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“Web Campaigning from a Global Perspective”

By

Dr. Rachel Gibson

**Deputy Director & Research Fellow,
ACSPRI Centre for Social Research (ACSR)**

Australian National University

‘Web Campaigning from a Global Perspective’

Rachel K. Gibson

Centre for Social Research, The Australian National University

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Introduction

Since the mid-1990s parties around the world have been moving into cyberspace. During most of these early years it was not evident that many of them had any clearly defined ideas about what the Internet would prove useful for, and how they should present themselves on it. As time has passed, however, a number of key uses for the new technology have emerged, as well some common trends in website content and appearance. Paramount among those uses has been the increasing use of the World Wide Web (WWW) and email as electioneering tools for parties and candidates. This paper aims to chart the development of parties' use of the Web in their campaigning efforts (supply side) and explore how much difference these efforts are making with the electorate as a whole (demand side). What results does cyber-campaigning produce, if any, among voters? Does it play a decisive role in terms of changing minds, if not hearts? The analysis covers developments in cyber-campaigning across a number of contexts but has particular emphasis on Europe, the US, and Australia. Beginning with an historical overview, we chart the rise of Web campaigning since the mid-1990s in the US and then move to look at the academic research that has attempted to compare and contrast website content and quality and also explain the distribution of party and candidate sites. After identifying some of the key elements within the cyber-campaign tool box, and the factors that appear to promote its practice, we then turn to look at the audience for election websites and discuss the crucial issue of how far having a website actually matters for parties. Although an obvious measure of success may be whether the site actually produces an increase in the electoral support for the party, it may be that such an indicator of 'success' raises the bar unnecessarily high, and that cyber-campaigns advantage parties and candidates in subtle and diffuse ways. Having an attractive and user friendly website may contribute to a positive image of organisational competence and more importantly contemporary relevance?

The Development of Cyber-campaigning

Although the Internet had been used in a limited capacity during the US Presidential elections of 1992, it was the 1996 election cycle that saw the start of the concerted cyber-campaign with Bob Dole and Bill Clinton both running high profile websites. Candidates for other national and state level offices also invested in the technology with many Senate, gubernatorial and House races seeing some evidence of online campaigning (Epstein, 1996; Hall, 1997). In general, however, sites were seen as rather static and dull, with candidates simply migrating their offline content to the online environment, often with little to no editing. Content tended to comprise a photograph, some biographical information, a policy or position statement and contact details that often incorporated an email address. Although some sites offered some multimedia facilities and downloads of screensavers, interactivity was not a strong feature. Presidential sites in particular came in for heavy criticism, being considered unimaginative, and focusing too heavily on information and not offering a greater of interaction (Reavy and Perlmutter, 1996; McKeown and Plowman, 1998; Stone, 1996).

Aside from the web, however, candidates did deploy the technology in wider and more direct ways. As Bimber (1998) reports, campaign headquarters for the major and minor parties were also beginning to use email along with more traditional communication methods for voter persuasion. Despite this widening use, however, observers doubted its overall ability to have much influence on the outcome, at least over the next two election cycles (Corrado, 1996; Just, 1997).

Beyond the US, cyber-campaigning also gathered steam in other national contexts from the mid to late 1990s. The British general election of 1997, heralded by some pundits as the 'first Internet election', certainly did see the first extensive use of the new ICTs by the parties to communicate with the voters (Ward and Gibson, 1998). In other parts of Europe, particularly the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, but extending down to the poorer nations in the South, such as Greece and Portugal, parties were also waking up to the need to establish some kind of Web presence (Gibson, Nixon and Ward, 2003; Tops, Voerman and Boogers, 2002; Gibson, et al. 2000; Cunha et al., 2003; Voerman 1999) Further afield in Australia and New Zealand, parties were showing signs of taking their campaigns onto the Web for the first time during elections held in 1998 and 1999 respectively (Roper, 1999; Gibson and Ward, 2002). Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, Japanese politicians showed interest in running personal websites as

early as 1995, however, due to restrictions placed on use of advertising during election campaigns, direct electioneering through websites was significantly curtailed compared with other countries (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003). Overall, however, as in the US sites were generally seen as rather static with content being migrated from the offline environment. Parties on the whole, therefore, while they seemed cognisant of the importance in gaining a foothold in cyberspace, were largely unclear about exactly what to do with their sites once they had arrived there.

Despite there being a growing movement worldwide by parties in a range of countries to use the Internet and WWW, most of the 'landmarks' discussed in cyber-campaigning have been taken from the experience of the US. This is no doubt due in part to the wider platform that exists for innovation and change in campaign techniques in the US, with its high frequency of elections combined and more individualised candidate-centered political system. Additionally, the focus on the US as the engine and 'exporter' of new campaign tools has by now become an established feature of discussions of the literature on parties and elections. The term 'Americanisation', while subject to some debate, is still used by many to capture the global shift toward the more media intensive and professionalised methods by those engaged in electioneering. Following through the developments occurring in the US, therefore, as a signifier of the overall changing nature of Web campaigning, by 1998, this trend toward the unimaginative 'layering' of the Web on top of existing media strategies was still seen as a defining trait, although there were obvious instances where the new medium did appear to come into its own (Kamarck, 2003).

The victory of the independent candidate Jesse Ventura in 1998 in the Minnesota gubernatorial race was widely credited to his clever use of the Web and email to build a support base, particularly among younger voters (Fineman, 1999). Certainly use continued to widen among candidates with D'Alessio reporting a doubling of the number of sites maintained by Senate, House and Gubernatorial candidates from 18.7 in 1996 to 43 per cent by 1998. Figures from *The Democracy Online Project* put the proportion at 46 per cent across these races in 1998.¹ In addition, survey data gathered by Faucheux from 270 House, Senate and gubernatorial candidates revealed over half reporting some type of feedback mechanism on their site (1998:25). Davis and Owen (1998) underscored this increasing functionality, noting that options for gaining voters opinions, help and money were appearing more widely. However, it was noted that such features were directed more at using the new medium to generate resources than to encourage

participation *per se* (Leiter, 1995; Selnow, 1998). In addition, the facilities for contributing were generally not made possible directly across the Net, with interested parties being asked to download and mail back a form or provide their addresses to be contacted at a later date (Kamarck, 1998; Dulio, Goff and Thurber, 1999). Indeed, for every Jesse Ventura, there were also prominent failures with a series of candidates running specifically designed and highly publicised Internet campaigns (Wendel Turner in West Virginia, Doug Ross in Michigan) only to lose rather emphatically. This lack lustre performance of the Internet to serve as a vote mobiliser was certainly reflected in the findings from a survey of Media professionals and IT specialists run by *Democracy Online Project* in advance of the 2000 Presidential race. The data revealed a strong degree of scepticism about the utility of Internet-campaigning with almost half of the 128 respondents considering that it would be of little importance in the forthcoming election.²

