Chapter 11
Election Campaigns on the Internet: How are Voters Affected?

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates whether political use of the Internet affects users politically. Using a combination of log- and survey data from a study of Internet use during the Danish 2007 parliamentary election, a number of hypotheses are tested. The investigation finds that 30% of the survey respondents say they are influenced politically by their Internet use. However, they are only modestly influenced when it comes to “core values” such as party choice or important political issues, while respondents are affected more in terms of general political opinions and opinions on different candidates. Political interest is found to act as an important determinant for political activity on the Internet, and certain types of uses are found to have more profound political effects than others. Somewhat paradoxically—but in line with Zaller (1992)—those indicating they are “little” or “somewhat” interested in politics are found to be the most politically affected.

INTRODUCTION
From a feeble start in 1994 until now, election campaigns on the Internet have developed from an exotic, little-noticed phenomenon to a central component in all parliamentary and presidential elections (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Howard 2005; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Lee & Park, 2008). The growth in Internet campaigning can be observed both in terms of the number of parties and candidates using the Internet for campaign purposes and their increased level of sophistication in doing so, as well as in the ability of events on the Internet to increasingly set the political agenda of the campaign. The latter feature reflects the increased attention of journalists as well as the public to what is happening on the Internet and their increased observation of and participation in such activities. As many observers have noted, Internet use in political campaigning took a quali-
In this campaign, the strength of the Net in terms of mobilizing supporters, fundraising and creating support networks was amply demonstrated. That the lesson has been well learned became very visible in Barack Obama’s Internet campaign (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008).

We know less about the effects these campaign activities have on the persons exposed to them. Assuming that the most important thing candidates want to obtain by campaigning on the Internet—as elsewhere—is to motivate people to vote for them, it is relevant to ask whether such campaigning is actually capable of shifting the vote.

A straightforward answer to this question is not possible for several reasons. Firstly, an answer would demand it being possible to isolate the effect of Internet campaigning from the effects of campaigning through other media. While such isolation might be simulated in an experimental setting, it is not possible to achieve in a “real life” situation. Secondly, whether or not voters actually change their voting preferences requires longitudinal studies in which a person’s vote in one election is compared with the same person’s vote in the following election. While such (panel) studies are quite common in political science, longitudinal studies of Internet behavior—for not to mention the effects of Internet behavior—remain rare in the field of Internet studies.

However, the data presented in this article (see below) renders it possible to approach the question of whether the Internet has an impact on voting patterns by examining whether the political use of the Internet affects users politically; or rather, how users say they are politically affected, as this part of the analysis depends on survey data. If users/voters consistently indicate this to be the case, it is taken as a strong indication of the capacity of Internet campaigning to actually make a political difference.

A search for literature explicitly dealing with the question of whether political Internet use affects users politically reveals the limited amount of attention dedicated to this problematic. There are a few studies in the area (Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Pew Research Centre, 2000; Weise, 2000) posing questions similar to those raised in this article, but their evidence is not very clear. However, the study on which this paper is based is able to take the research in this area a step forward.

DATA COLLECTION

The data has been collected during the Danish parliamentary elections in November 2007. They were a collaborative effort involving The Association of Danish Internet Media (FDIM)\(^1\), Associate Professor Lisbeth Klastrup (IT-University, Copenhagen), Associate Professor Jakob Linaa Jensen (Department of Information and Media Science, Aarhus University) and the author.

The data set is rather unique. A panel of 5080 persons was formed, and their exact use of the Internet during an election campaign period (whole month of November, election was November 13th) was registered. This was the first such study in Denmark. Everyone in the panel voluntarily agreed to have software installed on their computers which registered all of their activities on the Internet. As we were only interested in the political aspect of this activity, only political Internet activities were coded. Furthermore, part of this panel (980 persons) agreed to answer an electronic questionnaire including questions concerning how respondents perceived their use of the Net during the election campaign, what effect they said this use had on their considerations about how to vote, what other media they used to get informed about political issues, etc.\(^2\)

The data used in this paper has been weighted so that the panel (the 5080 persons) and survey respondents are representative of the so-called gemiusAudience panel in terms of gender, age,
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