Organization Still Matters: Parties’ Characteristics, Posting and Followers’ Reactions on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Use of social media by political parties has become a part of their communication strategies. In Catalonia, where around 20% of Internet users obtain political information through Facebook and Twitter, parties use these channels widely. This article has examined 814 posts, 5,772 comments, 52,470 likes and 25,907 shares from the official Facebook pages of Catalan parties in order to ascertain the relevance of the classical party characteristics (party size, level of institutionalization, centralization of decision-making, position at the ideological cleavages) on how parties and their followers behave on Facebook. The data sustain that the characteristics of Catalan parties have an influence on their posting behaviour on Facebook, and mould the reactions (comments, likes and shares) of their Facebook followers to these posts. The results further show that small and new parties achieve greater engagement than bigger and more institutionalized parties.

KEYWORDS
Catalonia, Cleavages, Facebook, Followers, Party Centralization, Parties’ Organization, Political Parties, Posting Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Social media pose a variety of challenges and opportunities to political parties. They offer the possibility of a level of interaction between parties and the public that was previously absent, and give voters the ‘chance of entering into a real online dialogue with representatives’ (Mackay, 2010, p. 23), enhance relationship building and allow individual citizens to make, contribute, filter and share content (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012). However, the organizational adaptation of parties to these new channels of electronic communication puts participatory pressure on their hierarchical structures (Gustafsson, 2012, p. 1,123), blurring their classic strategy, based on a sharp differentiation between their members and the public (Margetts, 2001; Löfgren, 2003). In this way, parties combine a variety of media channels – from traditional mass media to social media – and are being involved in transformations that challenge party centralization and traditional party elites in a communicative environment described as a ‘hybrid media system’ (Chadwick, 2013; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016).
Parties are political actors with primary goals (Harmel & Janda, 1994) and organizational characteristics, and behaving strategically to win elections and influence policies. All of these determine how they deal with social media, just as what happened with previous online tools such as websites, chats and forums (Padró-Solanet & Cardenal 2008; Cardenal, 2011). In brief, parties' adaptation to this new digital environment seems to be mediated by their goals, organization, position on the ideological cleavages, power situation and electoral strength.

This article seeks to analyse the behaviour of Catalan parties with seats in the Catalan parliament, together with their followers on the party Facebook pages. We consider that party characteristics in general and party organization in particular have an influence over interaction on parties’ Facebook pages. Specifically, we examine the relationship between parties’ main characteristics, their Facebook posting behaviour and the responses given by their Facebook followers to these posts.

The understanding of how parties’ characteristics are affecting party use of social media depends on detailed empirical analysis rooted in specific cases and countries (Wall & Sudulich, 2010). The Catalan case is an addition from southern Europe to a field where other studies have already focused on countries with a proportional electoral system but which are mainly drawn from Northern Europe. And it is a particularly suitable case study because of the wide-spread use of the Internet and social media, the early adoption of social media by parties, and the multiparty system that provides sufficient variability between the analysed characteristics of the parties.

Our period of analysis is not long, between 15 January and 15 February, 2013; it is perhaps prone to short term conditions and factors. However, since the volume of data retrieved from parties’ Facebook pages is quite high (384 posts, 5,772 comments, 52,470 likes and 25,907 shares) and our research considers the entirety of the current Catalan parties, we believe that the time span is sufficient to shed light on some of the present controversies concerning social media and parties. Moreover, as far as we know, this is the first time that a work aims to study the relation between parties’ characteristics, parties’ posting behaviour, and their Facebook followers’ engagement in this so-called new ‘hybrid media system’ (Chadwick, 2013).

The following section outlines the literature on parties and Facebook use. Following this, we set out the context for the Catalan multiparty system, the current political context, and the Catalan public’s use of Facebook during our period of analysis. Next, we give details of the research design and the construction of variables, stating the hypotheses to be tested. We then present the analysis and findings of the article. Finally, there is the discussion and conclusions on the results, outlining potential avenues for future research in this area.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Since their inception, political parties’ organizations have mutated hand in hand with the changes in society unleashed by the appearance of new forms of communication. However, the academic controversy regarding parties’ organization and communication was given a boost with the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0.

As happened with other previous forms of mass communication, the use parties make of the Internet and social media depends on organizational characteristics, ideology and electoral situation. Consequently, we will review the literature dealing with party characteristics that influence parties’ use of the Internet and social media both from an international perspective and from a Catalan point of view.
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