Youth, citizenship and online political communication
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Chapter 5

Youth Websites During an Election Campaign

5.1 Introduction and contextual factors

This chapter focuses on an analysis of websites in the UK during the 2004 European Parliament (EP) election campaign. The analysis looks particularly at how websites address young people through online structures for political action (Schneider & Foot, 2002), in relation to information and engagement features present on these websites. It also examines the youth focus of these sites, in terms of the mode of address and types of encouraged participation, and brings in the youth perspective based on initial survey analysis.

In terms of the theoretical model explicated earlier, I assume a focus on organizations operating within conventional citizenship due to the electoral context of the current online observations. As all of the websites chosen were in a position to encourage either information about or participation in the campaign, as argued this can be considered as a more conventional take on citizen behavior. However, all relevant content is subject to analysis, not just campaign-focused content. This is appropriate as sites examined here were not simply online for this election. It is possible that political websites exist within this context in order to promote non-electoral (or non-traditional) goals, and the selection procedure remained open to include such discrepancies.

The issue of communication is centered on what each website offers in terms of content. Here, I combined my theoretical approach with the feature analysis proposed by the Internet and Elections project, detailed in the previous chapter. I examined the websites for a variety of information and engagement features, looking closely at electoral content, youth address and structure of participation explicated on these sites, and concluded how these features are related to both strategic and reflexive communication. This strategy guided the data collection and its effectiveness is reassessed at the end of the chapter.

The current chapter reports on results from the CIVICWEB survey with the aim to establish a cursory understanding of current youth attitudes and behaviors. The research question addressing this issue is:
Research question 5.1: How do young people use the internet and what are their reported political participation rates, both online and offline?

A second research question examines the content of websites meant to attract young people:

Research question 5.2: During an election campaign, how are party and otherwise politically motivated websites addressing young people, and how do these sites compare in the information they provide and the engagement opportunities they offer for users?

The 2004 European Parliament elections

The 2004 EP elections were, at least on paper, a highly symbolic event. In May 2004, the European Union was enlarged to include ten new member states. Because of this almost 350 million Europeans were eligible to vote in 25 countries, and in June 2004 they selected 732 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). However, overall voter turnout has consistently decreased since the first EP elections, from 63 percent in 1979 to 48 percent in 2004, the lowest turnout in the election’s history. It is probably not surprising to learn that these “second-order” elections are known for a lack of public and media interest (often referred to as the EU’s democratic deficit), and historically involve minimal campaigning, at least in comparison to local and national elections. Because they are organized at a national rather than a European level, and often deal with domestic rather than European issues, it is difficult to see their role as fully integrated in a European sense (Franklin, 2001). But a different picture emerges when individual countries are considered. For example, in the UK, turnout rose to a record-breaking 38.9% during the 2004 elections, up from 24% in the 1999 elections, though this higher-than-normal turnout may have been the result of local elections and EP elections occurring simultaneously, and is still below the EU average. Because of this, it is important to note that some websites examined here may have been additionally or exclusively focused on the local election. However this is not seen as problematic, as the goal is to see how websites directed their content during a period of electoral campaign activity in a general sense.

1 Since that time and as of the completion of this dissertation, the EU now includes an additional two member states (Bulgaria and Romania), bringing the total of eligible voters to 496 million and the number of MEPs to 736.

2 EP elections are held every five years; in the UK, the next election will take place on June 11, 2009.
Methodological review

Though the specifics of the methodology were elaborated in the previous chapter, here a summary is in order. Between February and April 2004, I selected a total of 30 UK-based youth sites for analysis. This selection was based on whether the websites had the realistic potential to contain election-related material. The aim was to define the electoral Web sphere, or “a dynamic array of Web materials created by political actors who participate in the electoral process” (Jankowski, Foot, Kluver & Schneider, 2005, p. 168). Of those chosen, 12 belonged to youth branches of political parties and 18 to youth organizations (see Appendix A for details).

The websites were coded two weeks before the EP elections, using the Internet and Elections Project feature analysis elaborated on in Chapter 4. After an initial familiarization with the content, websites were coded for a variety of information and engagement features. Information features, which aim to provide visitors with campaign-related knowledge, consisted of election content, biographical information, candidate endorsements, issue positions and comparisons, speeches, election-related calendars, and information about the electoral or voting process.

Engagement features focused on more interactive elements, particularly between political elites and citizens, and also enabled online and offline political actions. These features included the ability to contact the producer or receive an e-mail newsletter; to become a member of the organization; to engage in previously offline activities, such as donating to the party or organization or registering to vote; to contribute to a forum space; to write a public support statement for a candidate, party or other relevant organization; to send links and e-paraphernalia to others; to distribute materials offline, and to volunteer. A complete list and description of information and engagement features is found in Appendix B.

In addition to the feature analysis and also detailed in Chapter 4, qualitative website analysis was also utilized to more closely examine electoral content but also youth address, including mode of address and structure of participation. Before turning to the results of these analyses, I first focus on a descriptive analysis of the user survey, providing relevant percentages for internet use and political participation of young people in the UK.

