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The use of the Internet by political parties and candidates as part of their campaign for election to the Scottish Parliament in 2007

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ABERDEEN BUSINESS SCHOOL
THE ROBERT GORDON UNIVERSITY

Background to the Study (1)

- Scottish Parliament established 1999; 2007 election only the third to take place.
- Its devolved powers include: Health; Education; Housing; Agriculture and fishing; Police and fire services; Economic development; Transport; Environment.
- Growing political apathy amongst public – turnout at 2003 SP election was 49.4%, down 10 points from 1999.
- Electoral Commission poll after 2003 SP election found that around 40% of non-voters felt that they had received too little information on policies and candidates.

Background to the Study (2)

- **Continued growth in Internet access**
  - **2003: 42% of households in Scotland**
  - **2005: 48% of households in Scotland**

  (Source: Scottish Household Surveys)

- **35% of Scottish Internet users use or access government/official sites; a further 5% are likely to do so in the future. (*Scottish Household Survey, 2005)***

Background to the Study (3)

- **A comparative, follow-up study to one conducted prior to the previous Scottish Parliament election in 2003, which found:-**

- considerable variation between parties and between candidates in their capacity and willingness to seize the potential of technology;

- little evidence of a desire to engage with the electorate in a meaningful and visible online debate;

- a tendency to ignore contentious or 'difficult' email enquiries; and

- no real strategies designed to overcome voter apathy.

Research Objectives

- To log the content and special features of all political parties' websites and a sample of individual candidates' websites during the Scottish Parliamentary campaign;
- to analyse the content of the sites to identify ways in which public participation is encouraged, via information provision and opportunities for interaction and debate;
- 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; and
- to compare the situation in 2007 with that encountered during the 2003 campaign.

Methodology

- **Content analysis of websites of:-**
  - 27 political parties (of 31 parties fielding candidates)
  - 12 individual candidates (5 current MSPs; 7 new candidates)

- **Email enquiries on four key campaign issues:-**

  1) voter apathy, negative campaigning, and the 'quality' of the Parliament;

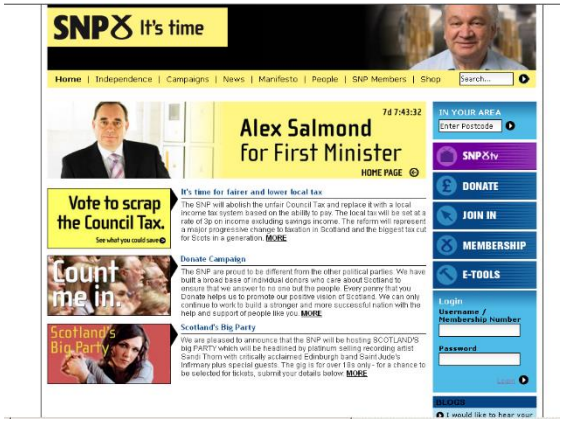
  2) street crime;

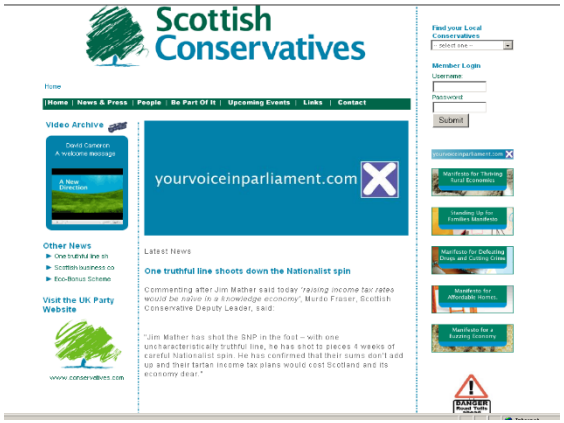
  3) the state of the National Health Service; and

  4) transport 'versus' environmental policies.

