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The role of the Internet for political campaigns in Germany

ABSTRACT

The Internet has become an important infrastructure for political campaigns around the world, and various online tools have become pervasive campaigning devices. Still, most research on the role of the Internet and online tools in political campaigns focuses on US presidential campaigns. Due to the specific institutional context in the US this research might not provide realistic observations about the role of the Internet in future campaigns in other countries. Researchers will have to enrich the debate through systematic studies of the role of the Internet and various online services in campaigns in political, legal and cultural contexts different from those prevailing in the US. This special issue aims to add to this discussion by presenting a number of empirical studies focusing on the role of the Internet and various online services during the campaign for the German federal election of 2009 and its aftermath.

THE INTERNET IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

The Internet has become an important infrastructure for political campaigns around the world, and various online tools have become pervasive campaigning devices. Still, most research on the role of the Internet and online tools in political campaigns focuses on US presidential campaigns. There are obvious reasons for this: dramatic and personalised campaigns, highly polarised partisans, large campaign budgets and a cultural proximity to the entrepreneurs and developers who have continuously built the Internet. These factors regularly produce innovative uses of the Internet in US campaigns. Research focusing on the USA thus provides us with interesting case studies how campaigns can use the Internet successfully and in a way that might transform traditional campaign structures. Due to the specific institutional context in the US, however, these case studies might not provide realistic observations about the role of the Internet in future campaigns in other countries. While case studies on the US still provide plenty of valuable insights, researchers will have to enrich the debate through systematic studies of the role of the Internet and various online services in campaigns in political, legal and cultural contexts different from those prevailing in the US. This special issue aims to add to this discussion

by presenting a number of empirical studies focusing on the role of the Internet and various online services during the campaign for the German federal election of 2009 and its aftermath.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN CAMPAIGNS IN THE USA AND GERMANY

The discussion about the role of the Internet in political campaigns is dominated by the successful use of the Internet by the Obama campaigns for the American presidential elections of 2008 and 2012. These campaigns have become widely cited as examples for the transformative power of the Internet in politics. Surely one reason for this is the fact that Obama was the first example of a successful candidate prominently using the Internet in a campaign of international importance. Although there had been candidates who also used the Internet successfully before (e.g. Jesse Ventura, John McCain and Howard Dean), they either did not win elections or they remained on the state level of American politics. Obama broke this pattern with his electoral victories. At first, the reactions to Obama's use of the Internet focused on his use of novel tools like Facebook, Twitter or the campaign's supporter platform my.barackobama.com. This was strongly encouraged by the Obama campaign which very consciously created a public narrative that positioned its efforts in the context of cyber-rhetoric, focusing on the transformative powers of the Internet for politics.¹ Back in 2005, analysing the online efforts of Howard Dean's campaign (which was ultimately doomed to failure), Matthew Hindman started emphasising the true disruptive potential of the Internet for the infrastructure of political campaigns: this included the coordination of campaigns, changes in their command-structure, and the identification of promising targets for mobilisation and fundraising.² Once the early enthusiasm about the shiny new digital toys of the Obama campaign subsided, in-depth research was published, focusing on the way the Obama campaign used digital technology, the Internet and various online services to improve these elements of its 'infrastructure'.³

The well-publicised online success of the Obama campaigns has contributed to an accelerated use of the Internet and various online services in campaigns beyond the United States. As the Internet has become more prominent among electorates, politicians and campaign professionals, it has also become an increasingly popular research topic.⁴

Still, in no other political campaign has the Internet achieved prominence comparable to its role in the Obama campaigns. Instead of a simple adoption of online tools and processes that proved successful for Barack Obama, an ‘Americanization 2.0’ as it were, we seem to be witnessing a selective adoption of individual tools in campaigns outside the US, but there does not seem to be a wholesale adoption of campaigning processes. Some commentators have spoken about this as a ‘European model of web campaigning’.⁵

The parties’ campaigns for the 2009 federal election in Germany were strongly influenced by the public perception of Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. The media had covered the Obama campaign as a grassroots movement with the charisma of the candidate and the creative use of the Internet at its core. Instead of focusing on the way the campaign used their online tools to generate data about their supporters and in turn mobilise them more efficiently for fundraising and volunteering, German media covered the candidate, the enthusiasm he generated and the tools his campaign was using. This also seems to have been the dominant impressions German politicians and campaigners gained from their visits in the USA during the Obama campaign. For example the then general secretary of the SPD, Hubertus Heil, started to use Twitter while visiting the Democratic National Convention. The lessons that media, politicians and campaigning professionals learned from Obama remained superficial, however: they focused on the use of the new tools, but not on finding out how digital technology could be used to run traditional aspects of campaigns in Germany more efficiently (e.g. recruitment and coordination of volunteers, mobilisation of potential voters, fundraising). In the end the high expectations of journalists and campaign consultants were disappointment as the potential of the Internet for transforming the character of German electoral politics remained unrealised. The disappointment was the result of a combination of factors, including the cautious adoption of online tools by politicians and campaigning professionals on one hand and an overall campaign that commentators found lacking in drama, conflict and real choices on the other. Journalists, public commentators and consultants tend to focus on the spectacular new thing. They are in the business of raising vast expectations and in turn, once they find reality falling short, declaring crushing disappointments. Scientists have the luxury of approaching their topics in a more balanced way. The German electoral campaign of 2009 and its aftermath are an

interesting research object precisely for such a balanced approach.