By 2000 use of the Internet had become virtually ubiquitous in Presidential politics, and was spreading rapidly among candidates and local parties. Kamarck (2003) reports that for state-level races in the US over 90 per cent of the major party candidates had a website and that the proportion of contenders in House races had gone from a third in 1998 to two thirds. The candidacy of John McCain in the Republican presidential primaries and his apparent success in raising money from Internet donations marked a shift in attention to online campaigning from simple message dissemination to resource generation. Reports that close to half a million dollars was added to the campaign coffers from Internet donations after his win in the New Hampshire primary caught the media's attention, with estimates rising into the millions shortly thereafter (Kornblut and Abraham, 2000; Birnbaum 2000). These figures were subsequently queried, however, with claims being made that the amounts were actually raised from telephone calls, with credit card details subsequently being entered onto the website for processing.³

It was not just McCain, however, who succeeded in exploiting the new opportunities for revenue raising. Al Gore was reported to have raised \$1.6 million via the Net in the second quarter of 2000, from an overall total of \$33.8 million, while estimates for George Bush were proportionally lower, \$2.6 million, from a total of just over 90 million dollars. Overall, approximately 10 per cent of campaign funds raised for the Presidential race across both parties were reportedly generated using the Internet.⁴ No doubt the increasing attention to this aspect of Web campaigning resulted from the US Federal Election Commission ruling that online credit card donations were eligible for matching funds (von Sternberg, 2000).

In addition to fund raising, attention also turned to generating resources of the flesh and blood variety, with volunteers being encouraged to sign up as E-Leaders by the Democrats from their National Committee homepage. E-leaders' responsibilities included creating an e-precinct with at least ten undecided voters, who would then be sent party and personal messages of support for the Gore/Lieberman ticket. Ralph Nader's attempts to encourage vote-swapping between Green party supporters across states to help unseat incumbents also represented a new 'strategic' focus to candidates exploitation of the new medium. Although these efforts did not pay off in the sense that they delivered victory, they caught the popular imagination. In the UK general election that followed, serious efforts were made by Liberal Democrat candidates and parties to encourage tactical voting among their own and Labour supporters to defeat Tory candidates, using appeals from the websites. Also explicit vote swapping sites were established to cement the practice further.

Attention to the online efforts by parties and candidates receded somewhat during the 2002 mid-term elections. Those studies undertaken revealed Web campaigning to have entered something of a 'holding pattern' with 65 per cent of all candidates for US House, Senate and gubernatorial elections reported to have sites.⁵ In addition, those offerings that were on display were not necessarily given the highest priority by campaign teams. Data from *Rightclick Strategies*, a Web marketing firm, revealed that on average only one quarter of major party sites in House and gubernatorial elections were actually updated on election day itself. In addition, the sites' basic mobilisation efforts were strongly criticised with only around one in ten making basic polling location information available and only seven per cent of all sites succeeding in sending any email reminders to supporters to vote.⁶ Even Phil Noble, a strong promoter of the use of the technology in campaigns and elections accepted that 2002 had seen 'no breakthroughs'. There was some jump in online fundraising of major party candidates sites, up from around one quarter in 2000 to 55 per cent in 2002. Campaign teams were also crafting more visually appealing direct emails to send action alerts and campaign updates, as well as utilising SMS to send reminders to voters to turnout.⁷ Overall, however, he concluded that parties were still continuing to use the new medium in an old way, most commonly by putting TV ads on their websites. Such a practice, he comments "...is simply dragging the old media into the new. It's like in 1950 putting a new television camera in front of a radio newsreader behind a microphone and calling it TV."⁸

Since 2002, it would appear that the Internet campaigning has started to turn a corner in terms of its movement into the mainstream as an electioneering tool. Throughout most of 2003, attention has focused on Howard Dean, one of the Democratic presidential candidates, as the new face of Internet-based campaigning. Leading a campaign he describes as built on 'mouse pads, shoe leather and hope', Dean's candidacy was given its most significant boost to date by his win in the MoveOn.org online primary in June.⁹ MoveOn being an online protest organisation established during the Clinton impeachment saga that continued afterwards, promoting a left-wing agenda. Reports that Dean had raised almost one million dollars in one day from online donations after the victory were widely reported in the media.¹⁰ While comparisons with McCain have been made, the scale and depth of the Dean campaign team's use of the Web is generally acknowledged as taking cyber-electioneering to a new level. His use of the 'Meetup.com' website since the beginning of 2003 to facilitate 'face to face' discussion among his supporters across the States, along with the coordination of a rapid online response to any critics through the so-called Dean Defense Forces (DDF) email list, and the targeting of leading 'bloggers' - key opinion formers on the Web have moved his Internet-based electioneering beyond any narrow fund-raising ambitions toward 'real world' vote mobilisation efforts. Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, who is credited as the real 'brains' behind the Internet operation considers that the medium has now matured into a real force that really could 'turn' an election, and that the 2004 election will prove it to be so.¹¹ What JFK was to television, and Goldwater and McGovern were to direct mail, Dean is to the Internet, enthuses Simon Rosenberg, president of the centrist New Democrat Network.¹² Such sentiments are not limited to the practitioners, however. Larry Sabato declared in an online article that the medium is now finally living up to its promise, and is shaping up "to be one of the primary vehicles for both organization and coverage from now on."¹³ Given the changes to campaign finance law passed in 2002 that, if upheld by the Supreme Court, would force parties to rely much more heavily on a wider base of small donations, and the exemption granted to the Internet as a recipient of 'soft money', the stage is set for its importance to increase exponentially.¹⁴

Despite the increasing commitment of party managers and campaign officials to the benefits of using the web, there is not unbridled optimism in all quarters. At a recent VoxPolitics debate on the development of the 2004 cyber-campaign for the US Presidency, Derek Parkinson, a technology commentator pointed to the need to place current enthusiasm in a longer term perspective. While one could not dismiss the power of the Internet in that it had served to turn a 'no-hoper' in to a 'genuine candidate', its

ability to deliver Dean the nomination and the ultimate prize of the Presidency was doubtful.¹⁵ Picking up on this issue of unsustainability, Nicholas Thompson, a writer for *theGlobalist*, an online magazine about global economics and culture also called attention to the ephemeral nature of Internet-based campaigning. Pointing to those politicians who have touted the Internet as vital to their election victories, he argues that most had since failed to see through their policy promises. Jesse Ventura being a classic case in point “...the qualities that have led to their failures are the same ones promoted by IT-driven politics...excess style and short [on] substance...”. The quick fire IT-based approach, while it may generate momentum and publicity, does not then carry over into the institutional job of governance.¹⁶ Following this line of argument, Chris Suellentrop, a writer for the online magazine *Slate*, commented that while no one could dispute Dean’s pioneering status in Internet campaigning, such tactics have ceded considerable control to unofficial activist groups who are well placed to “hijack” his campaign to their own ends. Comparing Dean to the killer ‘app’ Napster in the online music industry, he argues that the candidate no doubt has the potential to “upend” and “transform” the way in which political organisations operate in election campaigns. However, like Napster, ultimately he may end up receding into the shadows, swamped by those very forces he has unleashed.¹⁷

Academic studies of campaign sites: content and distribution

More systematic analysis of how the Web is being used as a campaign medium has been found in the increasing number of academic studies of sites’ content as well as the spread of those sites by parties and candidates during election periods.

