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**Does Cyber-Campaigning Win Votes?
Online Communication in the 2004 Australian Election***

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Abstract

Studies of candidates' and parties' web use during elections have focused primarily on the contents of their websites and reasons behind the adoption of the technology. Evaluation of the electoral impact of web campaigns on voters have been more limited and inconclusive. This study uses data from the 2001 and 2004 Australian Candidate Studies to investigate the factors determining personal internet use and public web campaigning among candidates and the impact of web campaigning on levels of electoral support. The findings show that web campaigning is more prominent among younger candidates, those in the lower house, as well as those seeking re-election. In terms of party affiliation, Green party candidates were significantly more likely to campaign online than those from the other parties. More significantly, we show that despite being linked with traditional campaigning techniques, web campaigning has an independent and significant impact on the level of electoral support that a candidate receives. We conclude that web campaigning, at least under present electoral conditions, constitutes an important component of a winning election strategy.

Keywords: cyber-campaigning, internet, web-campaigning, elections, Australia

Does Cyber Campaigning Win Votes? Online Communication in the 2004 Australian Election

There is little doubt that the internet is transforming the mode and content of mass communication, most notably in election campaigning. Political aspirants in the US, such as Jesse Ventura, John McCain and Howard Dean, have all made headlines in recent years for their creative use of the internet to mobilise young voters and generate financial support. There is also strong evidence that the internet is spreading widely among parties and candidates at the local level in a range of countries (Gibson and Römmele, 2005). Despite the increasingly high profile of internet-based campaigning, very little systematic study of its impact on voters has been produced thus far. Most studies of online electioneering have focused either on the distribution and content of the sites or voters' consumption of mainstream news and information online (Farnsworth and Owen, 2004; Schuefele and Nisbet 2002; Norris, 2003; Rainie et al., 2005). Any direct analysis of the impact of partisan sites has yielded contradictory and ultimately inconclusive findings (D'Alessio, 1997; Bimber and Davis, 2003).

In this paper we examine the effects of cyber-campaigning on voter behaviour in the 2004 Australian federal election, using data from the Australian Candidate Study (ACS) and Australian Election Study (AES). The ACS and AES include a number of questions about candidates' and voters' use of the web and email for private and public, or voter-related communication, ends. Using these data we examine whether candidates' web use or cyber-campaigning affects their fortunes at the ballot box, controlling for a range of personal, partisan and other campaign related activities. The findings show that having a campaign website does have a significant and positive independent effect on a candidate's levels of support. Given the spread of the practice across worldwide, these findings clearly hold significant implications election campaigning the twentieth-first century.

Cyber-campaigning from Dole to Dean

Although some of the first reported uses of the internet in elections came as early as the 1992 US Presidential race, it was the 1996 election cycle that first saw concerted cyber-campaigning with Bob Dole and Bill Clinton both running high profile websites (Margolis et al., 1997). Outside of presidential politics, candidates for other national and state level offices also invested in the technology with many Senate, gubernatorial and

House races seeing evidence of online campaigning (Epstein, 1996; Hall, 1997). Overall, the sites were regarded with a mixture of curiosity and scorn; candidates were accused of being too timid in their approach to the new medium, simply migrating their offline content to the online environment, often with little editing and not taking advantage of its interactive capabilities. (Stone, 1996). Sites typically comprised a photograph, some biographical information, a policy or position statement and contact details that sometimes incorporated an email address.

Beyond the US, cyber-campaigning also began to take hold from the mid-1990s onward. The 1997 British general election was even heralded as the ‘first internet election’ and saw a wide range of parties experimenting with the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to engage with the voters (Ward and Gibson, 1998). Parties in other European countries, particularly in Scandinavia and the Netherlands where ICT use levels was relatively high, also quickly became convinced of the need to establish a web presence (Lofgren, 2000; Tops, Voerman and Boogers, 2002; Newell, 2001; Cunha et al., 2003). Even in newly democratizing nations with low levels of internet penetration there was often a race among parties and candidates to establish a web presence, at least at the national level (Semetko and Krasnoboka, 2003; March, 2005). As in the US, however, these efforts were often subject to scathing critiques. Having recognised the need to enter cyberspace, political actors it seemed were not too sure about what they should be doing there.

The surprise victory of the independent candidate Jesse Ventura in 1998 in the Minnesota gubernatorial race was seen as providing the first indication of the medium’s power to influence an election outcome. Ventura’s use of the web and email was widely credited with enlarging his support base, particularly among younger voters and thereby delivering him the crucial extra votes needed to win office (Fineman, 1999). The candidacy of John McCain in the Republican presidential primaries of 2000 provided a further boost for internet campaigning, with widespread coverage being given to his apparent success in raising money from online donations. It was estimated that close to half a million dollars was added to McCain’s campaign funds from internet donations after his win in the New Hampshire primary, this figure 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.¹ Despite doubts over the accuracy of the sums reported, however, McCain's efforts did much to raise the profile of this aspect of cyber-campaigning.²

