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The Use of the Internet by Candidates as Part of Their Campaign for Election to the Scottish Parliament in 2003

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the preliminary results of a study which investigated the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by political parties and individual candidates as part of their campaign for election to the Scottish Parliament. Two methodologies were used in gathering data. Firstly, a weekly survey of political Web sites was conducted in the four weeks preceding the Scottish Parliamentary election on 1st May 2003, with the content of the sites being analysed to measure activity. Secondly, a series of e-mail enquiries, based around significant issues, were directed at party Web sites and individual candidates in order to measure the extent of interaction, feedback and the creation of an ongoing relationship with enquirers.

Keywords: Elections, Online Campaigning, Scottish Parliament

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper reports the preliminary results of a study which investigated all aspects of the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by political parties and individual candidates as part of their campaign for election to the Scottish Parliament. The campaign period was construed as the four weeks preceding polling day on the 1st of May, 2003. The Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, thus becoming Scotland's first Parliament in almost 300 years. The 2003 elections to the Scottish Parliament were, therefore, only the second to take place. The Parliament has tax varying and primary legislation powers, in devolved matters such as education, health and prisons, and its formation has been widely regarded as an ideal opportunity to introduce a new, more transparent style of democracy.

With the advent of the Internet and the growing realisation, in the years since the influential Clinton/Gore campaign in 1992, that Web site use by political parties could materially affect the results of an election, there has been growing interest amongst researchers in the role of the Web in support of the electoral campaign and political marketing efforts in general [1]. The Web both supports centralised party efforts, while also enabling the individual candidate for election to circumvent the party machine and take a more independent and personal approach to interaction with their electorate. As a result, there are those, such as for example Kavanagh [2], who argue that political communication is in the process of being transformed, although Norris *et al.* [3] suggest that 'the full impact of the digital television revolution and the internet remains uncertain' and

that the impact of this more fragmented, post-modern approach to communication is still in dispute. The fall in voter turnout and theories of increasing apathy support Franklin's [4] contention that one result will be increasing trivialisation of political discourse and a less engaged public. Foot and Schneider [5] argue that the use of the Web in the 2000 election in America, is in the process of re-shaping US electoral process and portends an evolution of political communication, while Agre [6] suggests that a political institution that adopts Internet tools to support its activities may find that its organisation and ultimately the political process will be transformed.

However, in contrast, the British Electoral Commission [7] believes that 'election campaigners in the UK have been relatively slow to capitalise on new opportunities offered by technology, but many are beginning to develop more extensive party and candidate Web sites, e-mail groups and lists and SMS messaging campaigns', in comparison with campaigners in the US who use online communication technologies as a strategic campaign tool to a far greater extent. Meanwhile, research has begun to examine the effects of Web use on individual campaigns in the UK

Auty and Cowen [8] examined Internet use during the London Mayoral election campaign in May 2000, evaluating the content, design, currency, interactivity, links and multimedia features of 11 candidates' sites in the month preceding the election. Broad similarities were evident in terms of content – biographies and policy information featured heavily. However, there was much variation in design and use of other Internet features. Interactivity varied from simple mailto features to e-news and occasional use of online polling. Multimedia and images were also used with variable creativity. Where the design and structure of the sites remained unchanged, most of the sites were maintained during the campaign in terms of currency. The authors conclude that the Mayoral election provides evidence of a growing awareness of the benefits of online campaigning.

Auty and Cowen [9] also describe a four-week survey conducted during the run up to the 2001 UK general election, which compared Web sites with those of the previous campaign in 1997. They evaluated the sites of 11 political parties using criteria similar to that of the earlier study. Findings show that, although content still tended to conform to a 'habitual stereotype' focused on biographies and personal details, there had been significant progress in terms of design and added features. All the parties' sites now had a solid more professional design than did the previous models, with party colours, logos and branding strongly in evidence, leading to the observation

that 'party Web pages were now fully ensconced into the party machinery and communications strategy'. The Web-based Bobby tool was also used during the study to evaluate site content, with only the Liberal Democrat site fulfilling all required criteria. All sites were found to contain a range of contact features but lacked opportunities for true user interaction. In 2001, the Internet was still being treated by political parties as simply another platform for publicity and fundraising rather than a medium for involving the public in political debate.