5.2 Young citizens and their internet use

3 Along with the Internet and Elections Project, websites were included even if they did not contain election-related material at the time of identification. “The rationale for this was that such websites could be significant in structuring online action – or the lack thereof – within an electoral web sphere” (Dougherty & Foot, 2007: 18).
The online survey was conducted via the European-wide CIVICWEB project. Results reported in this dissertation are from the survey conducted in the United Kingdom (N = 1,215). Here, I looked at the demographics of the respondents, generally reported internet use, and respondent’s reported political participation online and offline. A focus here is on traditional participation, and traditional politics can be seen as “party politics, interest in government and voting” (Livingstone, et al., 2005a, p. 288).

Demographics and internet use

The reported mean age of survey respondents was 21.84. Females made up 64.4% of all respondents; 20.6% belong to a minority ethnic group; 79.3% were born in the UK. In comparison to the latest UK census data (collected in April 2001), the sample here is skewed: CIVICWEB survey respondents are over representative of females in comparison to the general population. Further, respondents here are much more ethnically diverse than census data reports (although generally, women outnumber men across a variety of ethnic backgrounds).

Respondents demonstrated regular internet use. With the average age of first use at 14.49, 84.8% of young people reported accessing it most “at home.” Internet use was quite prevalent: 55.5% used the internet seven days a week on average and 84% were online between five and seven days per week. When going online, 49.2% of the respondents reported using the internet for either “1-2 hours” or “2-3 hours” on average. These findings are comparable with recent research on internet use by children and young people. The UK Children Go Online project (Livingstone & Bober, 2005) reported slightly lower percentages (i.e., 75% of participants had internet at home as opposed to 84.8% in the current survey; 41% were daily internet users, in comparison to 55.5% in the current survey) although this is in line with increasing rates of internet penetration in the UK (Dutton & Helsper, 2007). Along with this, 94.1% of CIVICWEB survey respondents reported they were “free” or “completely free” to use the internet as they like (without supervision). Conversely, Livingstone and Bober (2005) found that parents generally attempt to manage their offspring’s internet use, though this research was conducted with a younger cohort of respondents (and also spoke with parents).

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4 The CIVICWEB project set a target age group from 15-25; 67.9% of respondents fell into this age range.
5 As reported on http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cgi/nugget.asp?id=299; “87% of the population of England and 96% of the population of Wales gave their ethnic origin as White British. The proportion of minority ethnic groups in England rose from 6% to 9% - partly as a result of the addition of Mixed ethnic groups to the 2001 Census form.”
6 It should also be noted that the CIVICWEB survey was accessible from the MTV UK website and not available offline; this feasibly could result in a more tech-savvy, higher access group completing the survey.
Respondents also demonstrated great familiarity and confidence in using the internet (see Table 5.1). Almost all respondents felt “quite confident” or “completely confident” in gathering data online (87.7%), which demonstrates a high level of comfort in browsing websites. Learning skills within a specific program also revealed almost three quarters (74.1%) of “quite” or “completely” confident users, showing that these young people are comfortable learning in a digital environment. Respondents were somewhat less confident in reporting a good understanding of technical terminology (62.7%) and were slightly less confident when it came to troubleshooting internet problems (59.8%). Slightly over half (57.3%) reported confidence in turning to an online discussion group for help.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.1. Reported Confidence in Using the Internet</th>
<th>% of those “quite confident” or “completely confident”</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding terms related to Internet hardware and software.</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troubleshooting Internet problems.</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering data online.</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning skills within a specific Internet program.</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning to an online discussion group for help.</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The reported percentages represent those who reported being “quite confident” or “completely confident” in answering the question: “How confident do you feel when using the Internet in regard to…?” All items were measured on a 5-point scale.

These results show that young people are savvy, regular users of the internet, particularly in everyday activities like gathering data (e.g., browsing websites) or acquiring new skills demanded in an online game or task. These numbers fall when turning to the more technical side of internet use, though well over half of respondents still profess proficiency in these areas.
Online and offline participation rates

Despite a competence for internet use, youth enthusiasm fell when it came to activity in a variety of political realms, either online or offline. For example, in terms of online political participation, respondents overwhelmingly reported having rarely or never done a number of actions in the last 12 months (see Table 5.2). For example, almost all internet users had “seldom” or “never” forwarded an email about social or political problems (84%), participated in online discussion platforms about social or political problems (81.7%), sent an email to a political or government official (87.1%), or worked on a website/page where it is possible to state an opinion on social and political problems (85.2%). Here, confidence in internet use does not translate into participating online as citizens in the manner queried in the survey.

Table 5.2: Reported Online Political Participation Rates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of those answering “seldom” or “never”</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forwarded an email about social or political problems.</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed a petition on the internet.</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in online discussion platforms about social or political problems.</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent an email to a political or government official.</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked on a website/page where it is possible to state an opinion on social and political problems.</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The reported percentages represent those who responded with “Seldom” or “Never” when asked, “In the last 12 months, have you...?” All items were measured on a 5-point scale.
Table 5.3. Reported Offline Political Participation Rates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>% of those answering “seldom” or “never”</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donated money/contributed to a political party or charitable organization.</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Called or sent a letter to a political or a government official.</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wore or displayed a campaign badge/sticker.</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked for a political party.</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave out leaflets about a social or political issue.</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited a public meeting or attended a local event.</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoke at a Student Council.</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked for a voluntary or charitable organization.</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized/participated in a demonstration, strike, or protest.</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boycotted a product due to disagreement with the social or political values of the company that produces it.</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk to friends, families and colleagues about social problems or political issues.</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The reported percentages represent those who responded with “Seldom” or “Never” when asked, “In the last 12 months, have you…?” All items were measured on a 5-point scale.
The only exception was in terms of those that had signed a petition on the internet: 30.4% did report having “sometimes” participated in this activity. Signing a petition online does not require a great deal of time and effort, as some of the other items possibly do (e.g., participating in an online discussion). It may also demonstrate a cautious optimism for those concerned about youth citizenship that more than a quarter of these respondents do occasionally participate in such an activity. At the same time, the question posed was vague and could have been interpreted in relation to a host of issues (i.e., non-political) that are commonly addressed via online petitions. Analysis in Chapter 6 will draw on a scale of these five online participation items (alpha=.82, M=1.63, SD=.73).