It was the emergence of Howard Dean in 2003 as a contender for the Democratic party's presidential nomination, however, that signalled the 'coming of age' of internet campaigning for most commentators. (Hindman, 2005; Wolf, 2004; Williams and Weinburg, 2004). His clever appeals for fundraising via a 'live' rising total shown on the baseball bat prominent on his site, combined with his use of 'Meetup.com' to mobilise offline support nationwide and the hiring of Matt Goss to run his daily campaign commentary or blog, 'Dean for America' secured him valuable mainstream media attention and even more crucially, the grassroots support that propelled him from rank outsider to front runner.³ His win in the *MoveOn.org* online primary in June increased the momentum behind his campaign, as did the reports that he had raised almost one million dollars in one day from online donations after his victory.⁴ Although he was ultimately unsuccessful, his performance clearly raised the bar for the use of internet-based technologies in campaigns and provided a strong example for others to follow. The exemption granted by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) to the internet as a recipient of 'soft money' no doubt provided a further spur to uptake of the new tools, with some commentators predicting at least a 300 to 500% increase in spending online.⁵

The Electoral Potential of Cyber-campaigning

In addition to its use at the national level, actors at the state and local level have also shown growing enthusiasm for the internet. Within the US, studies have shown state and local candidates from the major parties have become increasingly active online with uptake spiking most dramatically between 1996 and 2000 (Foot and Schneider, 2003; Kamarck, 2003, D'Alessio, 2000). Outside of the US, recent general elections in Germany (Gibson and Rommele, 2003) and Finland (Carlson, 2006) also saw a majority of major party candidates with an online presence. Evidence of this widening use has made the systematic evaluation of the impact of internet campaigning on voters an important area of study. The research conducted on this topic, however, is surprisingly limited and the evidence that has emerged is mixed.

D'Alessio (1997) conducted one of the earliest analyses of the effects of cyber-campaigns. Based on his analysis of Congressional candidates in the 1996 election, he found that a website provided a candidate with an additional 9,300 votes, after controlling for party affiliation and incumbency. Despite using a restricted model (with just three

independent variables) it accounted for 78 percent of the variance in a candidate's vote total. In explaining the results, D'Alessio was sceptical of his own findings, commenting that '...it seems very unlikely that each candidate's web site inspired 9,300 (on the average) additional people to vote for that candidate.' (498). More likely, he argued, was that the web variable was a proxy for the overall level of preparation and professionalism within a campaign. The more sophisticated and better resourced candidates were more likely to operate websites. In addition, if the web was directly influencing voters it was probably not through having them switch sides, but rather through mobilising a new crop of voters with pre-held preferences who might otherwise have abstained. Finally, he argued, it was also possible that those candidates who were ahead in the opinion polls may be more likely to turn their attention to establishing a web presence.

Despite the surprising nature of D'Alessio's findings, there was little done to follow up his analysis in terms of looking specifically at the effects of partisan or campaign websites on voters. Much subsequent work has concentrated on the 'supply' side of the equation with analysts focusing on the content and function of candidate and party sites in a number of countries and why these actors were moving into cyberspace (Gibson, Ward and Nixon, 2003). Attention to the 'why' question did yield some discussion of causal dynamics; in particular, electoral context was seen to matter in terms of the competitiveness of the race (Ward and Gibson, 2003; Kamarck, 2003), as well the candidate's status as a challenger (Carlson, 2006; Klotz, 1997), and the level or type of office being sought (Greer and LaPointe, 2004). Organisational incentives were also seen as important with an increasing emphasis being placed on major party status or the level of resources that a party could bring to the campaign table (Greer and LaPointe, 2004; Foot and Schneider, 2003; Ward and Gibson, 2003; Norris, 2001; Margolis et al., 1999). In addition, a party's audience was also seen as important and minor parties with a more educated electorate have proved to be enthusiastic users of the technology (Gibson and Ward, 2003; Newell, 2001). Finally, the role of individual characteristics in prompting web campaigning has also been examined. In his examination of the 2003 Finnish elections, Carlson (2006) identified age as a significant factor in web campaigning, with younger candidates exhibiting the strongest levels of enthusiasm.

Attention to the 'demand' side – the internet's impact on individual political attitudes and behaviour during elections – has focused largely on the effects of general news and information consumption. Reports issued by the US *Pew Center for the People and Press* and the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* from 1996 onwards have

shown growth in the online news audience for (from 4 percent in 1996 to 29 percent in 2004) as well as evidence that the web was making a difference, particularly among young people.⁶ A report issued in 2000 revealed that two-fifths of those viewing online information said their vote choice was affected by what they saw, this rising to half of all those aged 18 to 29 years.⁷ Even more significantly, the proportion of those visiting sites that reinforced their views was actually smaller than those visiting sites that challenged their views (Howard, 2005: 159). Following up this positive picture, more systematic multivariate analysis by Farnsworth and Owen (2004) has found significant effects for online news and information on voter decisions in the 2000 presidential election. Adopting a 'uses and gratifications' perspective to examine the question of web effects in the 2000 presidential election, the authors found that those who actively looked for information online were affected in their vote decision by what they saw. Similarly positive effects of web-based information were recorded by Norris and Sanders (2003) in their experimental analysis of media use and knowledge among the UK electorate in 2001.

