and operate in an e-democracy environment. The proposed four-maturity stage framework is cross-national and can be applied to any political actor website. The advantage of the proposed framework over other attempts is the importance it attaches to user needs in maintaining their interest on the website. This framework has the added advantage to evaluate and compare websites along a maturity four-maturity stage ladder starting from online presence progressing to interactivity stage, advancing to an e-democracy stage, and culminating in the final integration stage. The proposed framework is applied to MPs’ websites of the Greek parliament, revealing interesting patterns.

INTRODUCTION

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in politics is becoming more and more important. Evolving information technologies interact with political processes and outcomes in novel and interesting ways. As Stuart Shulman states (2007) “the intersection of information technology and politics is nearly ubiquitous. Studying phenomena at this intersection is like studying the interplay of government and language with politics” (p. 1). Information technology, government and language are all three foundational aspects in the study of modern political life.
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Campaigning on the web (E-campaign) appeared as a new medium in the campaign strategies of parties and candidates in the 1990s. E-campaigning was introduced as an early attempt in the US presidential elections of 1992 (Diamond et al., 1993; Myers, 1993; Hacker et al., 1996). E-campaigning increased its usage in every electoral circle thereafter. Extensive studies on the USA analyzed Presidential and Congressional campaigns on the web (Bimber, 1998; Browning, 1996; Casey, 1996; Corrado & Firestone, 1996; D’ Alessio, 2000; Dulio et al., 1999; Farnsworth & Owen, 2001; Foot et al., 2003; Kaid & Bystrom, 1998; Kern, 1997; Klotz, 1997; Margolis et al., 1999; Puopolo, 2001; Rash, 1997; Schneider & Foot, 2002; Whillock, 1997; Williams et al., 2002; Vaccari, 2008). A number of electoral contests have also been studied in the United Kingdom (UK) (Yates & Perrone, 1998; Margolis et al., 1999; Ward & Gibson, 2003; Marcella et al., 2003). Beyond the USA and UK contexts, web campaigns studies have been conducted for Italy (Newell, 2001), Finland (Carlson & Djupsund, 2001), Germany (Gibson & Rommele, 2003), Netherlands (Tops et al., 2000), Australia (Gibson & McAllister, 2003). Moreover, the use of the web by parties and politicians has been the focus of many studies around the world as in the Netherlands (Voerman, 1998), Russia and Ukraine (Semetko & Krasnoba, 2003), Denmark (Lofgren, 2000), and Japan (Tkatch-Kawasaki, 2003), naming just a few cases from the long catalog. Regarding Greece the study of online politics has also attracted the interest of researchers (Kotsikopoulou, 2002; Demertzis & Armenakis, 2003; Yannas & Lappas, 2005a; Yannas & Lappas, 2005b; Demertzis et al., 2005; Lappas et al., 2008). Most of the campaign websites that have been studied provide political and campaign information. The interactivity features and the interaction between campaigner and voters are favourite subjects in almost all web campaign related studies. Thus, the main characteristic in most web campaigns under examinations were dominated by information provision material of the campaigner leaving few space to citizen interaction and participation. At the same time candidates and parties were adopting new communication technologies in their campaigns to demonstrate that they had espoused technological developments and to project an image of a forward looking candidate or party.

It is generally agreed that internet changes the traditional way of communication. Unlike other mass media, internet potentially enables parties and candidates to tailor messages to individual citizens and voters. For political candidates the web offers a number of more advantages compared to other media. Specifically it: a) is much less expensive than television or print advertising; b) has the capacity to integrate in one form text, photos audio and video; c) allows for interactive and direct communication between the candidate and thousands of voters simultaneously; and d) offers candidates a platform to develop in length their political programs and policy positions (Benoit & Benoit, 2000). Blogs provide a more interactive form of communication and became popular in political campaigns since the 2004 election cycle in the USA (Trammel et al., 2006). The emergence of Web 2.0 enabled a qualitative shift in the flow of communication from one-way to two-way. Current research in the area focuses now on the many new interactive tools of Web 2.0 to investigate the use of the new media by parties and candidates in their campaigns. Obama online campaign attained unprecedented success through the utilization of the web as a primary vehicle for his political campaign (Carpenter, 2010). The digital campaign of Obama was designed in order for online tactics to be translated into offline mobilization (Gibson, 2009).

The aim of this chapter is to provide and test an evaluation framework for MPs websites. The present chapter is divided into two parts: a theoretical and an empirical. The theoretical part develops a four stage maturity framework for evaluating websites and engaging in cross-national evaluations.
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