Since early efforts as part of the 1997 election, four key areas of political Internet activity have been identified: e-marketing, voting resources, new media, and as a new forum for unmediated participation. Coleman [10] concludes that while parties' Web sites in the 2001 election were being used as an information and promotion resource, there were few features involving dialogue and interaction. Coleman hypothesises that this may provide evidence of a risk aversion strategy: 'political marketing is about winning votes and not chatting with the enemy'. There was also some evidence of a move from 'pull to push technology' with e-mail campaigning techniques. However, questions were more likely to be answered where they fell in line with party policy. Coleman suggests the main problem lies in British political culture, rather than negative exploitation of Internet features. Consequently, the Internet is unlikely to feature strongly as a tool for political marketing in a culture where there remains, as yet, resistance to change.

Johnson [11] argues that the Web site alone is not the 'killer application', that is the single most influential technology, in the context of a political campaign, while Cain *et al.* [12] suggest that it is in fact e-mail that will transform political communication. Given the increasing proportion of the electorate with access to and using e-mail, there are already signs that such an approach is growing increasingly significant and common. It might be hypothesised that, where a member of the public finds no opportunity to e-mail a candidate or whose e-mail communication goes unacknowledged, he or she will be less likely to actively support a particular candidate. There is, however, also evidence that politicians regard e-mail with some disquiet, as a result of their lack of control over the content and quantity of incoming, unsolicited messages, and the demand that such communication places upon resources in response. Problems also arise during an election campaign in determining whether an e-mail enquiry comes from a member of the candidate's constituency, in which case it should be responded to, or from an individual with no direct involvement in the election locally, when a response might be felt to be unnecessary and even unproductive.

Bowyers-Brown and Hunter [13] used a marketing efficiency model to test the effectiveness of political Web sites during the 2001 general election. The GeorgeWBush.com site in the US had already shown how considerable advantage could be gained over rivals during the 2000 Presidential campaign by employing strategic market-orientated methods that combine to produce an overall 'Web efficiency'. The same criteria were applied to the three main UK parties' Web sites and data were collected through use of interviews with Web personnel, Web surveys, and a series of e-mailed questions carried out weekly to test the responsiveness of parties. The picture was variable and there had been some efforts towards market research in design and content. Results reveal a noticeable progression towards the ideal of 'electoral professional organisations' since the 1997

election, and demonstrated some growing awareness of what the Web can offer as a separate arena of political activity and in generating support. Strategic marketing tools, brand values, multi-media and advertising were all employed, although there was limited exploitation of interactive and 'dialogical' features. The results of the e-mail test also displayed a less than uniformly efficient scenario. Overall, progress was evident but there was still some way to go to match the marketing efficiency model of the US example and stimulation for a politically alienated UK electorate.

The Hansard Society commissioned a MORI poll, in August 2001, to find out what the public really wanted from politicians online. The findings, presented in a paper by Coleman [14], reinforce the view that the public express a desire to be more active in politics and that the Internet has a role to play in this. Eighty-five per cent of respondents were enthusiastic about the prospect of online surgeries and discussions, forums for debate, and the publication of information such as MPs' daily diaries. However, the Hansard Society also expressed concern over the continuing existence of a digital divide that must be overcome before e-democracy can become a reality for all. Coleman suggests that genuine interactivity cannot be achieved through technology alone in a culture where political dialogue is traditionally one-sided. The public believe that greater opportunity for dialogue will not necessarily lead to more useful dialogue. Coleman's paper also presents responses from MPs, in which they describe the practicalities of being an MP in the Internet age, citing problems associated with already stretched time and resources, the need for the Internet to complement and not replace traditional communication media and the progress already made by government institutions. One MP concludes on a positive note, arguing that the Internet can play a vital part in re-engaging the public in political debate, emphasising the need for politicians to listen.

In the light of statistics that show 60% of the British public now use the Internet as a part of everyday life, Halstead [15] carried out a study to test the accessibility of MPs from the three main parties, in terms of who had a Web site and, if so, what features were offered, what opportunities for interactivity existed, and to what extent the MPs were accessible by e-mail. Data were collected through a questionnaire to establish percentages, relevant Web sites were surveyed, four MPs were interviewed, and their sites evaluated using criteria set out in Steinberg [16]. This involved issues of design, interactivity, and personal profiling. Halstead concludes that, although there has been a significant increase in the number of MPs with Web sites and using e-mail, the numbers are still relatively small. Only 28% of MPs in the Commons have their own Web site and 48% are contactable by e-mail. The Liberal Democrats stand 'head and shoulders above the rest', with only 4% not having a site or e-mail. The subjects' sites were generally competently designed and imparted a positive image of the subject involved; however, some MPs demonstrated a resistance towards the introduction of interactive features. Halstead concludes that, on the whole, MPs still lag behind in terms of Internet presence. As a consequence, they risk losing touch and becoming irrelevant in an increasingly Web-orientated society.

