How Have Irish Parliamentarians Adapted to the Age of Web 2.0?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the engagement of members of the Irish lower parliamentary chamber (TDs) with Web 2.0 technologies. While conducting the website-feature analysis, the authors looked at three dimensions of each TD’s website: information content, interaction tools and politicians’ activities on the web. They found that Irish parliamentarians’ usage of the Internet is still largely based on the paradigm of Web 1.0. Perhaps more accurately, Irish politicians’ Internet usage is in the mode of Web 1.5, in which some interactive and participatory space is generated with the idea that the cyberspace should encourage citizen participation. As conventional variables such as party affiliation and geographic variation still have an influence on TDs’ website performance, one can conclude that information and communication technologies do not really change the way Irish politics are played. The Irish experience is in line with various other studies, such as in Italy and Finland.

KEYWORDS

Ireland, Party Systems, Teachta Dála (TD), Web 2.0, Website-Feature Analysis

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Lilleker and Jackson evaluated the impact of Web 2.0 on the UK General Election of that year. They found that British political parties are underachieving with regard to maximizing the interactive potential of Web 2.0 to encourage participation by the electorate. This is in contrast to Obama’s campaign in which citizen participation “in the forms of sharing and acting as an advocate online” through offering feedback to the campaign was encouraged (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010, p. 71). Lilleker and Jackson’s finding is in line with the broader debate on the impact of social media on the pattern of political competition, in which much is made of the contrast between candidate-focused election systems (e.g. US), which are assumed to encourage campaign innovation, and those with strong parties (e.g. UK), which are presented as lagging behind in adopting new methodologies (see also Strandberg, 2013).

In this article, the use of Web 2.0 by politicians in a system which is both candidate-centric but with strong party orchestration is analysed in the context of the mid-point in the electoral cycle (Williamson, 2009, p. 514), taken here to mean a period of politics considered as ‘normal’ (Abney et al., 2013), or, in other words, a non-election period.¹ The research locale is the Republic of Ireland,² where the electoral system and political culture foster both strong intra- and inter-party competition (Collins, 2004). The question to be answered is whether Web 2.0 is a game changer in the Irish context, facilitating quintessentially new political interaction between politicians and their electorate, or simply a means of expediting established patterns of behaviour (Scholzman, Verba, & Brady, 2010, p. 489). It is, of course, important to note that Web 2.0 denotes cumulative modifications to the Internet.

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since Web 1.0. Primarily, Web 2.0 facilitates dynamic interactions rather than one-way information flows and is not limited to browsing content. It is hoped that this case study of Ireland can contribute empirical evidence to the current debate over whether Web 2.0 can change the fundamental ways of how politics are played in this cyber age.

If information and communication technologies (ICTs) have offered a new way for Irish politicians to interact with constituents, this would imply that the discussion, negotiation and formation of policies could take place online as well. Although online discussions are not about hard policymaking, the ideas generated in online debates could help representatives to garner constituents’ views over certain issues and policies and this might affect the agenda setting, formation, interpretation and implementation of policies later.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, the core imperative for most politicians is re-election, and this tutors their behaviour in a direct way, even allowing for assumed inclinations towards public service and ideological conviction. Obviously, those whom Barber (1965) termed the ‘advertisers’ and the ‘reluctant’ may stand outside the larger group, but even their conduct may need to meet the mainstream public expectation.

Striking ideological differences do not mark political competition between the parties in the Irish parliament. The left-right cleavage is not pronounced and the traditionally large parties can be characterized as centre/right (Marsh, Farrell, & McElroy, 2017). Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the two largest parties, trace their roots to the Civil War of 1922-3 (Collins, 2004). Although the economic crisis of 2008 was particularly damaging to Fianna Fáil, traditionally the largest Irish party, it has since practically recovered its position, according to the opinion polls. All Irish governments since 1989 have been coalitions. For the individual parliamentarian, the major electoral very often comes from candidates of the same party or, occasionally, ‘independents’ campaigning on particularly contentious local issues. Each constituency returns three to five TDs. Irish politicians, therefore, spend a lot of time and resources on managing constituency affairs in order to cultivate votes (Butler & Collins, 2001), sometimes even at the expense of their role as national lawmakers (McGraw, 2016; Martin, 2013; O’Leary, 2011).

It may be assumed that this is particularly the case for deputies whose seats are less secure, but in the Dáil, which is the lower but principal chamber of the Irish legislature, electorally secure incumbents are few in number. Although recent elections have been marked by changes in parliamentary personnel, in many ways the essentials of how Irish politics operates has not altered much (Marsh et al., 2017; Marsh & Mikhaylov, 2014).

In 1976, the role of the members of the Dáil, the TDs, was described by two scholars as being centered on influencing the decisions of civil servants, ‘pulling strings’, and acting as confidantes for their constituents (‘hearing confessions’). Bax (1976) and Sacks (1976) ascribed differing impacts to these functions, but the brokerage style they described was accepted as reasonably accurate. Both authors confirmed Chubb’s (1963) famous description of the TD’s role as ‘persecuting civil servants’ (Butler & Collins, 2001). The patterns have changed little, as revealed by recent publications: “the demand for constituency service runs deep in Irish society” (Marsh et al., 2017, p. 161).

With regards the interest of this study, L./M. C. Murphy (2013) reports that Irish parliamentarians appear to be willing to be engaged with Web 2.0, but she did not examine further TDs’ exact Web 2.0 usage.

The next section will begin by exploring how Web 2.0 is believed and empirically found to have affected politics in the international context. This will be followed by an introduction to the research method and data. Section four presents a website feature analysis of TDs to see how they have actually explored and made use of the potentials of Web 2.0. The data enables the examination of 88 TDs’ personal websites. This is followed by section five in which a comparison between TDs’ performance across websites, Twitter and Facebook is made.
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