  (Covert research using Hotmail addresses used here)

Party Website Analysis





Candidate Details (1)

- 73 constituency seats
- 56 regional seats (proportional representation)
- 18 of the 27 party websites had complete lists of their candidates

Details of 73 constituency candidates on major parties' websites				
Candidates' details	**Labour**	**SNP**	**Lib Dems**	**Conservative**
Name	72	73	67	73
Biographical details	-	-	33	-
Photograph	-	-	66	-
Link to personal website	-	-	20	18
Email address	-	-	-	73
Postal address	-	-	-	-
Telephone number	-	-	58	-

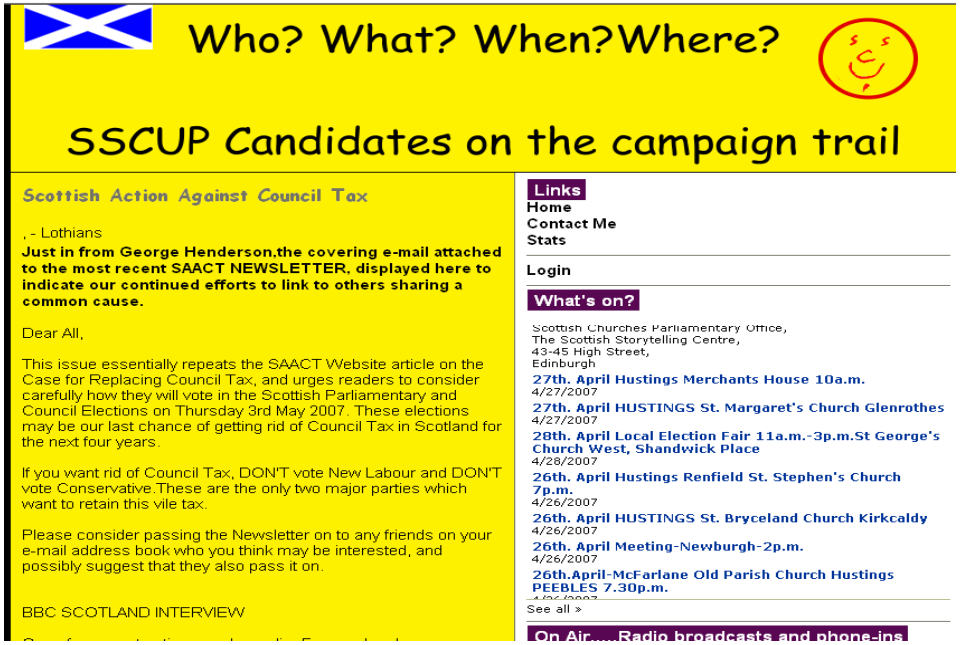
Candidate Details (2)

- Biographies and photos more common on the websites of:
  - Christian People's Alliance
  - Green Party
  - Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party
  - Scottish Voice
  - Socialist Equality Party
  - UK Independence Party

- But Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party and UK Independence Party were the only parties to provide candidates' email addresses as a matter of course.

Information Provision (1)

- **Of the 27 party websites:-**
  - 17 contained an election manifesto;
  - 27 contained other policy information or statements;
  - 13 provided updated campaign news;
  - 6 provided a campaign agenda or calendar.



Who? What? When?Where?

SSCUP Candidates on the campaign trail

Scottish Action Against Council Tax

, - Lothians

Just in from George Henderson.the covering e-mail attached to the most recent SAACT NEWSLETTER, displayed here to indicate our continued efforts to link to others sharing a common cause.

Dear All,

This issue essentially repeats the SAACT Website article on the Case for Replacing Council Tax, and urges readers to consider carefully how they will vote in the Scottish Parliamentary and Council Elections on Thursday 3rd May 2007. These elections may be our last chance of getting rid of Council Tax in Scotland for the next four years.

If you want rid of Council Tax, DON'T vote New Labour and DON'T vote Conservative.These are the only two major parties which want to retain this vile tax.

