French Primary Elections and the Internet, the Social Network of the Socialist Party, the Coopol

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ABSTRACT

Beyond traditional places for exchanges within organizations (for example, ward or branch meetings), virtual communication forums give members of political parties an opportunity to express their opinions on line. The social network of the Parti Socialiste (PS) in France, the Coopol, was created on January 12, 2010, and seems to hold out new prospects for public debate. The mediated exchanges which took place on this platform have allowed us to analyze the political debate among activists between July and October 2011. The results are based on different types of data (statistical analysis of text, web surveys and qualitative interviews) gathered while observing the debate on the forum and through interviews with voters and activists. The rationale for the use of three different approaches is related to the fact that the article presents several studies that can be evaluated in their totality, but should be taken singly in each case. The information provided by this article makes it an important case study which explains in an empirical way the latest theoretical approaches within this research field.

Keywords: Coopol, Debate, Hollande, Internet, Social Network, Socialist Party, Primary

INTRODUCTION

Over the decades of the Internet’s development and popularization, academic literature on party politics has studied the transformation of organizations and activism, focusing on professionalization and personalization, particularly in online contexts (Gibson & Ward, 2009; Kreiss, 2012); and on the fall in political party memberships, together with the claim that members are being replaced by “supporters” (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). Responding to their own decline, some political parties have given non-members a more direct role in selecting party candidates. This is observable in France: for instance, before the 2012 Presidential elections in France, the PS (Parti socialiste, Socialist Party) organized an external election in 2011,
termed “open primaries”, which allowed any left-wing voter to participate in the selection of the Socialist candidate for the 2012 presidential election. Fabienne Greffet emphasizes that “the growing use of the Internet itself has helped to transform both intra-party organizations and participation in campaigning” (Greffet, 2013). Some studies have been carried out in other countries with different, sometimes even contradictory results. In the case of Danish and Norwegian parties, Pedersen and Saglie emphasize that use of the Internet seems to provide a way for very active traditional members to increase their activism and involvement in the party (Pedersen & Saglie, 2005). In the case of the British Liberal Democratic Party, online members participate slightly less than offline members (Lusoli & Ward, 2004). On the opposite side of the spectrum, studies of the general public either illustrate the limited penetration of online information and participation within the general population (cfr. Greffet & Vedel, 2011; Koch-Michalska & Vedel, 2009). We aim to shed light on this debate through a study of the French case. This paper offers another perspective, looking at online political activism at a level intermediate between party members and the general population. It explores, in a comparative approach, the profile of online primary election voters and online PS members. The primary offers an opportunity to understand the differences between members and non-members online. In an electoral process strongly marked by personalization and deterritorialization, we can examine a moment when candidates’ electoral teams very much campaign online. To complement our analysis, we study discussions within the social network of the PS, known as the Coopol1 (Coopérative Politique), during the period of the Socialist primary elections campaign in order to discover who participated in this social network. From 2010 onwards, several discussions between militants and sympathizers appeared in the Coopol, and since then the Socialist Party has been urged to adopt this network in order to mobilize and enhance communication between members. Since July 2011, within the Coopol, supporter groups have been active and have tried to rally activists and sympathizers around one candidate or another:

We have 40,000 subscribers, 40% of whom are not members of the PS. There were lots of subscriptions at the outset and then things settled down. And there are peaks when there is party activity, such as electoral periods. Now, with the primaries, there is an upsurge. Before the summer, nearly 80% of Coopol members were active members2.

Before presenting our results, it will be helpful to explain the French political and media context. Still marginal during the 1990s, the Internet was propelled to the front of the French political scene at the time of the 2005 campaign for the referendum on the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and during the presidential election of 2007. Now “a compulsory element in campaigning” (Ethuin & Lefebvre, 2002), the PS has pushed its militants towards being visible on the Web. The Coopol was revealed to the general public on January 12, 2010:

It is a tool which enables better organization, in the first place for activists ... We’re giving them a tool which lets them interact with each other, set up activities, demonstrations, working groups, policy groups not only on the ground but almost everywhere in France. […]3.
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