Queries about offline political participation followed a similar pattern to those of reported online participation (in both traditional and more non-traditional realms of interest). A high percentage of respondents reported having seldom or never participated in a number of activities associated with traditional political participation in the past year (see Table 5.3).

Almost all respondents had “seldom” or “never” contacted political or government officials by phone or letter (92%), and 95.6% had never worked for a political party, neatly mirroring the number of respondents who were not members of a political party (96.6%, not reported in the table). Hardly any respondents have had direct contact (or have attempted to make direct contact) with those in positions of political power. What about other, less conventional issues that respondents may feel passionate about? Still 89.9% had seldom or never given out leaflets about a social or political issue, 91.9% had seldom or never organized or participated in a demonstration, strike, or protest, and 74.6% responded similarly to wearing or displaying a campaign badge or sticker. When it comes to donations, though, this pattern of low participation shifted (21% reported doing this “sometimes,” 12.7% “often,” and 5.9% “very often”). The question regarding donations does however combine contributions to political parties and charitable organizations into one query, perhaps demonstrating that young people are (also or instead) active in a more civic realm, outside of traditional politics.

But when turning to this more civic realm, survey results showed that 81.1% of respondents had seldom or never spoken at a Student Council, 75.2% had seldom or never visited a public meeting or attended a local event, and more than three-quarters (75.2%) had seldom or never worked for a voluntary or charitable organization. Even in the realm of consumer boycotts respondents reported little activity, with 81.4% reporting having seldom or never boycotted a product due to disagreement with the social or political values of the company.

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7 Percentages for all five answer categories were not included in the tables for reasons of space and clarity.
that produces it. Respondents did report a more balanced involvement in political talk: 39.4% reported “sometimes” talking with friends, family and colleagues about social problems or political issues (29.9% do this “often” or “very often”). Analysis in Chapter 6 will draw on a scale of these 11 offline participation items (alpha=.81, M=1.69, SD=.64).8

Reported results from the CIVICWEB survey demonstrate that respondents are confident and frequent internet users, though what they do online is not reflected in political interest. There is minimal political participation reported among young people, both online and offline. Even less overtly political activities still attract less than a quarter of respondents on a regular basis, from attending local events to boycotting products or protesting. However, glimmers of participation can be seen in volunteering for an organization (13.6% of respondents do this “sometimes”) and in talking about social or political issues with family and friends. Such an exploratory analysis, though conducted on a non-random sample of respondents, demonstrates a general understanding of the extent to which young people (do not) participate within a traditional political context, as well in terms of more civic endeavors. This situation poses a challenge to youth organizations that wish to address those entrenched in a culture of non-participation. Given the wide array of offline political participation measures reported on here, I look more closely at these variables in Chapters 6 and 7 to more clearly distinguish different types of participation.

5.3 Information and engagement features

The following results section reports on the use of information and engagement features on analyzed websites. Despite the challenges of reaching youth in this traditional context, websites did supply an array of features to examine, and a number of the websites created content related to the election. First, I provide a description of the websites, and then look at general features categorized as information or engagement-related before turning to those websites that contain electorally-specific content. This analysis examines differences between political party websites and those of youth organizations.

Website descriptions

8 A number of other queries explicitly related to electoral participation are of interest here, though they are not reported in the table and are not included in the scale of offline participation used in Chapter 6. Almost one-third (30.5%) voted in the last election, but 24.5% did not vote (an additional 45% were not eligible). The survey did not distinguish the explicit terms of ineligibility (e.g., age restrictions, or not being registered to vote).
Youth, Citizenship and Online Political Communication

Youth websites active during the EP election campaign provided a broad range of offerings, from high-tech, high quality websites to more sparsely designed or rarely maintained initiatives. Websites of political party youth branches differed in their autonomy from the parent organization – sometimes links led directly back to the main party site – but were clearly created to attract a younger cohort of party supporters. The Conservative party’s youth branch described itself as follows:

Conservative Future was formed in 1998 when the Young Conservatives, Conservative Students and Conservative Graduates were merged into one united organisation to incorporate all members of the Party aged under 30. It is an integral part of Conservative Party, recognised as the official organisation for young people.

The Labour Party’s youth site, Young Labour, focused on an age range from 15-27 and like the Liberal Democrat Youth and Students, had a members only section in addition to extensive youth and party-related information. Generally the political party sites made an effort to take issues relevant to party politics and relate these explicitly to youth. One example on the Liberal Democrat Youth and Students site was a news article about a girl who was ruled as too young to stand for office as a Member of the European Parliament (MEP).