Please consider passing the Newsletter on to any friends on your e-mail address book who you think may be interested, and possibly suggest that they also pass it on.

BBC SCOTLAND INTERVIEW

Links
Home
Contact Me
Stats

Login

What's on?

Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office,
The Scottish Storytelling Centre,
43-45 High Street,
Edinburgh

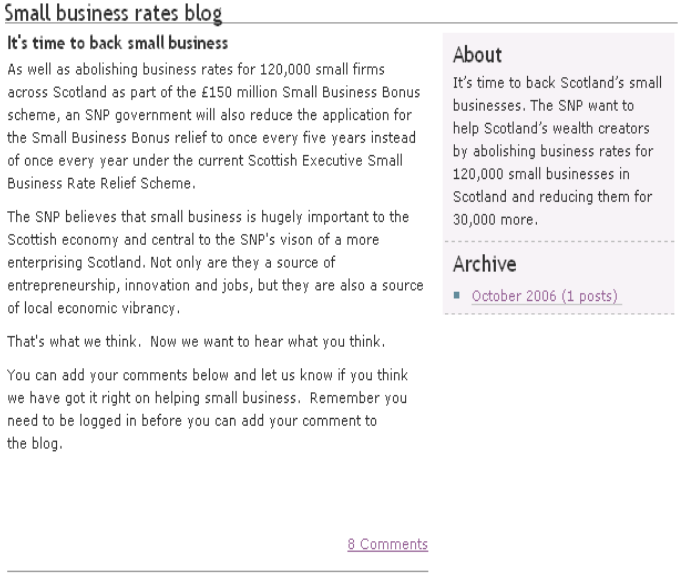
27th. April Hustings Merchants House 10a.m.
4/27/2007
27th. April HUSTINGS St. Margaret's Church Glenrothes
4/27/2007
28th. April Local Election Fair 11a.m.-3p.m.St George's Church West, Shandwick Place
4/28/2007
26th. April Hustings Renfield St. Stephen's Church 7p.m.
4/26/2007
26th. April HUSTINGS St. Bryceland Church Kirkcaldy
4/26/2007
26th. April Meeting-Newburgh-2p.m.
4/26/2007
26th.April-McFarlane Old Parish Church Hustings PEEBLES 7.30p.m.

See all »

On Air ... Radio broadcasts and phone-ins

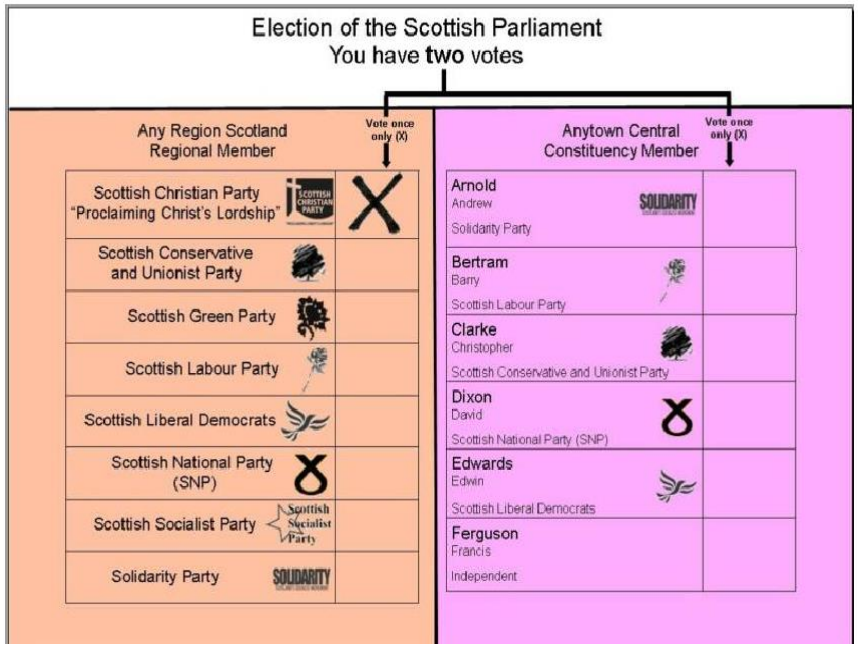
Information Provision (2)

- **Of the 27 party websites:-**
  - 7 *claimed* that they provided an e-news service;
  - 6 provided RSS feeds;
  - 5 contained blogs.