Bimber [17] reports the results of a survey which demonstrate that there are statistically significant, although substantively small, differences in the nature of the communication enabled by the Web, where it appears that the democratic base is being broadened and those who might not be characterised as

politically connected are more likely to use electronic forms of communication about political matters. However, he argues that this political activity, while salutary, may be short lived and not representative of lasting interest or convictions and as a result may add little to democratic discourse. Equally, there remains evidence of a gender divide with women less likely to participate in a technological environment.

A number of researchers have considered the impact of Web technologies on local government. Musso, Weare and Hale [18], for example, examined the impact of the use of technology in support of two models of local government reform, the 'entrepreneurial' and the 'participatory', through an analysis of 270 Californian Web sites, where they conclude that most municipal Web sites fail to exploit new technologies fully and tend to emphasise service provision (the 'entrepreneurial') rather than democratic involvement. However, the authors describe a small number of exemplary sites that are using a range of communications approaches to encourage participation in government.

Huang, D'Ambra and Bhalla [19] report that 'perceived usefulness', a highly reliable predictor of technology adoption in the business domain, is not influential on the adoption of e-government by public citizens, suggesting that assumptions cannot be drawn across both the working and political contexts, and that the increasing numbers using the Web as a work resource are unlikely to translate this behaviour into a democratic domain.

The present study sought to build on and, to an extent, replicate some of the earlier work described here, in order to determine the extent to which political parties and candidates, as part of the 2003 Scottish Parliament election campaign, demonstrated a dynamic and proactive use of the Internet and computer mediated communication tools, such as e-mail and messaging, in seeking to engage with the general public

2. AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of the project was:

> to explore the extent to which the Internet was being used as a tool to encourage political participation in the campaign leading to the 2003 Scottish Parliamentary Election.

Project objectives, therefore, were:

i) to log the content and special features of a sample of Web sites hosted by political parties and individual candidates during the Scottish Parliamentary campaign;

ii) to analyse the content of the sites over a four-week period in order to identify the ways in which participation by the public is encouraged, via the provision of information, and of opportunities for interaction, debate, and feedback; and

iii) to assess the value and relevance of the sites in terms of their contribution to the public's understanding of the campaign and the political agenda.

The study gathered data about Web-based activity both on the part of the political parties fielding candidates, 11 parties in total being studied, and of a sample of the individual candidates (24), including examples of individuals standing for re-election and those seeking office for the first time. It consisted of a number of elements which sought to examine the extent of the use of Web sites as part of a political campaign, in terms of the following functions: to provide information; to generate interest in the election campaign; to keep the electorate up to date with developments and involved in the campaign in an ongoing way; to engage visitors to the Web site in support of the party or candidate, to promote parties and candidates to visitors; and to interact with and provide feedback to members of the public.

Two methodologies were used in gathering data. Firstly, a weekly survey of political Web sites (i.e. of the 11 political parties and of 11 individual candidates) was conducted in the four weeks preceding the Scottish Parliamentary election on 1st May 2003, with the content of the Web sites being archived and analysed subsequently to measure levels of activity. Secondly, a series of e-mail enquiries, based around issues such as genetically modified crops, voter apathy, services for older citizens and the escalating costs of the new Scottish Parliament building, were directed at party Web sites and individual candidates (i.e. the 11 individuals discussed above, plus 13 others) in order to measure the extent of interaction, feedback and efforts made by parties and candidates towards the creation of an ongoing relationship with enquirers.

3. CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PARTY AND CANDIDATE WEB SITES

Table 1 presents a preliminary analysis of the content of political party Web sites during the 2002 election campaign. While certain features, such as the election manifesto, information about policy, and invitations to join the party, might be regarded as almost mandatory, with such regularity did they appear, there was very significant variation in more dynamic use of the Web site. A large proportion of the parties, including major parties, failed to offer Web site visitors the opportunity to purchase or download campaign materials, a traditional part of the campaign process. While the majority updated the news sections of their sites throughout the campaign (smaller parties performing less well in this respect), only four offered an e-news service delivered directly to visitors by e-mail, one of these, the Conservative Party, only doing so if the subscriber adopted an @ScottishTories.com e-mail address. The Conservative Party Web site did, however, also offer a news service to subscribers with a Personal Digital Assistant. All sites offered visitors access to party e-mail links but only five invited visitors to provide feedback online and just two had an online question and answer section. Only one, minority party (the UK Independence Party) allowed visitors to engage in an online forum, suggesting reluctance on the part of political parties to engage in the most interactive, open and dynamic form of electronic communication. Other interactive features designed to engage the public, mostly clickable constituency maps, were provided by four of the parties. The Conservative Party site contained two online surveys, the first on general issues, such as health, education and transport, and the second on cutting red tape in the Scottish Parliament.