Deeper analysis of the impact of partisan sites, however, with the exception of D'Alessio, has shown limited effects. In contrast with the growing numbers seeking news and information online, Pew Center data report much lower levels of public awareness and enthusiasm for campaign and party-specific sites. Indeed, comparing the figures for the presidential campaigns of 1996 and 2000, as levels of news gathering rose from 22 to 33 percent of internet users, the proportion viewing candidates' sites actually declined from 25 to 7 percent.⁸ The same study also reported, however, that one-third of those visiting the sites found them useful, although there is no indication whether they changed their vote decision as a result. European evidence indicates a more limited interest among voters in partisan information on the web. A study of the 2001 UK general election found that while 15 percent of online users intended to look for campaign news on the internet, only one-fifth of these (or around 3 percent of internet users) planned to visit party-specific sites.⁹ Across Europe, Eurobarometer data confirmed the minimal levels of interest with 5 percent overall saying they had looked at party sites (Gibson, Ward and Lusoli, 2003).

More sophisticated multivariate analysis by Bimber and Davis (2003) on the 2000 presidential election has endorsed this minimal effects finding. In one of the most systematic studies of the phenomenon to date, the authors examined the impact of state and national to candidate websites on individuals' levels of knowledge, positive or

negative feelings and voting behavior. Overall, they concluded that most people were not affected by what they viewed online, particularly in terms of being mobilised to vote. They did note, however, that there was a significant minority of undecided voters who were visiting websites. To investigate this further they compared the influences of a subset of panel participants who switched their vote (4 percent of the sample, a total of 12 respondents) to those that remained constant in their choice. Their analysis concluded that no significant role was played by websites in triggering the change (140), although they did acknowledge that such small numbers of respondents made any firm conclusions impossible. Certainly it does not seem implausible to suggest that they may have found a stronger effect for the Web if they had examined the undecided voters, rather than those who switched sides. Indeed, evidence to support this comes from William et al (2004), who found that those engaging in the Howard Dean 'Meetups' made their way there predominantly from having looked online rather than through personal contact, and that also they were more likely to be younger and less politically active or interested.

Overall, therefore, despite the fact that the audience for web campaigning is undergoing significant expansion, our understanding of whether it actually produces any tangible results in terms of increasing levels of voter support is far from clear. This study addresses this question in a more direct manner than has hitherto been conducted by combining candidate attitudinal and behavioural survey data with election results. To do so we utilise data from the special post-election candidate survey run in the Australian Candidate Study.

Cyber-campaigning in Australia

Before looking specifically at whether web campaigning is affecting electoral outcomes in Australia, we briefly profile its evolution over time. Overall, the Australian parties have been slower to adopt websites than their counterparts in the US and other countries around the world. While the first national site was launched by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in July 1994, the other parties took a more leisurely approach, with the National Party only establishing its site in 1998. Smaller parties, such as the Australian Greens, were also slow in establishing a federal site, although a number of its state branches had been active prior to the federal party's establishing a web presence. In addition to this rather sluggish take-up, analysis of the sites and interviews with party officials revealed only modest levels of enthusiasm for the new medium, with few innovative or experimental uses being reported (Gibson and Ward, 2003; 2002). Outside of the state and national level, while it is clear that candidates' and some local parties

have also been using the Internet to communicate with their supporters, to date little systematic evidence on their usage has been presented. Using the findings from the 2001 and 2004 ACS, however, it is possible to provide a more comprehensive picture of incidence of websites at the local level during election time, at least among the parliamentary parties' candidates.

The ACS asked the federal election candidates if they maintained a personal (as opposed to a party) website.¹⁰ Table 1 shows that in 2004 just over one-third of those surveyed maintained a website, a figure which is on a par with that reported for the previous election in 2001. If we look at figures for the major parties only (Labor, Liberal or National) the proportion rises to 44 percent, although this actually represents a slight decline on the figure of 48 percent for 2001. The number of minor party candidates maintaining a personal website in 2004, by contrast, rose marginally by 1 per cent to 32 per cent overall. Aside from displaying a remarkably static picture of web campaigning in Australia, these figures also reveal much lower levels of enthusiasm, compared with candidates elsewhere. The studies discussed earlier of the 2002 US election, for instance, found a clear majority of Senate and House candidates had hosted website. This was also true for parliamentary party candidates Germany in the 2002 federal election and Finland in 2003 parliamentary elections.

Table 1 about here

Based on previous studies, we anticipate several factors to be relevant in explaining parties' and individual candidates' propensity to use the web for campaigning. First, despite minor parties' enthusiasm for new ICTs, we would expect major party candidates to be more prominent. Second, political resources such as incumbency, as well as a candidates' overall legislative experience and their length of time with the party, could prove influential since this would allow them greater access to party and governmental resources to assist with website maintenance and development. Third, following the patterns uncovered in general internet use, one might expect a bias toward more highly educated and higher occupational status candidates. Age might also be expected to play a significant difference, with younger candidates (i.e. those below 40 years of age) showing a greater familiarity with the medium, compared to older candidates.¹¹ To test these hypotheses, Table 2 uses a range of independent variables to predict whether or not the candidate reported having a web page, as well as whether or not they used the web to access political information about the election. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, logistic regression techniques are used.