Information Provision (3)

- **Of the 27 party websites:-**
  - 8 provided ‘How to vote’ information;
  - 4 provided information in alternative formats/languages;
  - 11 had a search facility.



Online communication

- **Of the 27 party websites:-**

  - 24 had contact email addresses or web enquiry forms;
  - but none had an active, public online discussion forum.

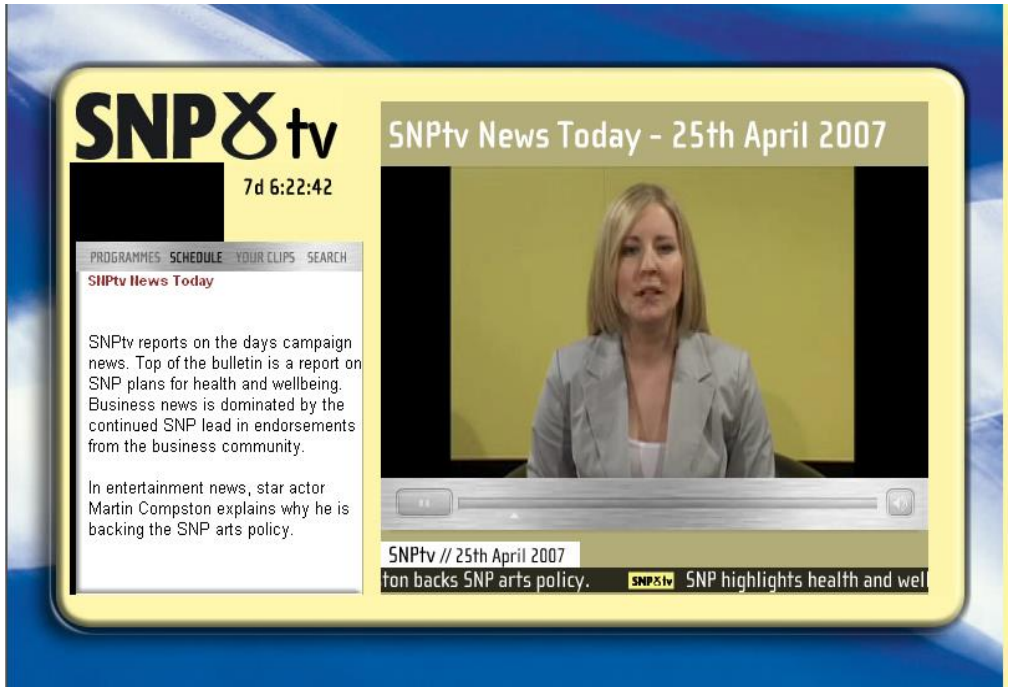
Membership, Donations, etc.

- 12 had an online membership form;
- 4 had an online volunteering form;
- 5 had an online shop;
- 10 provided downloadable campaign materials;
- 12 provided for making donations online;