In many ways political campaigns in Germany happen in contexts that are much more typical for campaigns in Western democracies than campaigns in the USA, which tend to be outliers. First, and probably most importantly, campaigns in Germany have much more modest budgets than campaigns in the USA. In 2009 in Germany the two biggest parties, the Christian Democratic CDU/CSU and the Social Democratic SPD, had campaign budgets of around 26.5 and 29 Million Euro in total.⁶ Compare this with the 745 Million Dollar that Barack Obama 2008 could collect in donations,⁷ and you see why campaigns in Germany have a much harder time to invest in research and development or staff to incorporate labour-intensive online tools in their campaigns. The way political parties used online services in 2009 might be thus more representative for the use of online services in countries with similar budgets than the use of the Internet by the, in international comparison, exceptionally well-funded US campaigns.

Second, the German election of 2009 occurred in a context of an especially unpolarised electorate with comparably few attempts of the political parties to polarise or introduce drama in the campaign.⁸ This makes for an interesting contrast to the US campaign of 2008 that was conducted in the context of highly polarised partisans.⁹ There is a plausible argument to be made that the role of the Internet in elections should vary with the political context, especially with regard to a high, or low, polarisation of partisans and mobilisation of supporters. The Internet offers its users manifold choices to spend their time. The political use of the Internet is known to be very dependent on prior political interest.¹⁰ Campaigns in polarised political contexts can thus potentially use the Internet much more successfully than campaigns in less polarised context. This makes the German election of 2009 an interesting case of comparison to the campaign of the US in 2008.

Third, Germany's privacy laws prohibit the extensive use of data collection and data acquisition that enabled the targeting efforts by the Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012. As accounts of the Obama campaign 2008 show, the ability of the campaign's digital team to use data to improve fundraising, volunteer recruitment and the targeting of prospective voters was crucial to anchor their staff in the core of the traditional campaign structure.¹¹ Without this potential to improve the efficiency of traditional campaigns it is

highly unlikely to find digital campaigners at the core of a campaign's decision structure. Again, as in the examples before, Germany offers an example of online campaigns in vastly different contexts than the USA.

This shows that there is more to the understanding of the role of the Internet for contemporary campaigns than just understanding the role it played for a few high profile elections in the USA. In their book on the role of the Internet for collective action Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport emphasise that different organisations manage to realise potentials of the Internet with varying success. For them this is the reason to focus on examples of the successful adoption of the Internet in collective action.¹² Still, there is a flipside to this argument. While the focus on successful examples allows for the identification of promising organisational contexts, mechanisms and potentials of the Internet for political campaigns, our understanding might be restricted to only these singularly successful campaigns and their specific contexts. To gain a deeper understanding, we also have to identify the role of the Internet for campaigns in different political, legal and cultural contexts. This understanding begins to show in the literature focusing not only on successful online campaigning outliers but also on campaigns where the success of the use of Internet-based tools can be described as 'average'.¹³ In this spirit there is much to be learned from the use of the Internet by German campaigns for the federal election 2009 and after.

There are a few texts on the role of the Internet in political campaigns in Germany since the general election of 2009 available in English.¹⁴ Most relevant research results were published in German.¹⁵ This makes this special issue of German Politics so timely and valuable. It presents papers by scholars documenting various aspects of the role of the Internet in the campaign of 2009 and after making the current state of knowledge about the Internet in German campaigns accessible to international researchers. It aims to contribute to the on-going international scholarly debate about the role of the Internet in campaigns outside the USA.

THE PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles collected in this special issue offer multiple perspectives on the role of the Internet and various online services in Germany during the campaign for the federal

election 2009 and after. We start with six articles by Julia Partheymüller, Thorsten Faas, Daniel Kličković, Pascal Jürgens, Andreas Jungherr, Sebastian Scherr, Carsten Reinemann, Olaf Jandura, Stefan Marschall and Martin Schultze that focus on the political use of specific online services by the German public. We follow these by three articles by Thomas Zittel, Karoline Schultz, Linette Heimrich and Jörg Haßler that focus on the use of specific online services by politicians and parties.