Table 2 about here

The results in Table 2 show that despite having more candidates online overall, major party membership is not significant in predicting website establishment when other resources are taken into account. Indeed, on the contrary, Green party candidates emerge as the most likely to engage in online electioneering. Existing experience as an incumbent, however, does exert some influence, a factor which no doubt accounts for the greater predominance of major party members with sites. In terms of the role of individual resources, none exert any decisive impact, including age. Such results are intriguing since they indicate that although the traditional boosters to campaign efforts such as incumbency operate for web campaigning too, individuals with less mainstream political backgrounds are also significantly more inclined to utilise the new form of electioneering.

The Internet and the Election Campaign

Turning more directly to the question of the impact of candidates' use of the web during the election campaign, overall usage statistics do not indicate a widespread level of public interest. Combining the ACS data with that from the Australian Election Study (AES) of the electorate's internet use patterns it is clear that, in line with the findings from other countries, the internet was used only modestly by voters for information about the election.

Table 3 about here

Table 3 shows that among voters, just over one in 10 reported using the internet for election news, most of them doing so on several occasions or less; frequent users constitute just 3 percent of the electorate. Restricting the analysis to just those voters with internet access—who form 66 percent of the electorate¹²—shows that 18 percent had used the internet for election information, well below the 52 percent of internet users in the US that said they went online in the 2004 election for related news and information (Rainie et al, 2005). While it might be argued that this lower total reflects Australians' weaker overall appetite for election news, the comparable figures for other media do not reflect this, with 44 percent saying that they had followed the election a good deal or some on the radio, 57 percent doing so in the newspapers, and 69 percent on television.¹³ In contrast to voters, the candidates were considerably more active in accessing the internet for election-related information. Seven out of 10 candidates with internet access (65

percent of the total number of candidates) said that they used the internet ‘many times’ to source election information; just one in 20 with internet access did not use it at all for this purpose.

While this low level of penetration in terms of the web campaigns’ message clearly limits its influence on individual’ voting decisions, the key question that these aggregate figures do not tell us is whether among those receiving the message, it made any difference to their vote? Such effects could be direct in terms of informing or changing a vote decision, or indirect, in that it was linked with other campaign activities, particularly media coverage that helped to boost the profile of the candidate at large (for a review of direct and indirect effects see Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2002). To unpack these effects we first examine the linkage between candidates’ offline campaign activity and their web utilization before moving to look at the combined direct effects of these different campaign resources on the election outcome using an OLS regression model.

Cyber-campaigning and traditional campaign activities

The 2004 ACS allows for in-depth examination of the association between the different dimensions of election campaigning since it included a large battery of items designed to measure the extent of campaigning offline by the election candidates. The items chosen here were designed to capture the overall preparedness and professionalism of the candidate, as well the level of party support given to the candidate to conduct his or her campaign. Three basic types of campaign activities were identified: (1) media interviews (a composite measure of time on interviews for the TV and radio, and for national newspapers); (2) canvassing (a composite measure of doorknocking and organising direct mailing); and (3) party activities (a composite of discussions with national party officials and local party members). Of the three activities, the candidates reported spending most time, 15.8 hours on average per week, on party activities, followed by canvassing (11.2 hours) and media interviews (3.7 hours).

The survey also included a wide range of measures related to party support and three measures are included here: organizational support (which is measured by a cumulative scale of seven areas of party support, ranging from the candidate receiving leaflets and handouts prepared by the party, to party funds and visits by high profile politicians); how early the candidate began to prepare for the campaign, measured in months; and the average number of party workers available on any one day of the campaign. In Table 4 we report the findings from a logistic regression model that examined the extent to which

engagement in traditional offline campaign activities was linked with whether or not the candidate had a web page.

Table 4 about here

The results indicate that the establishment of a campaign website occurs to a large extent in isolation from more traditional types of campaign practices, particularly those undertaken directly by the candidate. Two factors are important. First, candidates who have the time and personnel in advance of the election are more likely to develop a website. Second, web campaigning is linked to a candidate's use of the mainstream media, as measured by the number of interviews engaged in. It appears those individuals who are leading the pack in terms of media attention do appear to be more inclined to establish a web presence.¹⁴ More general and diverse kinds of party support i.e. leaflet production and visits, however, do not influence the presence or absence of a web page. Such a finding suggests that website production is more of a 'luxury' feature of campaigns than a necessity. It is those candidates who prepare their campaign well in advance of the election who can set up a home page. Overall then, there do appear to be limited but important inter-relationships between a candidates' offline and online efforts. In the next section we expand on these findings to test whether or not these campaign activities had any effect on the outcome of the election.

Evaluating the Electoral Consequences

Thus far we have examined the extent of web campaigning engaging in by political parties during the 2004 federal election campaign in Australia and identified the key individual and organizational resources that are important in promoting this type of campaigning. In this section we move from the causes of web campaigning and its place within the campaign as a whole, to the question at the heart of this paper – that of its effects. Did candidate's use of the web actually make any difference to their vote, after controlling for a range of other factors linked to electoral success?¹⁵ In examining this question in the Australian context we are interested specifically in whether web campaigning affected vote choice, as opposed to the decision whether or not to vote. Generally speaking, campaigns serve two functions: to mobilize voters to cast a ballot; and to convert voters to a particular party. Election campaigns for national office in Australia have a distinctive character because of the system of compulsory voting. Compulsory voting effectively means that mobilization is achieved by the electoral institutions, so that the purpose of the campaign is solely conversion. The dependent

variable is the first preference vote won by the candidate (in the lower house) or for the party group (in the upper house).