Others differed in what kind of youth they wanted to attract. The Federation of Student Nationalists (the Scottish National Party’s youth branch) encouraged participation from students under the age of 26: Those under 26 but not enrolled in a higher education program were invited to join an affiliated organization called Young Scots for Independence. The Young Greens were less particular: They invited all those under 27 and all students to join.

Youth organizations, though more broadly focused, did their part in acknowledging the election campaign. The British Youth Council, an organization for young people under 26, had several youth-related campaigns including “Get the Vote Out.” HeadsUp, a government-sponsored organization that connects Parliament with young people, scheduled a forum on Europe in the weeks leading up to the campaign between May 3 and May 14, 2004. The forum was designed for those under 18 to learn about Parliament and talk to politicians. Upon entering Massive Youth, an organization of working students backed by the GMB Trade Union, a visitor was greeted with a thumping bass line and an invitation to participate in a number of polls that quired getting the voting age reduced and whether visitors had voted in the general election. Through text from mission statements, youth-oriented content, and general impressions of

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All corresponding URLs are listed in Appendix A, Table 1.
functionality, each website in the selection communicated an allegiance to certain aims and values.

Information features

Table 5.4: Number of Websites Containing Information Features During the 2004 EP Election Campaign.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Political party websites (n=12)</th>
<th>Youth organization websites (n=18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Election content</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography/history/about us</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endorsements</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue positions</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speeches</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar/List of events</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison of issue positions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Info-electoral campaign process</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Info-voting process</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The reported number represents the total number of websites that contained each feature. There was a total of 18 youth organization websites and 12 political party youth branch websites.

Information features (see Table 5.4) provided explicit information about the organization to ensure visitors understood the aims and goals of the organization, but also served the purpose of highlighting real-world events that demonstrated what kind of activities the organizations found important to emphasize. Further, some of these features were explicitly campaign related (e.g., they provided election content or candidate information) while others contained campaign information as well as a more general focus (e.g., issue positions or listings of current events). Of the 12 total political party sites, seven provided specific election content.
This provision was less frequent on youth organizations sites (four out of the total 18 had this type of content). Since political parties had a direct stake in the election, this was to be expected. The overall result however was somewhat surprising: Only a third of websites chosen for their realistic potential to contain EP election campaign material actually did so. These 11 explicitly campaign-related websites are looked at in more detail later in the chapter.

Other websites, though not specifically featuring EP election information, did focus on Europe in other ways. Two UK youth organizations included in the analysis dealt with Europe directly, including the Euro-skeptical Youth for a Free Europe and the pro-European Young European Movement. Although both hold clear positions regarding Britain’s role in Europe, neither encouraged youth participation or provided information about the election campaign.

All seven youth political party websites that contained election-related material provided information about the candidates running for their party, except for the Young Greens and the Young Socialists. This feature often linked to the candidates’ non-MEP homepages (discussed later) and sometimes also provided candidate photos.

Issue positions, or statements of viewpoints the organization holds about relevant issues, appeared as text related to party manifestos for the election campaign. Ten of the political party sites listed issue positions, though none of the youth organizations presented this feature. An example was found on the website of the Young Communist League. They had a “What we stand for” link on the homepage, which directed visitors to a bulleted list of beliefs. The section also highlighted the democratic and revolutionary nature of the organization and its autonomy from the Communist Party. It also seemed much more focused on issues such as better wages for young people, anti-war, and pro-cannabis positions. To provide a richer evaluation for young people in helping them better understand relevant political issues, sites could list a comparison of issue positions with other political parties or organizations. However, only two political party websites provided this feature, and did this through highlighting issues of importance to young people.

It is of interest to examine what youth-focused websites are attempting to accomplish from a conventional view of citizenship. For example, one normative assumption inherent on these websites is that they should get young people to vote. Such a goal may be realized by examining whether or not these sites encourage voting behavior or provide voter registration or information. That said, both youth organizations and political party sites did fairly little to inform visitors about the basics of the campaigning process. Only four of the political party sites provided details about the electoral campaign process, though this is not an established function of political parties. More unexpected was the fact that more general, often education-focused
Youth organizations neglected this aspect. Information about the voting process (sometimes for the EP elections, sometimes for local elections), such as how to register to vote and where and when to vote, turned up on both types of websites: Four political parties and five youth organization websites supplied this information. Interestingly, two of the five youth organization websites with such information did not mention the current election. This may signify a deliberate lack of concern regarding the EP elections or, more probably, those in charge of the website simply did not update more general content to timely events.

Endorsements, defined here as support for a candidate for the European Parliament, were present on seven political party sites. There were a number of candidate mentions: Several parties endorsed young candidates from their organizations and in doing so, also promoted certain events where these candidates would be present and available for questions. This high number of party sites is partly explained by a campaign regulation in the UK: Incumbent MEPs were not allowed to use their current title or their official websites for the purpose of campaigning for reelection. Therefore it was up to party websites to promote their candidates online.

Generally, information features were found more often on political party youth websites than on those related to youth organizations. Since a number of these features can be seen to encompass campaign specific realms, and political parties are traditionally more involved in the election, this result is not surprising.