Site Content

Work by Margolis et al. (1997) in the US and Ward and Gibson (1998) in the UK offered some of the first attempts to categorise and compare site content and quality. Generally speaking, these analyses have dissected sites by assigning their various features to correspond to certain basic functions that political actors perform in election periods. This includes most commonly, the basic transmission of information to down voters (which would include items such as party histories, biographies of candidates and press releases) and the gathering of opinion, comment or questions from voters to feed back to the party (through email, opinion polls). In addition, more specialised studies have also focused on the more medium-specific features of Web communication, which include the possibilities for inter-organisational linkage and networking through hypertext links and

interactive participation between voters, and also voters and elites via chat rooms and Q&A sessions. These items, having been grouped into these functional categories are then converted to some type of scale (additive or ordinal) and scores for each site calculated accordingly. These data then allow for more definitive conclusions to be drawn about parties' relative emphasis on the range of possible modes of communication online. Namely, do parties favour the more fixed model of downward distribution of information to voters or are they open to allowing input in return? If they do promote feedback, how far is it of the controlled 'one-way' type and how far do they allow for more free flowing multi-way speech to take place. Finally, are parties keen to use their sites as a means to connect with the outside Web world and which type of sites are they most keen to link to?

Variants on these coding schemes have been applied now in a wide range of national contexts since the late 1990s with the resulting datasets leading to a number of key cross-national trends in Web campaigning being identified, as well as some individual country differences. In terms of similarities, it seems that one of the major traits of parties and politicians exploitation of the Web across the world is its 'stop-start' nature, in that it is largely structured around election cycles. Resources are poured into sites in the lead-up to polling day to keep them fresh and updated, but then they are left to languish afterward. A second and related key finding has been that as Web use has widened among voters and parties have woken up to its utility as a campaign tool, a divide has emerged between the major and minor parties in the quality of the sites produced. Basically, the former have channelled more resources into the design and functionality of their sites, offering more of everything, particularly in the areas requiring database connectivity, such as search facilities and submitting personal details for volunteering and membership. In the early days of parties' use of the net, studies from the UK, the US, Italy and the Netherlands were quick to note the lack of any clear disparities in site content, with the medium being hailed as something of a leveller in terms of quality of the political message being delivered (Gibson and Ward, 1998; Gibson et al., 2000; Margolis et al., 1997, 1999; Newell, 2001;; Voerman, 1999). More recent studies of the British and German national parties websites in the 2001 and 2002 parliamentary elections, however, have revealed a clear divide to have opened up in their quality and visibility (Gibson, Römmele and Ward, 2003; Gibson et al. 2003). In addition, the larger parties have more recently shown initiatives toward linkage of the website into a broader digital communications strategy targeting mobile phones and wireless devices, as well as

building databases to better inform canvassing and direct mailings (Peterson and Seifert, 2003).

Despite this evidence of a 'normalising' of party competition in cyberspace, with the larger parties becoming more effective at harnessing the power of the digital revolution, it is notable that the smaller players remain committed users of the medium. According to recent surveys and interviews with communications personnel, the minor parties are much more likely to rate the Internet and WWW as more important than television, radio, and newspapers for communicating their message than their major counterparts (Gibson, Römmele and Ward, 2003; Gibson et al. 2003). New ICTs, while not levelling the playing field, are still seen as offering a better foothold for the less well known candidates and parties to extend their reach to a new audience and galvanise support than other mass communication tools. Certainly, if the Dean phenomenon is any guide, it does appear that the Internet can still function as an 'outsiders' medium, propelling a relatively unknown name into the forefront of national politics.

One final major finding emerging from these empirical studies is the non-adventurous approach adopted by parties and candidates in developing their website content. Campaign and 'peace-time' websites are generally the vehicles for downward dissemination of information rather than recruitment of users' opinions and the promotion of participation. This tendency is confirmed by one of the few large scale comparative analyses performed on party websites across the world by Pippa Norris (2001). Her analysis looked at a total of 399 websites in November 2000 and coded them according to how far their content focused on downward and upward flows of information. The results revealed a stronger emphasis on the provision of basic information about parties, with opportunities for joining discussion groups, emailing party leaders and politicians or donating money being present far less frequently (2001: 163).

Nestled within these broader trends, of course, regional and country differences also exist. One of the main areas of distinction that appears to separate campaigning styles on the Internet is the extent to which it is personalised. The US, having a candidate-centered system, offers a prime example of this type of campaigning. As was noted earlier, this more 'distributed' and decentralised model of site creation is possibly one of the key reasons why it dominates in accounts of innovation and development in Web campaigning. In addition, fundraising, while a feature of campaign websites in other countries has, as the accounts above noted, become particularly prominent in the US.

This emphasis no doubt also has its roots in the institutional design of the system, with a campaign finance regime that provides for independent revenue raising by candidates in state and federal elections. Of course cultural outlook and historical events also make their mark on the approach parties make to voters. By way of contrast, for example, Italian party websites have been conspicuous in the absence of pleas for money, not due to any prohibition on raising funds in this way but as a reaction against the revelations of corruption that have beleaguered the party system since the late 1980s (Gibson et al., 2000).

Elsewhere in Europe, where strong party systems and unitary states prevail, most work has been focused on national parties use of new ICTs, with less activity being seen among individual candidates (Gibson, Nixon and Ward, 2003). In Britain, work by Gibson and Ward (1998) Ward and Gibson (1999, 2003) has revealed an evolution in parties' Web style toward more direct marketing tactics online with parties showing keen interest in subscribing users to email news bulletins. In the 2001 election, the Labour party took the extra step of using SMS to send text messages out to mobile users in the hope of reminding them to vote. Of course, some of the most 'wired' parties in the world are in those countries with the highest and fastest growing levels of Internet use. Parties in Denmark, Sweden and Norway have long held a presence in cyberspace, and although they have not been seen as particularly trailblazing in campaigning online, they have shown a marked commitment to developing fora for internal member discussion over time. (Hoff and Löfgren, 1997; Löfgren 2000; Pederson and Saglie, 2003).