Audio-visual Features

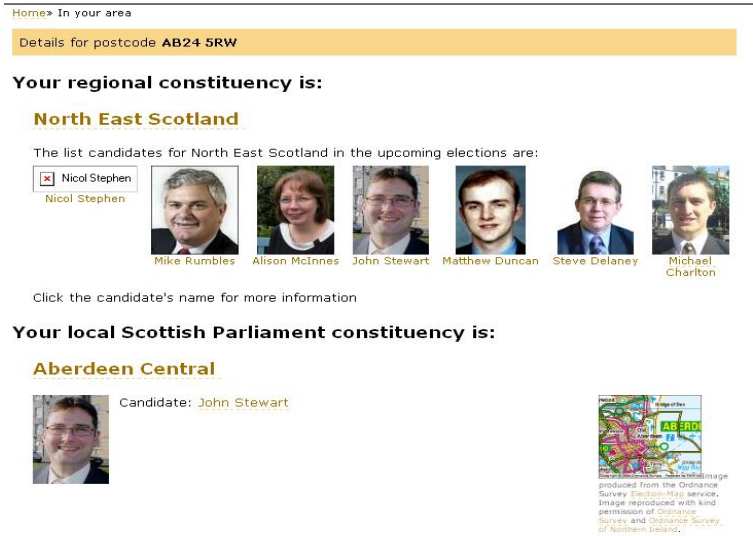
- **Of the 27 party websites:-**

  - 12 provided video clips and podcasts;
  - 4 provided audio clips and podcasts;
  - 2 contained online TV stations.



Other Interactive Features

- **Of the 27 party websites:-**
  - 3 contained online petitions;
  - 1 contained an online survey/poll;
  - 2 provided for postcode-based candidate searches.



Content Analysis of 12 Candidates' Websites

Feature	No.
Biographical info	9
Photo	12
Online contact	12
Link to party website	10
Personal policy statements	6
Personal campaign calendar	2
Updated campaign news	6
Mailing list/e-newsletters	6

Feature	No.
Blogs (updated)	1
Page change alert	1
Personal video clips/podcasts	3
Download campaign materials	1
'How to vote' info	4
Alternative formats/languages	1
Online surveys/polls	2
Search facility	5

E-mail Enquiries on Policy Issues (1)

- **128 enquiries sent, 82 to parties, 46 to individual candidates.**

- **60 replies received (47% response rate), 37 from parties (45%), 23 from candidates (50%).**

- ***Parties:*** **86% of replies received within 2 days; longest response time was 7 days.**

- ***Candidates:*** **78% of replies received within 2 days; longest response time was 8 days.**

E-mail Enquiries on Policy Issues (2): 'Hall of Shame'

- **Enquiries to Party email addresses**

  No replies received from: Solidarity; Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party; Communist Party; Scottish Christian Party; Christian People's Alliance; 9% Growth Party; Socialist Equality Party.

- **Labour Party's 'Ask Jack' feature**

  No replies to three enquiries, despite 'guarantee' that a response would be received on the Friday of the week in which an enquiry is made.

- **Enquiries to individual candidates**

  Poorest response rates came from Conservatives (1 of 6), Liberal Democrats (2 of 6), Scottish National Party (2 of 6), and Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party (2 of 6)

E-mail Enquiries on Policy Issues (3): Extent and Content of Replies

- Ranged from the constructive, detailed and responsive, to ‘cut and paste’ standard replies from campaign manifestos, or simply URL links to the online manifesto.
- In general, the major parties adopted the ‘copy and paste’ approach.
- The UK Independence Party candidates appeared the most willing to initiate further engagement with the enquirer.
- Five candidates wanted to know where the enquirer lived before proceeding to answer the question.
- Most engagement arose from the question on voter apathy and negative campaigning.

Election Results 2007

- **Of 129 seats:-**

Scottish National Party	47	(+20)
Labour	46	(-4)
Conservative	17	(-1)
Liberal Democrats	16	(-1)
Others	3	(-14)

- **Turnout of 51.8%, up 2 points from 2003.**
- **But:-**

  - Almost 142,000 spoilt ballots.
  - Independent review of elections being conducted.

Conclusions

- Little progress made since 2003.
- Still little evidence of a real desire to engage with potential voters in a meaningful, visible online debate.
- Still a tendency for parties and candidates to ignore, or fail to answer fully, contentious or ‘difficult’ email enquiries.
- Still no obvious strategies designed to overcome voter apathy.