Engagement features

Engagement features (see Table 5.5) are characteristics that offer website visitors an opportunity to actively participate in the campaign or the organization as a whole, and these opportunities are usually available online and offline. The defining characteristic of these features is their (potentially) interactive nature, which facilitates communication with the political party or youth organization or even with other users by encouraging contact or by aiding the distribution of material, an example of transactional interactivity. As with information features, a number of engagement features had the potential to be campaign specific (e.g., writing public support statements for a candidate, running a campaign-related forum) though many encompassed general engagement opportunities in line with organizational aims (e.g., becoming a member or sending links to friends).

A relative large number of websites provided the option to join or become a member (eight youth organizations and eight party sites). On the Young Labour site, visitors were encouraged to pursue membership after being presented with an appeal to shared values with the
party itself as well as with other young people. The site also encouraged visitors to get involved in other, more explicitly electoral ways, like by helping the Labour party campaign and assisting in choosing candidates.

Table 5.5. Number of Websites Containing Engagement Features During the 2004 EP Election Campaign.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Political party websites (n=12)</th>
<th>Youth organization websites (n=18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact producer</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join/become a member</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register to vote</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get e-mail from site</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to forum space</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline dist. of material</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send links</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public support statement</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-paraphernalia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The reported number represents the total number of websites that contained each feature. There was a total of 18 youth organization websites and 12 political party youth branch websites.

Voter registration was a feature that allowed explicit means for the user to register to vote. In the context of this coding scheme, this differed from voter information, which focused on offering information about the voting process rather than enabling registration. Voter registration is crucial especially in the UK where voters need to register 30 days in advance of
Youth Websites During an Election Campaign

the election. Voter registration was made available by only a few websites (three youth organizations and four political party sites, all with campaign-related content), although it was technically possible for any website to provide access to voter registration forms.

Providing a forum is one way for organizations to make use of the internet’s interactive qualities; visitors could contribute to a communication space on four youth organization sites and three party sites. The Institute for Citizenship website ran a number of political discussion forums, some of which specifically dealt with the issue of European citizenship. Polls, though requiring less of a contribution from visitors, form another type of communication space, and allow individuals to voice their opinion about election issues. Throughout the campaign, on its homepage the Scottish Youth Parliament website made use of a “Euro voting” poll. Visitors were asked, “Will you be voting in the European Election in June?!” and could choose between three alternatives: “Elections…NO WAY!,” “I would but I’m under 18;” and “Yeah, I’ll be voting.”

Websites can also promote both online and offline distribution of campaign-related as well as other relevant material. Online, this is possible by enabling visitors to send campaign-related links or providing downloads of other online materials supporting the campaign. The chance to send links to friends or others was present on four websites. Only one youth organization and two youth branches of political parties provided e-paraphernalia (e.g., downloads of web banners, desktop wallpaper, or screensavers that promoted the electoral campaign, party, organization, or voting in general) on their sites. The Young European Movement announced on its homepage “Send your friends an e-card” and showed a sample of a postcard-shaped greeting that read “Euro Yes!” One more click and the visitor could preview six card options, some animated, and send the card to a chosen recipient. Sites encouraging offline distribution of materials (e.g., printable documents containing electoral campaign or election literature for distribution offline) were also not common; this strategy was present on only one youth organization and four political party sites.

Volunteer opportunities appeared on five of the youth organization sites and four party sites. This feature was often utilized by encouraging site visitors to submit a form with contact information or by promoting specific issue campaign volunteering. For example, The British Youth Council provided a list of current campaigns linked on the homepage, including topics such as getting the vote out or lowering the voting age to 16, and were often sponsored cooperatively with other, similar organizations.

In general, engagement features were offered more often than information features, suggesting that websites are providing opportunities to participate more than they promote
informational content. This was not the case on more general EP election websites analyzed through the Internet and Elections project: Though information features were common on these websites, opportunities for political action or discussion were not seen as often (Jankowski, et al., 2005). This contrast presents an interesting opportunity for further comparison between youth and non youth-focused websites. It could mean that youth-focused organizations recognize the importance of engaging internet-savvy youth (rather than just providing them with information), though such an inquiry goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Summarizing the feature analysis, the information feature most often available on both types of sites was biographical content about the organization. Conversely, the most notable difference was in the presentation of issue positions, which was entirely absent from youth organizations and present on almost three-quarters of political party sites. Variations in engagement feature provision were less prominent, though contacting the producer was almost always possible, and the largest difference was in the request for donations, which was used more often by youth branches of political parties.

5.4 Electoral focus and youth specifics

Drawing on the results of the feature analysis, I use these insights and turn to an exploratory qualitative analysis that provides a more in-depth look at three aspects of the websites: electoral focus, mode of address towards youth, and structure of participation.

An electoral focus: get out the vote

Political party sites provided election content more often than youth organization sites. Political party websites that contained election-related content were Young Labour, Conservative Future, Liberal Democrat Youth and Students, the Federation of Student Nationalists, Social Democrat and Labour Party (SDLP) Youth, Young Greens, and the Young Socialists. Youth organizations with such content included the British Youth Council, the Scottish Youth Parliament, HeadsUp, and The Site. This section provides a more in-depth look at these websites and examines a number of campaign specific features.