Further South, regional differences have been ascribed to party systems in Portugal, Greece, Italy and Spain in that they have been seen to be holding out against the rising tide of 'normalisation' and the growing dominance of the major players. The small 'anti-system' Portugese Communist Party is held up as a shining exemplar of this counter-trend, being one of the first to establish a website that has gone on to be consistently rated as one of the best in the country (Cuhna et al., 2002). The slower spread of Internet use across the population, however, may in part explain this greater evenness of performance. Once penetration has reached the same level as one finds in the north European countries and the incentives for taking the Web increase, one might expect similar gaps in the quality of party sites to develop. While one might also expect the same pattern of activity to develop across the countries of eastern Europe where Internet penetration levels are considerably lower than even those of southern Europe, analysis by Semetko and Krasnoboka (2003) of sites in Russia and Ukraine has pointed

already to a divide in quality opening up between the parliamentary parties and those outside. Further research by March (2003) on Russia confirmed this divide although he noted that the overall quality of the sites was surprisingly high given the very small audience. In seeking to explain this aggressive approach to website development, March argued that many of the new parties in the former Communist countries were particularly keen to show their 'progressive' credentials and that they are part of a new politics agenda. Taking a proactive stance toward the new digital technologies, therefore, would be one important and obvious way for them to do so. Krasnoboka and Semetko (2003), in a follow up study to their 2001 analysis, however, make the point that so far, the most meaningful Internet-based political action in the region has taken place beyond the party system, on independent news websites.

Crossing to the Southern hemisphere to Japan, it appears that much of the early flurry of activity in Web campaigning also occurred outside of the party sphere, with at least 40 MP's being reported as having gone online prior to the 1995 Upper House elections (Tkach-Kawasaki 2003). Indeed, one of the more prominent examples of Web campaigning emerged in the battle for the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2000 when Kato Koichi attempted to unseat the incumbent Yoshiro and took to the Web to build up support for his bid. Then in 2001, Prime Minister Koizumi was also seen to turn to the Web to fend off an internal leadership challenge. The less vigorous approach to the Web found among Japanese parties may be explained in part by the highly volatile nature of the party system during the 1990s after it emerged from a long period of one-party rule. It is also clear, however, that Web campaigning has been actively discouraged by governing politicians who have applied the highly restrictive rules on media use contained in the Public Offices Election Law (POEL) to parties and candidates websites. The effect has been to make any changes in website content illegal during the official election season. Such measures are seen as designed to deprive the newly emerging rival parties to the LDP of the oxygen of publicity. Recent reports, however, have suggested that this moratorium is in the process of being amended with an eye to an eventual lifting of the ban entirely. Approval of changes to the POEL to allow for Internet-based distribution of manifestoes is expected to take place in time for the Upcoming Lower House elections in 2003.¹⁸

Distribution and diffusion of sites

Systematic analysis regarding the distribution of sites and identifying the most prominent political actors in Web campaigning has taken off more recently, as usage by candidates

and parties has spread beyond the national level. Examination of these patterns have revealed that a number of key factors are at work in determining whether and how soon a party establishes a site. As was noted above, major parties are now moving into a more obvious position of dominance, a finding that is underscored by the evidence from table 1 which lists the dates of website establishment for a range of parties in four major democracies.

Table 1 about here.

This pattern is also confirmed by the analysis of Norris (2001) discussed earlier, which revealed that whereas over 50 per cent of the major parties included in the analysis maintained an online presence (i.e. those gaining over 20 per cent of seats in parliament), less than 40 per cent of fringe parties (those obtaining less than three per cent of seats) did so (2001: 157).

Beyond party status, however, it is important to look at other factors that may play a role in determining use of the Internet. Ideology or party outlook, for example, also appears to be important. As table 1 shows, it is the mainstream left-wing parties that appear to be more likely to be the early adopters of the technology with the US Democrats, the Australian and British Labour parties, and the Social Democrats in Germany all moving to set up websites before their right-wing rivals. However, further evidence provided by Norris reveals that right-wing parties may make up for later start with better and more functional sites. Conservative and Christian Democrat parties scored consistently higher on her information and interactivity scales than did Social Democrats (Norris, 2001:164). This conclusion is supported by findings from the US which indicated that despite the fact that the Democrats stole the march on the Republicans in establishing their national website in June 1995 (albeit by a matter of days)¹⁹, research on the actual content of the sites revealed Republican sites to have the edge over the Democrats, with each site providing information on making financial contributions, getting on mailing lists and on the candidate's stand on some policies (Tedesco, Miller and Spiker 1999). These differences were also reflected in the respective National Committee's websites, according to a report in *Slate*, Microsoft's online magazine, which found volumes of position papers on the DNC site but more glitz on that of the RNC.²⁰ Differences continued into the 2000 election cycle with Democrat nominees for the US Senate being reported as more substantive, albeit more dull, in their Web offerings than Republicans, who were seen as more 'Web savvy' offering volunteer options, voter registration

information, a market place, audio, video, motion graphics, links, pop-up features (Puopolo 2001).

Outside the US, Ward and Gibson (2003) concluded that party outlook also appeared to interact with party status as a determinant of the extent and quality of Web campaigning in the General election of 2001. Their examination of local websites for the three main parties local branches and individual candidates showed the Liberal Democrats, despite being the smallest of the big three, were the most 'wired' in terms of the number of sites that were operated and also in terms of the quality of those sites. Although no party exhibited exceedingly high levels of Web sophistication at the local level, and sites generally focused on the static dissemination of information, those operated by Liberal Democrats did tend to have more interactivity and user friendliness than those operated by Labour and Conservative. Significantly, such divergence was not captured by the national level study of election sites, with Labour and the Conservatives running sleek and professionally designed sites (Gibson et al., 2003). Further afield in Australia, Gibson and Ward (2003) also found evidence of party outlook or ethos affecting use of the Web in their analysis of the sites maintained by the two major parties and one minor party – The Greens – at the state and territory level during 2001. Contrary to expectations, Green parties were actually found to 'punch' well above their weight in terms of the number and functionality of the sites they offered. It was speculated that the more interactive capabilities of the medium, as well as its environmental 'cleanliness' and cheapness, increased the incentives for Greens to use the Web. In addition, the more educated and middle profile of Internet users was also seen to increase the incentive for Greens' to use the Web, given that their voters are more likely to come from such groups.