Most importantly, the results in Table 5 show that having a web page had a significant effect on the vote, net of a wide range of other factors. Candidates who maintained a web page increased their first preference vote by just over 4 percent, net of individual and party resources, party membership and other aspects of campaigning. The standardized coefficients (in parentheses) suggest that the overall importance of having a web page is more important than the candidate possessing a tertiary education and is superseded only by incumbency and party membership in determining a candidate's electoral support. Indeed, maintaining a web page is a more significant predictor of the vote than all three campaign activities combined. To put this finding in some perspective, in order for a candidate to gain the same increase in the vote as occurs from maintaining a web page—4 percent of the first preference vote—the candidate would have to devote just over 50 hours per week to party activities, rather than the average of just under 16 hours reported in the survey.¹⁶ The message is quite clear, therefore: candidates who concentrate their resources on the web will do better than those who use more traditional approaches to campaigning.

This is an important result since it suggests that a web presence may be one of the most significant initiatives that a candidate can take in planning his or her campaign. Indeed, from this evidence it is clear that web communication substantially supersedes media interviews and more face-to-face styles of campaigning as a means of converting voters to the cause. Given the conflicting evidence from the US about the impact of web campaigning as well as the undeniably narrow audience in Australia for such messages, we are clearly faced with the question of how to interpret these findings, and in particular the very substantial effects of having a web page on the vote?

Discussion

Our analysis has clearly confirmed the positive effects initially found by D'Alessio in the US but have done so with a more fully specified model. As such, it is possible for us to address empirically some of the speculative arguments D'Alessio put forward to account for the strong connection between electoral success and candidate's use of the web. In particular, D'Alessio argued that websites may be serving as a proxy for candidate preparedness and overall professionalism. On the face of it, this is clearly a persuasive claim. However, our analysis of the impact of a campaign website takes into

account factors such as the time taken to prepare for the election; measures of professionalism such as level of media exposure and staff numbers; and party support. This explanation, therefore, does not appear to hold, at least in the Australian context.

A second explanation that D'Alessio put forward for the connection between web use and increased electoral support was the 'reverse causation' hypothesis, whereby the front runners, by virtue of being ahead, were placed under greater pressure to create a site. Our evidence provides partial support this interpretation. If one accepts that those riding high in the opinion polls would also be those with a higher public profile in mainstream news sources, then the connection between a candidate's level of media exposure and having a website provides some support for this claim. Simply put, those that are ahead, at least in the media stakes, tend to be the most likely to have a website. Of course, one would need over-time opinion poll and media coverage data for candidates across the course of the campaign to test this idea more conclusively.

The connection between online and offline media efforts by Australian federal candidates is one of the more intriguing findings of our analysis, since it indicates that running a website is part of an overall media awareness among candidates. In this model, the web acts indirectly to increase support for candidates since it allows them to compete more effectively for attention from journalists working for the traditional media. This enhanced media attention heightens their public profile and crucially provides them with greater visibility among voters. Of course it may still be the case that website use is capturing some aspect of candidate quality not measured by the variables included here. The presence of a web page may denote someone with political flair and drive, who will be distinctive in the quality of their campaigning. However, given the very rich array of data on candidate quality employed here we would argue that capturing any further aspect of quality would be difficult.

A final argument made by D'Alessio to explain his findings focused on the possible direct effects of the campaign websites on the voting public. Despite the fact those seeking out campaign information online are small in number, perhaps they are particularly attuned to, and directly influenced by the messages coming through the web? Finding the idea of conversion too hard to believe, however, he argued that this process would take place largely through mobilisation of pre-existing additional support from voters who would otherwise not have turned up to the polls, rather than persuading voters to switch sides. Using Australia data we can of course immediately challenge the second of his claims since under a compulsory voting system, any substantial increase in a

candidate's support would be occurring due to voters' switching from other parties or an independent stance, rather than the mobilisation of non-voters. Returning to the general idea of online information seekers being more susceptible to the political messages they receive on the Web, however, we can use the AES voter survey to investigate this claim.

Certainly the data reported in Table 3—that 12 percent of voters accessed election information on the internet—confirms that a minority audience for candidate web messages exists in Australia. The question is what does this group look like compared to the rest of the voting public? Are they more calculating in their vote and more susceptible to the political messages they read on the web? If they are, then it is at least possible that these websites are having a direct and disproportionate influence on vote choice compared with other stimuli. Twelve percent of the Australian electorate constitutes over one million voters, certainly a sizable enough voting bloc to account for the four percent swing noted in Table 5. Such an interpretation is given additional weight by the more general evidence on late deciders in election campaigns, which comparative studies have shown are more likely to be rational, calculating voters, than capricious and disinterested (McAllister, 2002).