Differences in campaign focus were noted earlier between political parties and youth organizations: Political parties, particularly if running candidates, have a clear stake in the outcome of the election, while youth organizations take a more neutral stance in terms of who to vote for. Conservative Future offered one example of overt election promotion. When accessing the home page, a pop-up sticky note appeared, dimming the rest of the content. It reminded visitors to vote, encouraged their participation, and urged them to continue into the site. Overt
promotion also included specific endorsement for the party’s candidates. As noted earlier, with the exception of the Young Greens and the Young Socialists, all UK youth party websites provided information about the candidates running for their party. The Liberal Democrat Youth and Students website linked back to the main Liberal Democrats site, which provided a Euro candidate list on its homepage. SDLP youth listed Martin Morgan as the candidate, and a corresponding article included a reminder to vote on June 10. In contrast, the youth organizations did not run candidates and did not encourage voting in a particular direction, and instead focused on the more neutral message of the importance of voting.

This brings up an important similarity between the two types of websites. As a general rule all election-related websites framed the act of voting as a matter of good citizenship rather than one of political necessity to their organization. Even if political party sites were clearly aiming to recruit new members and promote their ideology, they often encouraged voting in general, but not always voting for them. A number of examples demonstrate how voting is considered a more general, civic value than a “vote for us” message. For example, Conservative Future included a homepage link to a “How do I…vote in elections?” section. The content provided is neutral, and included links to the Electoral Commission for more specific information about the voting process and how to register. This neutrality could in part be explained by the nature of second order elections, as observed by Blumler (1983).

Even those that were promoting candidates often stopped short of sending a partisan message to vote: Under the news section on the SNP Students website, an article reported on meeting with the European candidate Alyn Smith. In passing, the article encouraged voting/getting out the vote, but presented no links or further information. The Young Greens showed a slight exception: They included a banner asking visitors to “Vote Green” but with no other explicit information about how to follow this partisan calling. Young Labour states, “Our aims: To get young people involved, persuade them to vote and join Labour and to help them bring about a better society built on Labour’s values” makes clear their bias towards Labour policies but still maintained a neutral voting message (not “vote Labour”) even though a vote for Labour is implied.

As expected this trend towards neutral voting promotion, though rather diverse on party political sites, excelled on the youth organization websites, at least on the small number that did provide it. The British Youth Council’s (BYC) main contribution to the cause was supporting a prominent “Get Out the Vote” youth campaign, which provided information about voting and how to register. This was mainly due to their involvement in the Youth Voting Network, which brought together 30 youth democracy organizations aiming “to develop and promote action to
encourage young people’s participation in the democratic process, particularly voting.” The Site (information for young people) is a general “guide to life” for young adults aged 16-25. It provided information on a wide range of topics deemed relevant for youth (e.g., health, careers, legal), and campaign-wise, provided page entitled “Voting for Dummies,” explaining why and how to vote, linking to the Electoral Commission and provided all necessary information to get young people to the polls or submit a postal vote. The article began by asking the question, “Why vote?” “Voting and elections are important parts of a working democracy. It's easy to think your vote won't count, but if nobody made the effort we wouldn't have an accountable government (one that answers to you, comrade, the people).” HeadsUp also professed a normative view on the virtues of voting and provided the most (potential) interaction with politicians and among young people themselves. The forum on Europe was scheduled for May 3-14, and although the HeadsUp target audience is mainly under voting age (the forum is designed for school-aged youth under 18) it was meant to arouse interest during the election campaign. As noted, there were two additional youth organization websites that included information about the voting process in general but did not mention the current election (Youth Information, which also provided a comprehensive section on Europe, and YouthNet Northern Ireland, the voluntary youth network for Northern Ireland).

Particularly through this focus on voting, political party youth branches and youth organizations active in the campaign demonstrate a number of ways to promote the EP election and encourage young visitors to get involved. Next, I provide a closer look at what makes these websites particularly attractive to young people, both in terms of mode of address and structure of participation.

Mode of address

Mode of address was found in specific youth language or more general referrals to youth culture. Using more casual language presumably assumed to be more familiar to youth was a common tactic. As noted earlier, a “Euro voting” poll on the Scottish Youth Parliament website demonstrated such language use in its answer options: “Elections…NO WAY!,” “I would but I’m under 18;” and “Yeah, I’ll be voting.” In general, such a poll would be appropriate on any citizenship-related site, but the use of all caps and informal language (e.g., “yeah,”), seem directed at a younger audience.

But youth-specific elements were also present in a less overt way. The above poll gave three general options: yes, no, and under 18. The designers of the poll seemed to recognize that many of their visitors would be unable to participate in the election, not because they were not
inclined to vote but because they were unable to. Such references to youth-specific elements
were present on all sites, down to the names of the organizations. The Site, in their “Voting for
Dummies” section, announced with a flair: “So long as you know how to make a cross on a bit
of paper, we’ll hold your hand for the hard bit.”

Conservative Future had a prominent section on “Your Future;” Young Labour appealed
to shared values with other young people and also challenged visitors in the following way:
“Don’t like it? Change it:”

You probably feel passionately about certain issues. Have you ever thought of
putting your beliefs into practice? These days it’s often said to be uncool to be
involved in politics, but this website is about finding out more and getting
involved.

Young Labour continued by addressing issues that they saw as
important to youth but then highlighted why participation in traditional politics was so
important:

What do you care about? The environment, standards in education, the health
service, job prospects, or the time at which pubs close? Single-issue pressure
groups have a role to play on certain issues but they can only go so far. They
exist to fight a corner and you can choose which of them you get involved in.
But on the big issues what really matters is who runs the country.