Beyond these party-specific factors driving utilisation of the Web, other studies have also pointed to some wider electoral dynamics that need to be taken into account when explaining political actors use of the Web. Incumbency is one such factor that has been identified as associated with the inclination, or lack thereof, to operate a site. Klotz (1997) reports that among the major parties, those Senators seeking re-election were less likely to have websites. One of the reasons for this of course, is that sitting politicians can and often do, rely on their official government sites instead of putting up their own campaign sites (D'Alessio 2000). Kamarck's analysis from 1998 and 2000, however, showed that by 2000 this gap between challenger and incumbent had shrunk to insignificance for Senate and gubernatorial races. However, for House races, challengers were still significantly more likely to run a site. In explaining this she notes that this is

not due to House incumbents being more complacent. Rather, it is that in any given year, House incumbents are far more likely to run unopposed than those in statewide races. Thus, the level of competition they face is generally lower. However, where competitive races do emerge, House incumbents are much more inclined to use the Web (Kamarck, 2003:88).

A survey by Netelection.org in 2000 supports this point, showing that 78 per cent of incumbent congressional candidates were found to have established websites in competitive districts compared with 50 per cent in more secure districts (Lynch 2001). Underscoring this, evidence from the British 2001 general election has signalled the relevance of electoral competitiveness as a stimulus to Web campaigning, with the tightest races (margin of victory less than one per cent) being far more likely to see both incumbent and the principal challenger online than other contests (Ward and Gibson 2003).

Finally, in terms of individual traits among cyber-campaigners at a more personal and demographic level, very little information exists. Findings from Greer and LaPointe's (2003) examination of the campaign sites of candidates for statewide office between 1998 and 2000 suggests that the gender bias in use of the new media at the mass level is not necessarily replicated at the elite level. Although far fewer of the total number of sites identified belonged to women, (15 per cent in 1998 and 13 per cent in 2000) this is reflective of the smaller proportion of women nominated for these offices by the major parties. Other individual traits of candidates, aside from gender have not been fully investigated, in any of these studies. Following the patterns uncovered in general Internet use, one might expect a bias toward the more educated, higher occupational status candidates. Age would also be expected to play a significant difference, with younger candidates (i.e. below 40 years of age) showing a greater familiarity with the medium, than those in the older age brackets.

Based on the variance emerging from these studies at that the sub-national level, therefore, it would appear that there are some common factors that we can identify in our efforts to explain parties' and individual candidates' propensity to use the Web for campaigning. First, despite minor parties enthusiasm, we expect major parties to dominate. Second, we would expect the individual resources that candidates bring to the task of campaigning influence their use of the web, mainly in terms of being young and educated. And third, political resources should play a role, mainly through incumbency, but also through legislative experience and being a long-standing party member, which

should enable them to access party resources to assist with setting up and maintaining a website.

Voters' Use of the Internet in Election Campaigns

Given this growth in activity and enthusiasm among political elites toward deployment of the Web as a means to woo voters, the sixty four million dollar question remains as to whether these efforts are reaping any rewards? The answer to this of course depends on what one uses as a measure of success? Placing the bar at the lowest level, one can argue that actually getting voters to view a site is a 'win' for a party, since the medium relies upon user initiative to in find the sites in the first place. Parties and candidates cannot push their message onto voters as they can on other mediums like television, they must sit and wait for visitors to find them. Beyond that first visit, however, a stronger mark of success would be influencing them to seek further information on the party or person being promoted, such that awareness of their message was raised in a positive fashion. Ultimately, however, if a website could actually serve to persuade someone to support the cause in terms of volunteering their time or even securing their vote, this would clearly mark its greatest success.

Looking first at the success of campaign websites in terms of attracting an audience (the 'if you build it do they come' question), one can argue that the evidence is not suggestive that the parties are scoring particularly high marks in this area. Overall, surveys on the Internet using populations' Web habits reveal there to be an appetite for election related news around the world. Figure1 reveals that the US leads the way with over 30 per cent of its online users having accessed the Web for election news during 2000.

Figure 1 about here

The UK and Australia lag somewhat behind with less than 20 per cent of Internet users turning to the medium for such information during the most recent national election season. These figures also need to be compared with the numbers looking for election news in other media, such as newspapers, since these show that many more voters (over fifty per cent) are looking for information from these more traditional sources. In addition, subsequent figures from the 2002 election season in the US have actually showed a drop in the proportions accessing online news, with 22 per cent reporting having done this.²¹ Such a decline, however, the report goes on to argue is consistent with an overall fall in

levels of political interest among the electorate during mid-term elections, and occurred in 1998 as well. Within this overall pattern of Net use for election information, however, it is clear that those going directly to party and candidate websites is quite small in number and may actually be in real decline. The Pew Center data reveal that while CNN and the major dailies took the lions share of those seeking information, attracting over 60 per cent of online users, only 11 per cent reported viewing candidates' sites. While this number represented a rise from seven per cent in 2000, it was down from 25 per cent in 1996.²² Similar work during the British election in 2001 conducted by the Work Foundation offered even less inspiring findings. Overall only 15 per cent of online users anticipated looking for campaign news on the Internet (slightly lower than the BES estimates reported in figure 1), and within that group only one third, or 2 per cent of the entire sample, planned to visit party-specific sites.²³ Data from a specially commissioned NOP survey on political organisations use of the Internet in the UK conducted in the following year confirmed this rather dismal picture for the parties, with only four per cent of those online reporting that they had ever visited a party site.²⁴ The statistics for other European countries and Australia reported in figure 2 using Eurobarometer data largely repeats this picture, with parties coming in as one of the least favoured sources of information.

Figure 2 about here

Translating these figures into actual numbers we can see that rather a bleak picture emerges regarding websites overall ability to influence voters' attitudes or the outcome of an election. In the UK it amounted to less than one and a half million voters being prepared to locate party-specific information in advance of the election. Of course, if those voters were actually persuaded by what they saw to support the party or candidate, and enough of them were located in a constituency where the race was particularly competitive, then one can argue that the Internet may indeed make some difference to the outcome. Evidence regarding the impact of sites is not particularly extensive. However, Pew data again proves particularly useful in this regard. As figure 3 shows it appears that such sites do have a strong potential to influence the vote intention of those who view them, with younger voters proving particularly persuadable.