What then, is the evidence from the 2004 election to support the view that voters accessing election-related information via the web were significantly different in their campaign behaviour or attitudes compared to other voters? To explore this question we compared the campaign behaviour and attitudes of three voter groups: those without internet access, those with access but who did not follow the election on the internet, and our group of interest, those who did use the internet for election information (Table 6). The results confirm our initial expectations in that the group who followed the election on the internet were indeed distinctive. Not only do they display significantly greater interest in the election and a readiness to discuss politics with others, they are more likely to care about the election outcome, and to view policy issues as the main determinant of their vote decision. Most crucially, however, they are more independently-minded than others voters, being much more likely to have considered voting for another candidate during the election and also to not follow the 'how to vote' card in the House of Representatives election, or to tick the party box on the Senate ballot paper. Such findings lend significant support to the direct effects hypothesis, therefore. Candidate websites may indeed be playing a vital role how voters decide to cast their ballot.

Table 6 about here

Conclusion

This study has addressed a number of important empirical questions about candidates' use of new ICTs in elections, an innovation that is seen as a vital component in the development of the new high-tech campaign (Selnow, 1996; Strachan, 2003; Norris, 2000). Utilising the rich resource of the 2004 Australian Candidate Study it has been possible to profile the aspirants to political office in terms of the degree to which they are disposed toward using the new technology and also the extent to which it is integrated with traditional campaign techniques. Our findings have shown that a mix of factors predict use of the technology for campaign purposes with younger, radical left-wing candidates being enthusiastic adopters alongside those more established members seeking re-election. In terms of factors internal to the campaign team itself, a web page is predicated largely on the candidate's preparing for the election well in advance, and gaining greater media exposure. The relationship between online and more traditional non-electronic offline modes of voter communication, however, is not a particularly strong one, with the extent of canvassing a candidate engages in not being closely linked to their use of the web.

Perhaps most importantly, however, we have been able to estimate the effects of having a web page on the election outcome. Our results reveal support for the proposition that a web campaign is an integral part of securing victory in an election. Net of a wide variety of other factors, including incumbency, party affiliation and political experience and support, the use of a web page delivers 4 percent of the first preference vote. This is more than all of the traditional methods of campaigning combined and outside of party affiliation, is outranked only by incumbency in its importance in explaining levels of support. The web is, then, a major vote generator for candidates and has the potential in closely fought contests to determine the election outcome. Further investigation of how the web might be converting voters has revealed that while some indirect effects and/or reverse causation might be taking place, a direct effects explanation is also of some merit, with the audience for election-related websites found to be the most politically aware and discriminating, as well as among the most independently-minded in deciding how to vote.

Clearly, these findings are of significance for the practitioners of online campaigning and also potentially for the voters and country at large, if the practice leads to a swing in election outcomes. However, while it is tempting to extrapolate directly from the

findings to make predictions about the extent of vote conversion that is possible if one moves to the online environment, caution is required before drawing any longer-term conclusions from these findings. As the results in Table 6 revealed, those voters who were accessing the internet for election information in 2004 were a very small and distinctive group who were very likely to use the information they found online to decide how they would vote. As the pool of voters using the web for election news continues to grow it will no doubt start to include less discerning and independently minded voters, for whom the effects of the medium would not be so pronounced. In addition, the novelty value attached to using new ICTs for election information may also have raised these voters' sensitivities to online political messages, thereby exerting an undue influence on their vote choice. As use of the web and email becomes more mainstream, therefore, one might see its effects become less pronounced on voters. Setting long range predictions aside, however, these results suggest that within the current political environment at least, running a web campaign is an important component to ensuring success at the polling booth.

Endnotes

- ¹ 'Experts Want to Dissect McCain's internet Fundraising' Rebecca Fairley Raney. *The New York Times on the Web* Feb 18, 2000. Available at <www.nytimes.com/li...ch/00/02/cyber/articles/18campaign.html > Accessed on 19 February 2000. 'Volunteers' Actions Lead Skeptics to Question McCain's Online Donations.' Rebecca Fairley Raney. *The New York Times on the Web* Feb 12, 2000. Available at <www.nytimes.com/li...ch/00/02/cyber/articles/12campaign.html > Accessed on 14 February 2000.
- ² A profile that was no doubt further enhanced by the US Federal Election Commission ruling that online credit card donations were eligible for matching funds (von Sternberg, 2000).
- ³ 'Against all odds' by Roland Watson *The Times* 26 November. (Section 2 p.7); 'Dean.com' by Ryan Lizza. *The New Republic Online* 23 May 2003. Available at <<http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030602&s=lizza060203>> Accessed on 4 June 2003.
- ⁴ 'Dean's Grass-Roots Cash Cow' by E. J. Dionne Jr. *Washingtonpost* Available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A23937-2003Jul7.html?referrer=email>> Accessed on July 20, 2003.
- ⁵ 'Internet and Campaign 2002 Analysis' Special Report by Phil Noble. *Politics Online* Nov 4, 2002. Available at <http://netpulse.politicsonline.com/soundoff.asp?issue_id=6.18 > Accessed on 6 November, 2002.
- ⁶ 'The Internet and Campaign 2004' by Lee Rainie, Michael Cornfield and John Horrigan. 2005. Pew Internet and American Life Project.
- ⁷ 'Youth Vote Influence by Online Information' issued by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Dec 3, 2000. Available at <<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/reports.asp?Report=27&Section=ReportLevel1&Field=Level1ID&ID=94>>. Accessed on January 12, 2001. These findings are

supported by a survey of American adults conducted in November 2000 for the *Democracy Online Project* (based at George Washington University) that examined use of the internet for election-related information, see 'Post-Election 2000 Survey on Internet Use for Civics and Politics' December 4, 2000. *The Democracy Online Project*, George Washington University. Available at <<http://democracyonline.org/databank/dec2000survey.shtml>> Accessed on 07/07/01.