Table 1: Content analysis of party Web sites											
Feature	Political Party (see Appendix for a list of party acronyms)										
	Lab	SNP	Cons	Lib	Green	SSP	SSCUP	BNP	UKIP	Peop	Pens
Election manifesto	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Other policy info	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
Campaign info	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	
Campaign materials	•	•	•			•					
Invitation to join etc.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	
Updated news	•	•	•	•	•	•				•	
e-news service	•	•	•							•	
Party e-mail links	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Online feedback	•	•	•							•	•
Online questions	•	•									
Discussion forum									•		
Audio/video features	•	•									
Search facility	•	•	•	•	•	•					
Other interactive features	•	•	•	•							

While, as one might anticipate, the major Scottish political parties, who were contesting all seats and who were likely to achieve significant levels of success, tended to offer the best resourced and most extensive Web sites in terms of e-content, they did not perform particularly well in terms of their provision of interactive opportunities: indeed, the UK Independence Party were most proactive in this respect, although their site was lacking in information content. Of the major parties, the Liberal Democrat site had least in terms of opportunities for public engagement.

The Labour Party Web site provided biographical information about all their constituency candidates but surprisingly failed to provide links to candidates' personal e-mail addresses (only 3 of 73 cases) or to their individual Web sites (only 10 links). It is not known if this was a deliberate strategy to discourage the public from direct, personal contact with candidates, if it reflected an emphasis on centralised communication, or if it was merely an oversight. However, subsequent tests located Web sites and e-mail addresses for several of the candidates, including some prominent current Ministers in the Scottish Executive, and it is thought this strategy might lead the casual visitor to assume that Labour Party candidates were much less active on the Web than was in fact the case. In contrast, the Scottish National Party provided biographical information and links to the personal e-mail address of almost all of their candidates (72 of 73), but again failed to link with candidates' own Web sites (only 7 of 73). The SNP pattern was repeated for all of the other major parties and suggests that the Labour Party approach was highly idiosyncratic and unconvinced about the value associated with enabling direct interaction between the public and the candidate. As might be anticipated, the smaller parties tended not to provide extensive e-content on their candidates or a mature matrix of hypertext links to related candidate sites. With respect to regional candidates, that is those candidates who were on the additional members' lists for regions in the system of proportional representation applied in Scottish Parliament elections, the party Web sites tended to perform less well, with very few details about the candidates available and even fewer links to e-mail and Web addresses. The Liberal Democrat site performed best in this respect.

In terms of individual candidates' Web sites (see Table 2) the pattern of provision was somewhat different, with the Liberal Democrat, Green Party and independent candidates providing more extensive e-content than those of the Labour, Scottish National and Conservative parties. While the majority, from all parties, gave a link to the candidate's personal e-mail address, only three gathered data from visitors to form an e-mailing list. With the obvious exception of the one independent candidate studied, all Web sites provided links to their party's Web site; however, somewhat surprisingly, only three candidates' Web pages (in each case hosted by their party or constituency Web site) provided a direct link to their party's e-mail address. None offered any form of computer mediated communication, via a discussion list, real-time online chat or frequently asked questions. While this will, of course, relate to the relative lack of resources of individual candidates and may also reflect the idiosyncrasies of the relatively small sample chosen, it does suggest that candidates are frequently not in a position to exploit the potential of electronic communication media fully.

Table 2: Content analysis of individual candidates' Web sites											
Feature	Candidate and Party (see Appendix for a list of party acronyms)										
	A Lab	B Lab	C SNP	D SNP	E Cons	F Cons	G Lib	H Lib	I Green	J Green	K Indep
Hosted by party/constituency		●					●		●		n/a
Biographical details	●		●	●	●	●		●	●	●	
Campaign info	●	●	●		●	●		●	●	●	●
Content updated					●			●	●	●	●
Contact details (excluding e-mail)	●		●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
Personal e-mail	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Direct e-mail link to party/constituency		●					●		●		n/a
Personal e-mailing list				●						●	●
Party/constituency e-mailing list		●									n/a
Link to party site	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	n/a
Audio/video features											●
Search facility		●		●					●		
Other interactive features										●	