Figure 3 about here

According to survey data from late 2000, just over two fifths of online news consumers say that their vote choice was affected by the information they received, this rising to half

of all those aged 18- 29 years. The same study also reports more specifically for those who took the time to visit candidate or campaign-specific websites, a third thought they were useful, although it does not indicate whether their vote decision was changed by them.²⁵ A subsequent and more indepth report on the 2002 online campaign and citizens response issued by the Pew Center moderates this picture of effectiveness, however. While 61 per cent of respondents said the Internet had been of some importance to them in deciding how to vote, up from two per cent in 2000, the numbers saying it had proved very important almost halved from 14 per cent to eight. In addition when quizzed about whether online information had swayed their vote for or against a particular candidate, one quarter admitted that it had, a fall from 34 per cent in the previous mid-term elections in 1998. Overall, only 13 per cent of those looking for online news wanted to find information to help them make their voting decision. Most people simply wanted to learn more about what was going on (43 per cent) and just under one quarter sought information to reinforce their existing preference.²⁶

In the midst of these rather contradictory findings, additional research from the UK on voters' attitudes to what is offered online by parties and political organisations offers some solace to Web campaigners looking for a 'net' effect. The figures from a national survey conducted in May 2002 reported that of those who had contacted a political party online, either through email or visiting the website, four in ten indicated that they would not have done so had the Internet option not been available to them.²⁷ As figure 4 makes clear this proportion was even greater for pressure groups, alternative and mainstream media organisations.

Figure 4 about here

When probed further about the experience, approximately one third of those visiting the party websites found the experience to be rewarding enough to make them want to find out more, as figure 5 shows.

Figure 5 about here

Five per cent of visitors, however, actually became less interested in the party as a result. This positive response was repeated and magnified for the other types of organisations included in the analysis with over half of those visiting an indy media site saying they would not have done so had they not had the Net option. This aggregate evidence has been supported by more qualitative data drawn from focus groups held during the 2001

General election. As part of their E-lection study, the Work Foundation recruited a small pool of undecided voters from two marginal electorates and had them locate a series of national and local campaign sites and more general news sites in the setting of an Internet cafe. Overall, the exposure resulted in an almost uniform reversal of the initial scepticism voiced toward the sites, with most participants reporting that they found the sites useful and preferable to leaflets and direct mailings. Sites that were rated positively increased regard for the party. Interestingly, it was also that the participants reported they were more likely to trust the information that they found online, but were also highly critical of the site if they considered its performance weak. Both of these responses were considered to stem from the personal labour invested by the participant in locating the site.

These data reveal, therefore, that while Web campaigning may not yet be effective in influencing the majority or even a significant minority of the hearts and minds of voters, this is largely a problem relating to access than to the content of sites. Once voters view the contents of a campaign-specific site, they generally appear to respond positively to the messages received. A complicating factor here, however, is that the requirement of finding the website, although it may raise the barrier to reaching a mass audience, may also be vital to creating a sense of ownership and control among users once they arrive at the site, which may in turn be responsible for creating the more positive responses reported above. Thus, it may be that the challenge for Web campaigners is to find a way to address this paradox such that the 'push' aspect of the medium becomes more ubiquitous in drawing voters in, but not so invasive as to make the viewing of the Internet message an entirely passive experience. Although some hapless candidates have engaged in spamming as one means of reconciling these contradictory impulses, the concept of 'viral politics' – a unique type of peer to peer communication through jokes or emailed stories via the Internet – appears to be a far more fruitful strategy. Certainly the Howard Dean phenomenon has, to a large degree, taken off through this more indirect recruitment and mobilisation strategy. The big question of course now is whether he can sustain the momentum his online campaign has generated and turn the mouse clicks into votes during the 2004 primary season.

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Table 1:
Party website start dates

UK	Germany	Australia	US
Labour Oct '94	SPD August '95	ALP July '94	Libertarian Party March '94
Conservatives Oct '95	CDU October '95	Liberal Party Feb '96	Democrat NC June '95
Liberal Democrats 1995	FDP December '95	Democrats 1997	Republican NC June '95
Ulster Unionists Nov '95	Greens Nov '96	Greens early '98	Reform Party October '95
SNP Feb '96	PDS April '98	National Party 1998	Green Party 1996

Figure 1

Sources: US 'Youth Vote Influenced By Online Information' Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 2000; UK British Election Study, 2001; Australian Election Study, 2001