- ⁸ 'Youth Vote Influence by Online Information' issued by the Pew internet and American Life Project. Dec 3, 2000. Available at <<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/reports.asp?Report=27&Section=ReportLevel1&Field=Level1ID&ID=94>>. Accessed on January 12, 2001. These findings are supported by a survey of American adults conducted in November 2000 for the *Democracy Online Project* (based at George Washington University) that examined use of the internet for election-related information, see 'Post-Election 2000 Survey on internet Use for Civics and Politics' December 4, 2000. *The Democracy Online Project*, George Washington University. Available at <<http://democracyonline.org/databank/dec2000survey.shtml>> Accessed on 07/07/01.

- ⁹ 'Whatever Happened to the E-Llection' James Crabtree. The Work Foundation. 2001. Available at <<http://www.theworkfoundation.com/pdf/Electionpercent20designed1.pdf>> Accessed December 2001.

- ¹⁰ The Australian Candidate Study was a mail-out, mail-back survey of all federal election candidates standing for the Labor, Liberal, National, Australian Democrat, one Nation and Green parties in the November 2001 federal election. Fieldwork commenced in early December 2001 and was completed by early March 2002. A total of 840 candidates were contacted, with 477 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 56.8 percent.

- ¹¹ An additional potential factor is competition at the local level, reflected in the level of marginality. However, this can be tested only for House of Representatives candidates (since Senate candidates are standing for the whole state or territory),

and in order to preserve our (already small) sample size, we have opted to combine candidates for the two houses. Preliminary analyses based only on lower house candidates found that marginality was not a factor, either in determining who had a web site or in affecting the influence of a web presence on the vote.

- ¹² In Australia, the most recent publicly available official estimates from the Bureau of Statistics in 2002 reported 58% of adults using the Internet. See *Yearbook of Australia* Communication and information technology: use of information technology. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available at <<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/68bd1499d3221ce3ca256f720083304b!OpenDocument>>
- ¹³ The figures are for respondents who said that they followed the election ‘some’ or a ‘good deal’ on each of the media.
- ¹⁴ This finding also holds for 2001.
- ¹⁵ Analyses were also conducted adding the range of variables in Table 2 into the model. However, since our major interest is in the campaign and web utilization, and since the substantive results for these variables remain unchanged whether or not these additional controls are entered into the equations, for parsimony they are excluded here.
- ¹⁶ The partial coefficient for canvassing is .08, which suggests an increase in the vote of .08 percent for each additional hour of canvassing per week. The calculation therefore is $.08 * 49 \text{ hours} = 3.92$.

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**Table 1: Candidates Maintaining a Website,
2001 and 2004 Elections**

	All		Major party		Minor party	
	2001	2004	2001	2004	2001	2004
Yes	37	36	48	44	31	32
No	63	64	52	56	69	68
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(455)	(420)	(168)	(161)	(287)	(259)

The question was: 'Did you maintain a personal website on the internet as part of your election campaign in the electorate?' Minor parties are Australian Democrat, Green, One Nation.

Sources 2001, 2004 ACS.

Table 2: Resources and Candidates Maintaining a Web Page

	Logistic regression estimates	
	Est	SE
<i>Individual resources</i>		
Age (years)	.02	.01
Gender (male)	.39	.25
Tertiary education	-.02	.45
<i>Party membership (Liberal-National)</i>		
Labor	-.14	.36
Democrat	-.44	.39
Green	.78*	.36
One Nation	-2.89**	1.08
<i>Political resources</i>		
Incumbent	1.34**	.43
Legislative experience	.01	.38
Length party membership (years)	.00	.02
Constant	-1.85	
Nagelkerke R-sq	.22	
(N)	(379)	

** statistically significant at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Logistic regression results showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting the probability of having a web page. All variables are scored zero or one except age (years) and length of party membership (years). For party membership, the excluded category is Liberal-National candidates.

Source 2004 ACS.

Table 3: Voter and Candidate Use of the Internet

	Voters		Candidates	
	All	Internet access	All	Internet access
Don't have internet access	33	na	6	na
Have access, didn't use	55	82	5	6
Yes, once or twice	6	8	5	5
Yes, several occasions	3	5	15	16
Yes, many times	3	5	69	73
Total	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,739)	(1,160)	(434)	(404)

The question was: 'Did you make use of the internet at all to get news or information about the 2004 federal election?'

Source 2004 AES, 2004 ACS.

Table 4: Candidates' Web Page and Campaign Activities

	Logistic regression estimates	
	Est	SE
<i>Campaign activities (hours per week)</i>		
Media interviews	.05*	.03
Canvassing	.02	.01
Party activities	-.01	.01
<i>Party support</i>		
Organizational support (0-10)	-.03	.05
Party workers (number)	-.01	.01
<i>Length of campaign preparation (months)</i>	.08**	.03
Constant	-1.26	
Nagelkerke R-sq	.09	
(N)	(420)	

** statistically significant at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Logistic regression results showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting the probability of having a web page.