4. PARTY AND INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATE RESPONSE TO E-MAIL QUESTIONS

Four questions were devised by the authors which were felt to replicate the kinds of queries that might arise from issues receiving media attention during and just prior to the election campaign, where the public might anticipate that parties had developed a policy statement. The questions were posted to both party e-mail addresses and to those of individual candidates. In the first week of the study a question was also sent to the e-mail address of the Scottish Executive, the devolved government of Scotland. The political parties provided readily located access points to an e-mail facility, with the exception of the Conservative Party, where the contact feature was only located by the researchers in week four of the study.

The majority of parties replied to the query sent, with only three occasions when no reply was received (the Labour Party on genetically modified food and the Liberal Democrats and the People's Alliance on voter apathy) and one occasion where only an automatic acknowledgement was received (the Labour Party on an issue relating to senior citizens). The time elapsed before a response was received varied from half a day (6 cases) to six days (the Scottish Executive on genetically modified foods). The results were again more variable for individual candidates. Of the 24 e-mail queries sent, only seven replies were received, a very poor response rate to what might very readily have been a member of the candidate's constituency with a legitimate policy query. In four cases no contact feature could be found or the contact feature did not work on the candidates' Web sites. In 12 cases no reply was received, while one automatic response was sent. The response time tended to be longer than for party sites, with two days representing the average and four days the maximum delay, although given the four day delay meant that the reply was not received until after the election, this delay was untimely in the circumstances.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings help us to understand the ways in which ICTs are being actively exploited at both the party and individual candidate level and the ways in which each complements the other. They are illuminating in that they demonstrate the extent to which a holistic strategy for use of the Internet and computer mediated discussion has (or in some cases has not) been developed by parties and provide evidence of considerable variation between parties and between individuals, in both their capacity and willingness to seize the potential of technology. Certain parties used the technology in a more sophisticated way, for example in following up on initial enquiries by instituting an alerting service whereby e-mail messages were sent to those members of the public who had initiated a dialogue. However, such developed use was highly unusual and the major finding from the study suggests that little progress has been made in the UK in development of strategies for campaigning via the Web. Indeed, the results would support the view [20] that British political parties are failing to match the activities of their American peers. There is little evidence from the results of this study of a desire on the part of political parties or individual candidates to engage with visitors in a meaningful, visible and swiftly moving debate. As in other studies, interactive and participatory opportunities are few and debate seems almost to be positively avoided. Whether this avoidance stems from reluctance, incapacity or a lack of vision remains to be determined, and further research might explore the manner in which Web site design decisions are taken. In particular, the Labour Party are felt to have adopted a questionable approach in failing to exploit the hypertext potential of the Web to link from the party Web site to the candidate. In line with previous research [21], the results of the e-mail survey suggest that parties and candidates may fail to respond to e-mail questions on contentious or 'difficult' policy issues. The findings also show that a significant proportion of e-mail queries are being ignored. This pattern of response is unlikely to result in a less apathetic and more participatory electorate.

Overall, the results tend to suggest that the parties and candidates involved in the 2003 Scottish Parliament election campaign, far from extending dynamic use of ICTs in communicating their messages to the electorate, have in fact regressed to a less open form of debate and discussion on the policy agenda. Given that voter turnout for the election was, at 49.4%, down almost 10 points on that for the 1999 election, and also considerably lower than the overall turnout of 58% at the last UK general election, it would appear that this strategy was not well designed to assist in efforts to overcome voter apathy. In a subsequent poll of the Scottish public [22], commissioned by the Electoral Commission and the Scottish Executive to investigate the perceptions of the electorate, 37% of respondents felt that they had received too little information about the party leaders and many thought that parties were not getting their message across. More imaginative use of the Internet might have contributed significantly to overcoming this information deficit for voters.

Further analysis of the results will examine party variation in more depth and will consider the impact of factors, such as the nature of the constituency (marginal or safe) and the status of the candidates (first standing or re-election), on the ways in which Web sites are exploited.

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APPENDIX: KEY TO PARTY NAMES

Labour	Scottish Labour Party
SNP	Scottish National Party
Cons	Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party
Lib	Scottish Liberal Democrats
Green	Scottish Green Party
SSP	Scottish Socialist Party
SSCUP	Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party
BNP	British National Party Scotland
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
Peop	The People's Alliance
Pens	Pensioners Party
Indep	Independent candidate