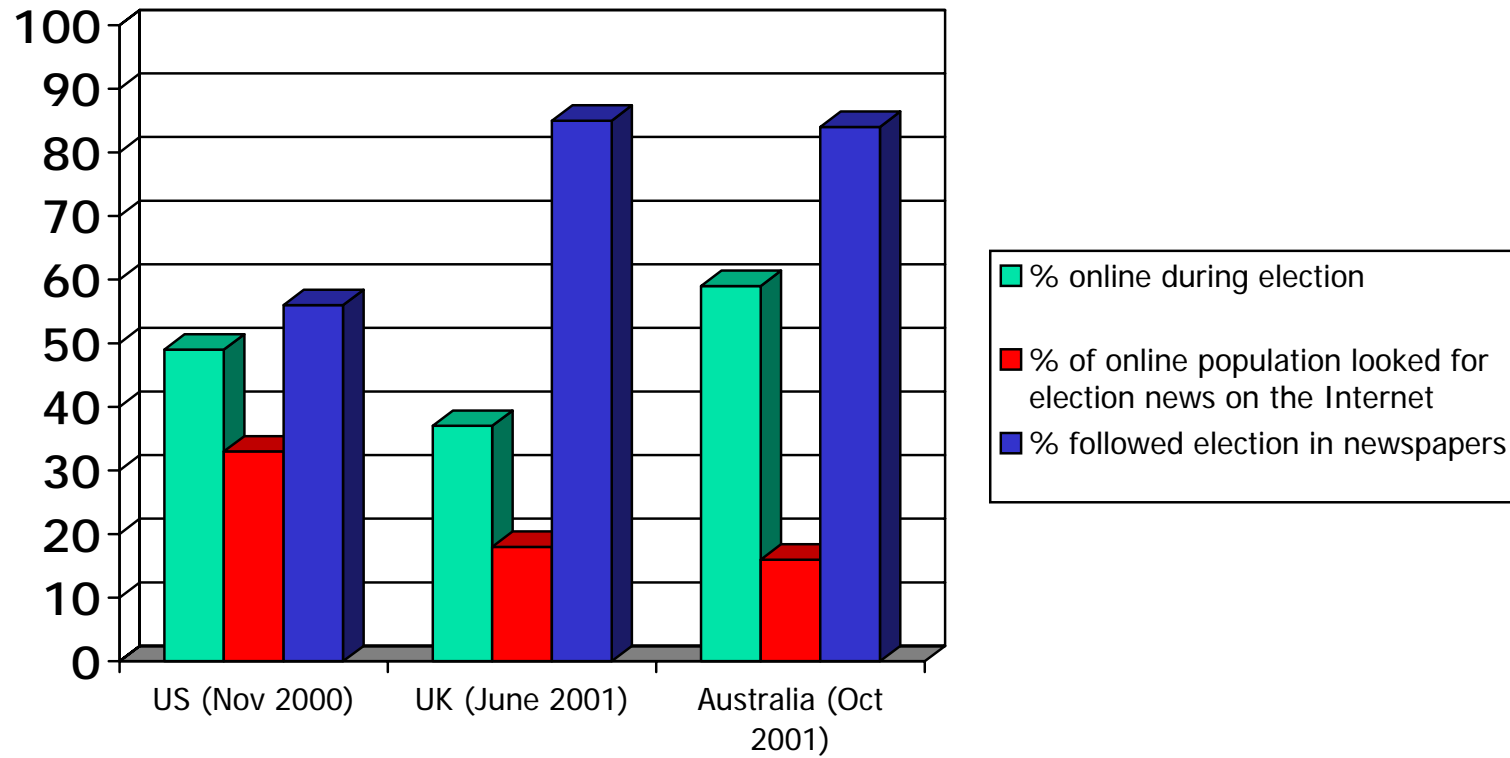


Figure 2:
Where do online users go for their political information
Sources: Australian Election Study, 2001; Eurobarometer 53.0 April/May 2000

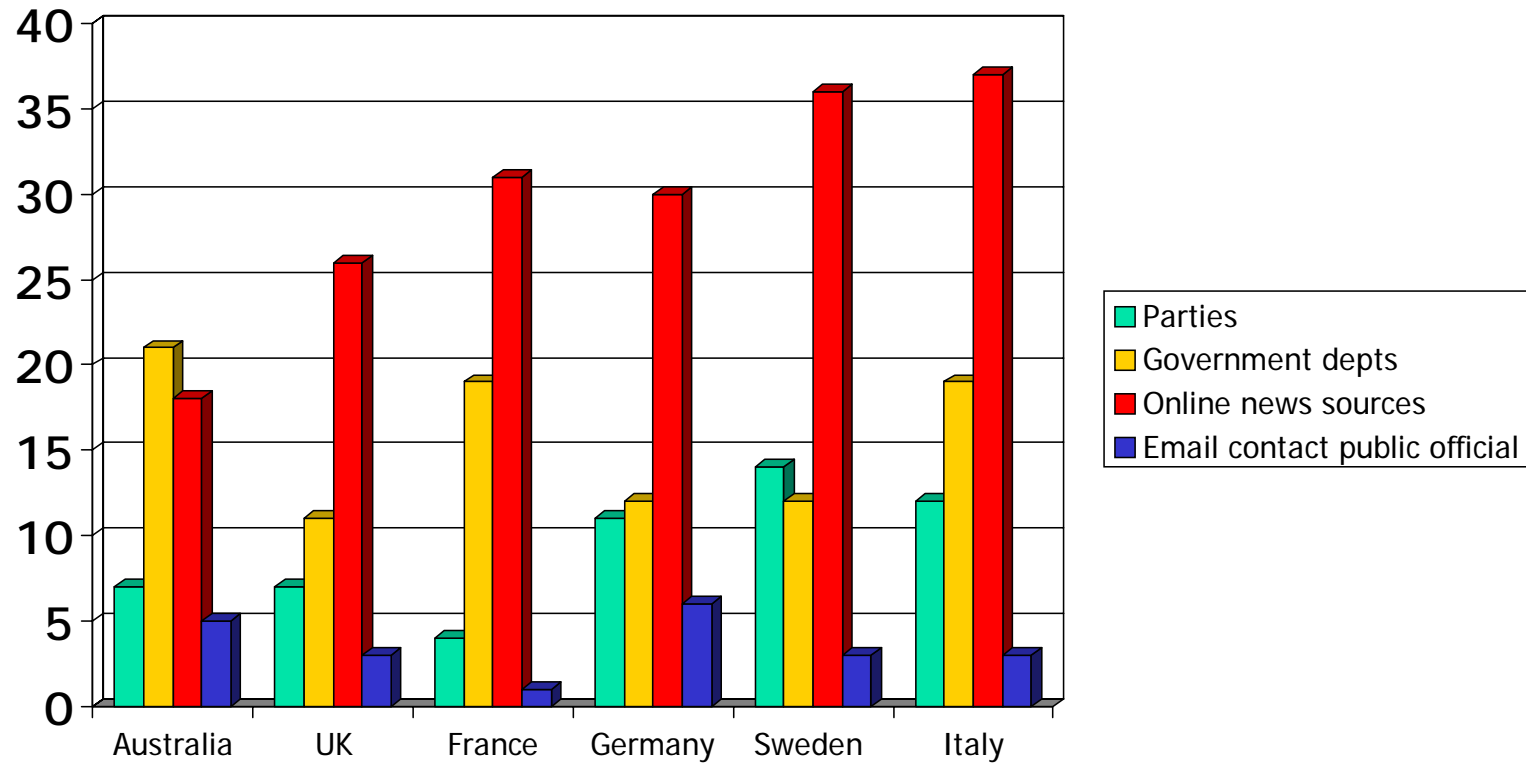


Figure 3:

Did online news affect vote choice in Nov 2000 US elections?

Source: 'Youth Vote Influenced By Online Information' Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 2000