That might sound old hat – and there are always cynics and doom-mongers who
say politics is irrelevant or boring – but nothing could be further from the truth.
Who runs the country affects you every day of your life. From education
standards and problems with crime, to public spending or the price of a new car.

Politics is too important to ignore or ridicule. And when you are 18 and you can
vote - it’s important to exercise that right. So stop shouting if you disagree with
the politicians you see on the telly, and get involved…

This provided a good example of both a casual approach to youth language and also
touched on a number of things that have been deemed relevant to youth, including an
assumption that politics is unfashionable or boring, a belief that youth are primarily concerned
with issues and at the same time, do not see a need to participate in traditional politics, and a
number of statements designed to convince youth of the importance of participation. This
example provides a bridge to the next area of interest: the structure of participation that is
encouraged on these websites.
Structure of participation

All party and organization websites encouraged youth participation either implicitly or explicitly. In terms of the election campaign, as detailed earlier the importance of voting was made explicit on a number of websites. At the same time the need to focus on issues relevant to young people was clear. For example, the Liberal Democrats Youth and Students ran separate campaigns for youth-specific “Scrap Tuition Fees” and “Votes at 16.”

As in the earlier example with Young Labour, however, political party websites often worked to connect this issue interest back to party politics. For example, the Young Greens described themselves and their goals in the following way:

Young Greens is a new movement harnessing the energy and ideas of young people to change the direction of our society. Our vision is of a fair, democratic and sustainable future, where individual freedoms and contributions are protected and valued. We’ve realised that if we want to change the way our society works, we need to use our democratic system and put forward a positive alternative. It’s not enough to campaign on single issues.

Sometimes young people were also encouraged to email their MP, or generally seek relevant information online, and participate in campaigns or volunteer, which involved contacting and meeting people offline. Conversely, one organization that explicitly encouraged the online is HeadsUp, an online debating platform. This initiative is part of the Hansard Society, a charity that promotes “effective parliamentary democracy through education, information and opportunities for participation.” Funded by the Electoral Commission, each forum (conducted primarily via school classrooms, though students can also participate from their home computers) provides an in-depth introduction to the issue, key arguments, and lists relevant articles and websites. Debate preparation is taken seriously and young people are encouraged to construct arguments in deliberative ways. Forums are moderated by “The Heads,” avatars that control certain aspects of the debates (e.g., “Justice”) and specific instructions about proper conduct are made clear to participants before the debates begin. These examples demonstrate that on the websites analyzed here, the structure of participation goes beyond election campaign objectives and encompasses a sometimes-broader view of citizenship.

5.5 Discussion

Chapter 5 provides an initial analysis of data available during the 2004 EP election campaign. Results reported here are relatively descriptive in nature, and in terms of the
theoretical background advanced here election data do not allow a great deal of interpretative possibilities. The final section of this chapter holds several functions: It first summarizes the empirical research presented here, it relates the empirical research back to the theoretical model of this dissertation, and it provides a brief explanation of the theoretical and methodological progression to the next empirical chapter.

*Election campaigns and youth address*

This empirical study looks at the ways in which political websites (youth political party and organization websites) address young people during the 2004 EP election campaign. The current dissertation research attempts to understand how the concept of citizenship is addressed online, so it is relevant to start by looking at a traditional event, such as an election campaign, in order to document what is on offer.

As the survey results demonstrate, youth organizations are facing the challenge of trying to reach a group that is not actively participating in (electoral) politics, either online or offline. However, young people often use the internet and are confident in their ability to look for information and learn new skills online, which may be a good reason for these organizations to make an effort to reach this age cohort via websites. Within the 30 websites analyzed, only 11 provide explicit election information. This relatively low showing mirrored a lack of interest present on general UK-based EP election sites (Lusoli & Ward, 2004). Local elections were held simultaneously as well as the election of the London Mayor, and these races sometimes drew more interest from citizens and political elites. The European Cup also took place during the campaign, possibly distracting citizens from a more political focus on Europe and the second order election at hand. But such a minor campaign focus goes beyond other, external events (electoral or non-) that may have contributed to a lack of interest. It also shows that party and organizations seem to perceive this arena of youth disinterest, and further content analysis reveals other strategies to reach young people.

Although particularly youth organizations seemingly did not find it important to focus on this election campaign, they still made an effort to address youth as citizens, by using youth-friendly language, focusing on issues that they deemed important to young people, and building an online space to encourage the participation of their target group. Chapter 6 provides a further exploration of what youth are doing online and looks in more detail at whether web producers have chosen a focus that can be said to be linked to the reality of youth citizenship.

*Bringing back the theoretical model*
Turning back to the theoretical model, two general conclusions can be drawn from this chapter. The first is found in what type of citizenship is inherent in the available content: Results here show a clear focus on conventional citizenship. The second relates to the use of particular internet features in facilitating either strategic or reflexive communication: Websites overwhelmingly chose to communicate strategically rather than reflexively, though scattered examples of reflexive communication do exist. Figure 5.1 provides a summary of the placement of these websites within the theoretical model.