Source 2004 ACS.

Table 5: Resources, the Campaign, Candidates' Web Page, and the Vote

	Means	OLS coefficients	
		b	beta
<i>Web page</i>	.36	4.05**	.11**
<i>Individual resources</i>			
Age (years)	57.64	-.01	-.02
Gender (male)	.67	.19	.01
Tertiary education	.89	2.00	.04
<i>Party membership</i>			
Labor	.20	-6.12**	-.13**
Democrat	.22	-28.35**	-.64**
Green	.28	-25.16**	-.62**
One Nation	.12	-26.85**	-.48**
<i>Political resources</i>			
Incumbent	.13	12.98**	.24**
Legislative experience	.11	1.32	.02
Length party membership (years)	9.36	-.15**	-.08**
<i>Campaign activities (hours per week)</i>			
Media interviews	3.72	-.15	-.04
Canvassing	11.16	.04	.03
Party activities	15.85	.08*	.07*
<i>Party support</i>			
Organizational support (0-10)	5.50	.10	.01
Party workers (number)	6.55	.00	.00
<i>Length of campaign preparation (months)</i>	7.51	.34*	.08**
Constant		26.08	
Adj R-sq		.67	
(N)		(420)	

** statistically significant at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed.

OLS regression estimates showing partial (b) and standardized (beta) coefficients predicting the percentage first preference vote for House of Representatives candidates only ($n = 420$). All variables are scored zero or one except age (years) and length of party membership (years), campaign activities (hours per week) organization support (0-10), party workers (number) and length of campaign preparation (months). For party membership, the excluded category is Liberal-National candidates.

Source 2004 ACS.

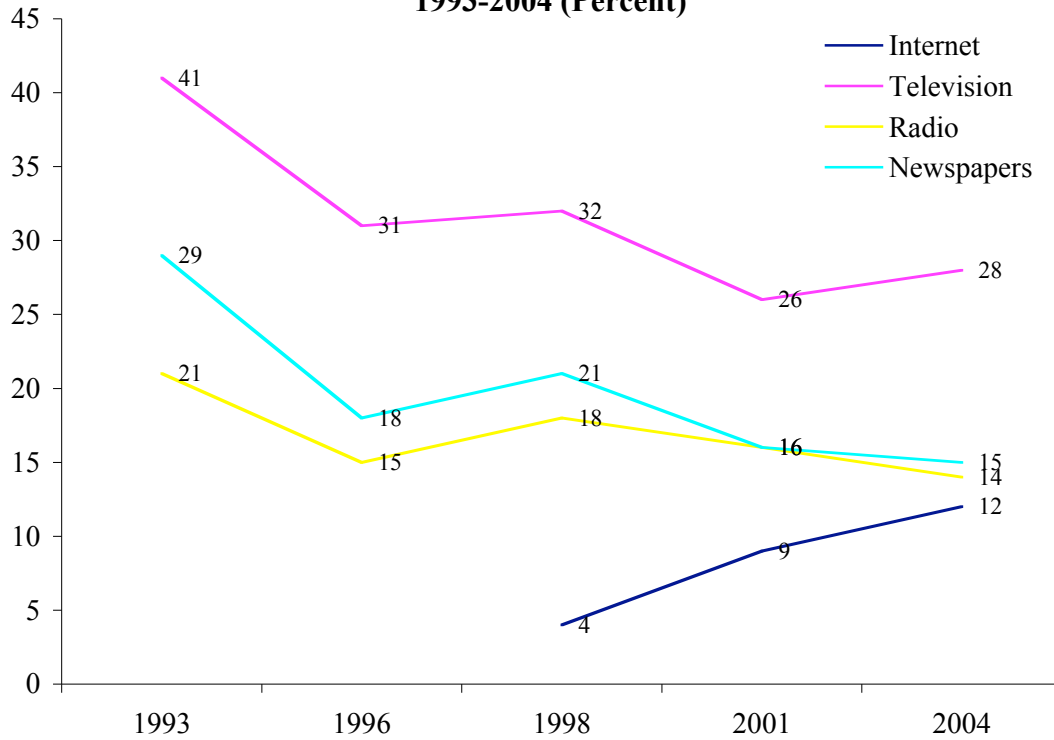
Table 6: Campaign Attitudes and Behaviour Among Voters

	No internet access	Did not follow election on internet	Followed election on internet
Interested in election 'a good deal'	30	25*	48**
Discussed politics with others 'frequently'	17	20	38**
Care which party wins 'a good deal'	68	70	77*
Policy issues most important in vote decision	49	47	53
Did not use 'how to vote' card in H of Reps	41	45	59**
Did not ticket box on Senate ballot	12	10	20**
Thought of changing vote during campaign	22	24	32**
(N)	(579)	(952)	(208)

** statistically significant from those with no internet access at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Source 2004 AES.

Figure 1: Media Use During Election Campaigns, 1993-2004 (Percent)



‘How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in television/radio/the newspapers?’ (percent say ‘a good deal’). ‘Did you make use of the internet at all to get news or information about the [1998/2001/2004] Federal election?’ (percent say ‘yes’).

Sources 1993-2004 AES.