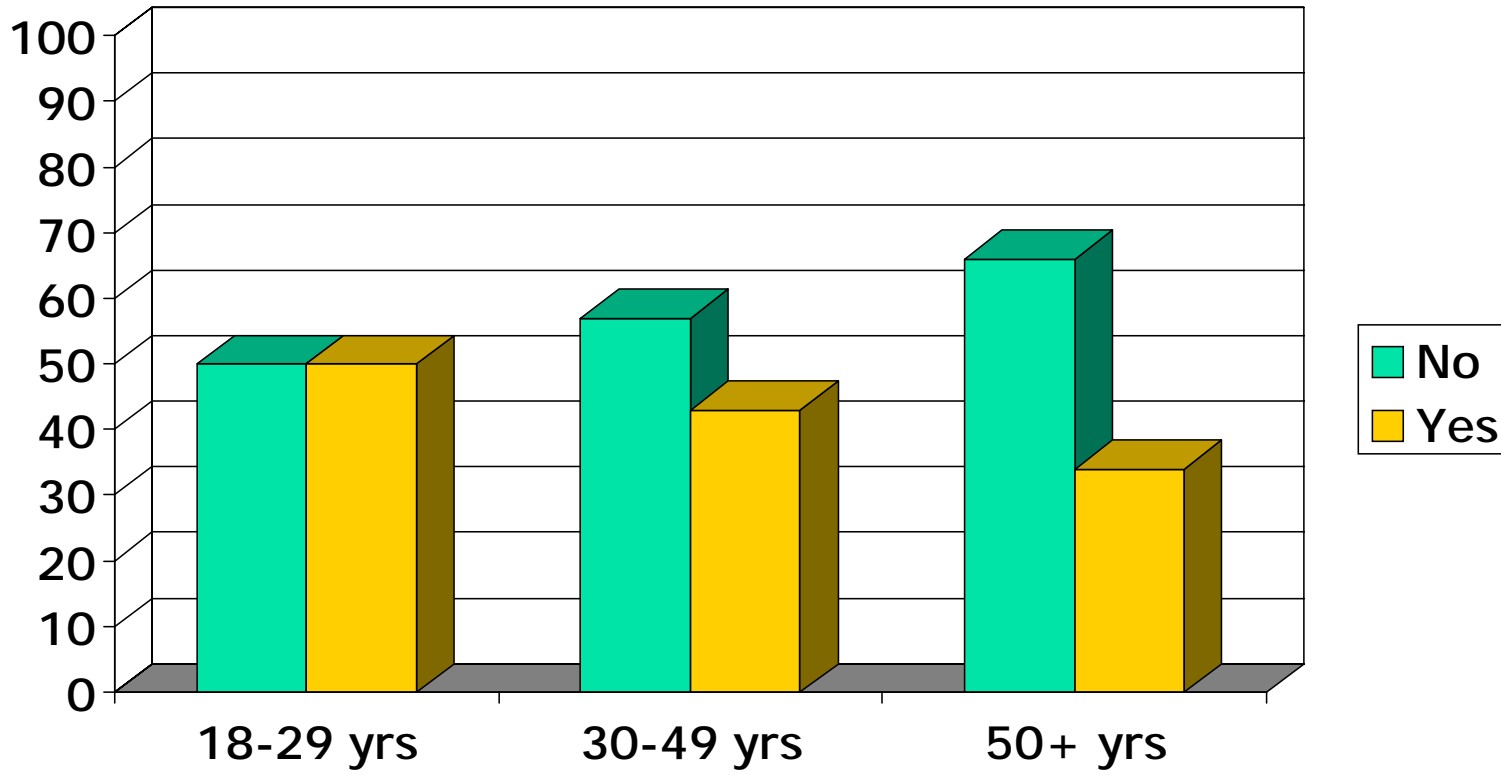


Figure 4
Do websites and e-mail increase your audience?: evidence from the UK
Source: NOP/ESRC sponsored poll May 2002 (n = 252)

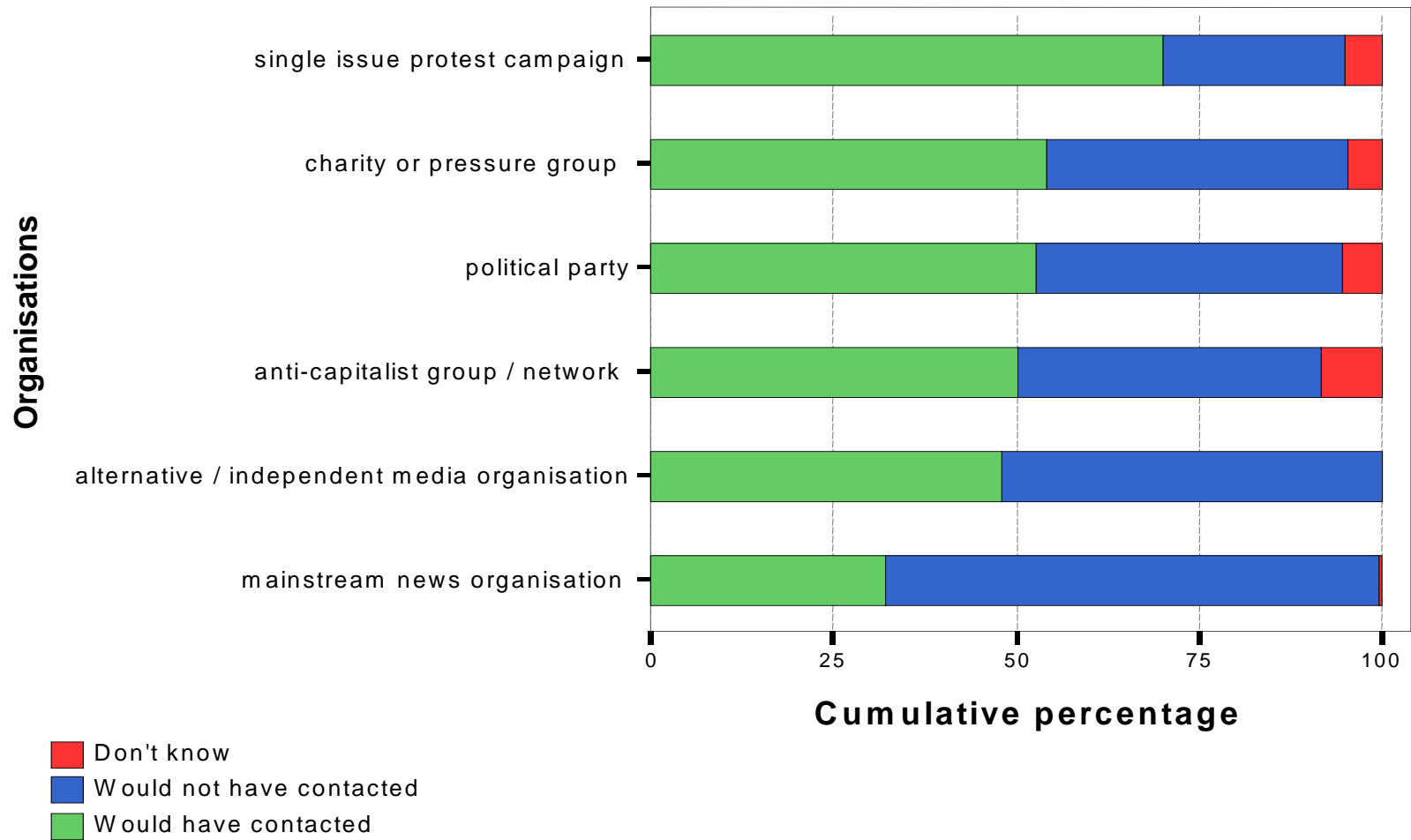


Figure 5:
 Do websites and email increase political organisations support?
 Source: NOP/ESRC sponsored poll May 2002 (n=252)