Figure 5.1. Communication Strategies of (Conventional) Websites During the EP Election Campaign.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic communication (type 1): Strategic communication on conventional websites dominated.</th>
<th>Non-conventional organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Goal-oriented: increase voter turnout (only on political party sites); increase youth political involvement more generally (both)</td>
<td>Type 2: N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Persuasive: information features often promote the party/organization’s point of view (e.g. “about us” sections)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One-way communication &amp; transactional interactivity: most content does not encourage interactivity; young people are often encouraged to provide information to the party or organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Top-down: content appears to be exclusively produced by the party/organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflexive communication (type 3): Reflexive communication on conventional websites was thin. Certain features do hint at reflexivity.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Goal-modifying: no evidence</td>
<td>Type 4: N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Responsive: youth language attempts to demonstrate an understanding of youth political culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coproducive interactivity: potentially present on websites with forums</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bottom-up: no evidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, websites included in the analysis were chosen for their potential to provide information and/or encourage participation in the election campaign. Theoretically, such a focus can be seen as fitting the realm of conventional
citizenship, and websites do match these criteria, demonstrating this view at least from a content standpoint. This is particularly true on the political party sites, given their electoral focus.

At the same time, conventional citizenship does entail more than electoral participation, and some organizations here did indeed focus on participation outside the campaign. A lack of electoral focus could simply be a failure to update web content for current events, but it is also possible that politically motivated organizations are channeling their efforts elsewhere for specific reasons. Some organizations appear to see election campaigns as less important for citizenship, reflecting the idea that political engagement needs to be more of a permanent activity.

The presence of certain features shows that engagement can occur in broader, more unconventional activities like volunteering. For example, on the youth organization websites, observations reveal that engagement is more often framed as general participation, rather than an explicit encouragement to participate in the election campaign. Additionally, joining a youth organization provides an invitation for young people to participate, but such a request did not necessarily relate to electoral participation. Such examples demonstrate that political websites also exist within this context in order to promote a broader perspective on citizenship beyond electoral politics. However, they do not meet the requirements of this dissertation’s definition of non-conventional citizenship, such as a primary focus on single-issue campaigns. This is also a result of the fact that the empirical focus in this chapter was on more conventional (i.e., electoral) aims. Figure 5.1 thus places all websites analyzed here under conventional citizenship, leaving an analysis of non-conventional organizations for later chapters.

The view of communication in this dissertation focuses on strategic and reflexive strands. Particularly in reference to the feature analysis conducted here, I examined information and engagement features and also other content relevant to voting, youth, and participation. The websites primarily fit the notion of strategic communication (within organizations geared towards conventional citizenship). Strategic communication is readily observable both in terms of information features and also most engagement features. This conclusion is illustrated by looking at one of the most frequently coded features, “about us” sections or biographies about the organizations: Party or organizational biographies function as a clear way to provide visitors information about the goals and aims of the producer.

Strategic – but also possibly reflexive – aims are also clear when going back to the very existence of the youth branch. Political parties have decided that youth should be addressed in a particular way, separate from adults, so the very existence of the party and its website points to an adaptation to this audience. This is also the case for youth organizations that hope to make
Youth feel welcome and (virtually) surrounded by likeminded others. Some interesting discrepancies can however be highlighted between political party and youth organization websites.

Strategic communication on the part of youth political parties is often aimed at a successful election outcome. Strategically speaking, the political party youth branch hopes to encourage its young members to vote. Therefore by providing information about candidates and encouraging them to vote in the election, through such information provision they hope to attain this goal by increasing voter turnout (for the party). At the same time, even with a clearly strategic goal to increase turnout, parties seemed to recognize that a normative level, they embrace the importance of voting in the greater context of democratic citizenship. Therefore they sometimes choose their language to be more neutral – rather than the few that say “vote for me” it was more often phrased as “voting allows you to have your say.” Strategic content therefore encourages support for the party but at the same time lets the young visitor know that voting for voting’s sake is an approved behavior.

Youth organizations take a different strategic route, as their aim seems more focused around a general desire to see young people participate as citizens, and electoral participation is only one example of this engagement. On both types of websites, reflexivity for this clearly electoral aim was absent. For example, there was no content that explored the relative importance of electoral participation (such as voting) for general citizenship. No matter how it was delivered, the importance of voting was presenting in a strategic, conventional manner.

Other features hint at a reflexive aim. For example, contact information may demonstrate possibilities for young people to shape the content and see their personal contributions manifest online, though specific references to this feedback were not observed. Drawing again on Xenos and Foot’s (2007) conceptualization of interactivity, transactional interactivity (here: strategic communication) is carefully managed and helps to strategically place organizations. Engagement features analyzed here seem to fit this definition much more than that of coproductive interactivity, which they say is favored by young users and allows for user-control. Websites that maintain forums may provide an example of coproductive interactivity, but such content was only examined on a surface level so such a conclusion is difficult to make based on this analysis. Results demonstrate that reflexive communication is lacking online. At the same time, by definition reflexive communication is difficult to grasp without gaining a deeper understanding of why certain content is chosen by producers, and will be expanded on more in later empirical work in this dissertation.
Given the theoretical background of this dissertation it is relevant to move forward by looking outside the context of election campaigns and at a non-electoral time period. It is also relevant to select websites from a wider political spectrum, which can be classified as conventional or non-conventional, based on an initial examination of their content and mission. This first empirical study did find differences between the two website categories, political party youth branches and youth organizations, though they were both classified as conventional. However, given the new scope of inquiry, I next focus on organizations that, at least explicitly, are linked to the current political system (those with a conventional view of citizenship) as well as those that are distanced or in opposition to the current political system (non-conventional). Details of this division are reviewed in the next chapter.