Julia Partheymüller and Thorsten Faas analyse in their article ‘The impact of online versus offline campaign information on citizens’ knowledge, attitudes and political behaviour: comparing the German Federal Elections 2005 and 2009’ data by the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) about the use and the effects of the Internet as a political information medium during the campaigns of 2005 and 2009. They examine questions such as: Who used the Internet for political information? What did users learn from it? What effects did the Internet have on political attitudes and issue positions of those who used it for political information? Their article adds to the international literature on political Internet use by the public. Their results offer an interesting contrast to results of similar studies from the USA.

In his article ‘Regaining voters’ trust on the Internet? A multi-method study on the effects of modernised online campaigning in Germany’ Daniel Kličković analysed whether campaign websites by CDU and SPD and the websites of their respective leading candidates, Angela Merkel (CDU) and Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), corresponded with the concept of modernised political campaigning and if these websites had beneficial effects on political trust of respondents who had visited the websites. This article offers insights into the use and design of websites by political parties and offers a further perspective on potential effects of political websites on their visitors.

For the next article we move from the effects of political websites to the use of microblogs in the campaign of 2009. Pascal Jürgens and Andreas Jungherr examine in their article ‘The use of Twitter during the 2009 German national election’ the political ‘Twittersphere’ in Germany. They seek to answer the questions about the most prominent users based on message frequency and network metrics and ask: What parties were mentioned most frequently, and what content was linked most frequently to from messages containing political keywords. Not only do they answer topical questions with

regard to the use of Twitter during the federal election in Germany 2009, they also contribute to the developing literature on the use of Twitter in international elections.

In their article ‘Dynamic success on YouTube: a longitudinal analysis of click counts and contents of political candidate clips during the 2009 German National Election’ Sebastian Scherr, Carsten Reinemann and Olaf Jandura focus on success factors of political YouTube videos during the run up for the 2009 Federal election in Germany. They perform a content analysis of political YouTube videos with the aim of determining the features that contributed to the total view count of the videos. Not only does their study inform readers about political YouTube use in Germany, it also adds to the growing international literature on the role of YouTube videos in political campaigns.

In their article ‘German e-campaigning and the emergence of a ”digital voter“’, Stefan Marschall and Martin Schultze analyse the user base of the online tool Wahl-O-Mat, a highly successful online voting advice application in Germany. Based on an online exit survey among Wahl-O-Mat users and a representative survey of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) they examine who used the Wahl-O-Mat and identify usage motives. Their article contributes to the international debate about voting advice applications.

In his article ‘Do candidates seek personal votes on the Internet? Constituency candidates in the 2009 German Federal Elections’ Thomas Zittel analyses data collected for the 2009 German Candidate Study (GCS 2009) where candidates running for a parliament seat were surveyed. His statistical analysis focuses on the use of online tools by constituency candidates in their campaigns and identifies factors motivating the use of various online services. Not only does this article offer a detailed view of the online campaigning activities of candidates during the federal election 2009 in Germany, it also adds to the international literature on the adoption of the Internet by political elites.

In their article ‘Social media use of German politicians: towards dialogic voter relations?’, Karoline Schultz and Linette Heimrich examine the use of popular online services (i.e. Facebook, VZ networks, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr) by German politicians. In particular, they examine the online profiles of a selection of German Members of the Bundestag, Members of the European Parliament and Members of the State Parliaments of Baden-Württemberg, Rheinland-Palatinate, Schleswig-Holstein,

Saxony-Anhalt und Thuringia. Their study is the first systematically to compare the use of such services by politicians across various tiers of state contributing to the international literature on the adoption of online tools by political elites.

In his article ‘One-sided discussions: deliberation in weblogs during the 2009 national election’, Jörg Haßler examines the use of blogs by the CDU and SPD. He seeks to answer the questions whether the blogs and comments the parties attracted can be seen as arenas of deliberative discourse between parties and blog readers during the campaign. His results contribute to the literature on the potentials of elite facilitated-deliberative practices online.

E-CAMPAIGNING IN GERMANY - A NET REVOLUTION?

When comparing the results of the papers in this special issue, we see few indications of a net revolution. Instead the evidence suggests that there is a gradual political adoption of the Internet and online services by the German electorate and political elites. Still, this adoption, at least up until now, has not led to transformative changes in the way campaigns are run and won in Germany. The adoption seems to be restricted to the use of new online tools. There is much less evidence of the use of digital technology, the Internet or online services for transformative changes of traditional campaigning functions. These developments offer an interesting contrast to the situation in the USA. As discussed above, the adoption of the Internet for political campaigns in Germany happened in vastly different and less promising contexts than the use the Internet in US campaigns. So, instead of interpreting the German experience as a case of failed adoption of the Internet by political elites, the German experience might offer an interesting example for the role of the Internet in political campaigns outside the USA. In order to validate or refute this assessment, we have to advance our understanding of the role of the Internet in campaigns in various international, political, legal and cultural contexts. We hope this special issue contributes to this evolving discussion.

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