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Keeping up with the Murphys? Candidate cyber-campaigning in the 2007 Irish General Election.¹

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Abstract

This article addresses the factors that influenced candidates' likelihood of cyber-campaigning in the 2007 Irish General Election. We consider the roles of party affiliation and support as well as intra-party competition, candidates' monetary and political resources and the marginality of the electoral race. We also provide the first empirical test to date of whether candidates' decisions to cyber-campaign are influenced by the behaviour of their direct political opponents. Monetary resources, party affiliation and the behaviour of opponents are found to have statistically significant effects on the probability of a candidate conducting a cyber-campaign.

Introduction

THE internet holds significant potential advantages for politicians engaged in campaigning compared to traditional broadcast and print media. Online campaigning offers candidates enhanced editorial control over their campaign, firstly because site content can be straightforwardly amended and updated in real-time, and secondly because candidate and party websites allow politicians to communicate directly with their audience without recourse to external media actors. Online political activism allows citizens to participate in campaigns from the comfort of their offices or homes at whatever time suits them; it removes nearly all of the conventional geographic and time constraints involved in creating and maintaining political communities, and it represents a potentially revolutionary form of revenue generation for political campaigns. It has even been suggested that the internet may help parties to cope with the declining levels of party activism that have been observed in many representative democracies.² Also, on a more practical level, web sites are comparatively cheap to establish and maintain. The enormous benefits of technically adept internet usage for political campaigns were recently made evident with the success of the 'barakobama.com' site as a vehicle for fundraising, communicating with supporters, and as a forum for volunteers to organise their own support networks during the US presidential election campaign. Indeed, it has been argued that the internet has the potential to radically transform political campaigning generally; with 'post-modern'³ or 'post fordist'⁴ campaigns allowing individual candidates a greater capacity to customize and localize their campaigns, enhancing the interaction and participation of voters.

Parties and candidates seeking to exploit the potential of the internet have adopted numerous online campaigning instruments including party websites, candidate websites, online blogs, fund-raising sites, online broadcasts and debates, and many have created profiles on social networking sites such as facebook.com, myspace.com and lately on multimedia sharing platforms such as flickr.com, where voters can register as 'friends' of candidates or parties and post public comments of support. The presence of candidate and party websites, as well as the increasingly proclivity of political actors to hi-jack social-networking sites have been most notable in the USA, but have also been observed across a growing range of political systems. It would seem that these activities are not without rewards for those politicians who pursue them; the political science research that has been conducted heretofore consistently indicates that candidates who conduct online campaigns win a greater number of votes than those who do not.⁵

However, cyber-campaigning remains a relatively novel phenomenon in the political sphere; contemporary politicians vary considerably in the extent and sophistication of their internet usage, with several not yet having any web presence whatsoever. The broader literature on the relationship between political life and the internet is characterized by something of a schism between those 'cyber-optimists' who view the internet as a medium capable of transforming the political sphere to empower previously marginalized actors and to broaden popular participation in political decision-making⁶ and those who argue that politics online will not differ radically from 'politics as usual'.⁷ Certainly, the internet has significant democratizing potential; it facilitates far greater levels of user participation than other mainstream media and the relatively low costs involved in establishing a web presence indicate that the internet could provide a more level playing field for competing political groups.⁸ However, dominant political actors may well be able to convert their resources in the offline world into dominance in the online word. Actors' resources matter firstly because, while the medium is inexpensive compared to print and mass communications media, there are still some costs to politicians in terms of time spent acquiring expertise or

employing a consultant to build and maintain a functional website. Those politicians with full-time staff dedicated to campaigning are more likely to be able to meet the costs involved in making full use of online campaign instruments. Secondly, the success of online campaigning is, to a degree at least, subject to the interest and attention generated for the campaign in the mainstream media, so candidates that are marginalized in the offline world will struggle to attract large numbers of viewers to their web sites.⁹ If patterns of uptake of cyber-campaigning mirror real-world disparities in terms of resources and political affiliation, this would lend credence to the contention that the internet will not radically transform political life.

Furthermore, there remains considerable debate about which factors exert the greatest influence over a politician's decision to go online during a campaign. It is not clear that cyber-campaigning is always a straightforward vote-pursuing tactic. While the findings of several research papers¹⁰ do point to a positive relationship between cyber-campaigning and electoral performance, the discussions that accompany these findings indicate that they occur in spite of generally low levels of usage and interest in such sites by the public at large. Moreover the observed positive effects of cyber-campaigning on electoral performance may not be wholly attributable to the *direct* vote-winning effects of cyber-campaigns,¹¹ as pointed out by D'Alessio in the 1996 US House of Representatives election, and subsequently by Gibson and McAllister for both the 2004 and the 2007 Australian federal elections. An alternative proposition is that there is a degree of peer-pressure at play in political actors deciding to go online; Gibson et al. argue that, for political parties 'even though parties were uncertain of the tangible benefits, it seems the risk of not having a website and giving your opponents an edge was a great stimulus to moving online.'¹²

This study focuses on campaigning online in the Irish political system. We provide a descriptive analysis of the types of web activities undertaken by candidates during the campaign, before investigating those factors that made an individual candidate more or less likely to campaign online. We address this question using data gathered from the 2007 Irish general election campaign. As well as improving our understanding of the Irish context, this study significantly expands the scope of research on the uptake of new media technologies by political actors. Most importantly, we provide the first evaluation in the literature of the extent to which a candidate's web activities are attributable to the behaviour of their direct competitors in their constituency. The possibility that politicians' presence online is a case of 'Keeping up with the Jones's' (or, in the Irish context, 'Keeping up with the Murphys') has been discussed, but not empirically tested, in the extant literature. We find that politicians are significantly more likely to launch campaign sites when a large proportion of their competitors in a constituency have done so, and that this is the case even when the levels of internet penetration within each constituency are controlled for. We also provide the first evaluation of the role of intra-party competitiveness on the likelihood of a candidate to cyber-campaign. We do so while controlling for candidate monetary and political resources and party affiliation across the universe of candidates in the 2007 Irish election.

The 2007 Irish General Election cyber-campaign

Ireland represents a fascinating case study for the uptake of internet technologies by political candidates; Marsh has argued that 'Irish elections are certainly not prime examples of the post-modern, post-fordist era'¹³ and traditional door-to-door campaigning by candidates and teams of assistants remains highly significant. Indeed, sixty per cent of the population reported that contact was made with their homes by either candidates or volunteers representing candidates in the 2007 election campaign.¹⁴ The pervasiveness of

traditional campaigning techniques in Irish politics may mean that online campaigning instruments are seen as more of a luxury than in other contexts, and our data shows that only a third of candidates launched personal campaign sites in the run up to the election. On the other hand, candidates in Irish elections face significant pressure to distinguish themselves from their party colleagues, as in most constituencies several candidates face opponents from within their own party. Online campaigning represents a relatively efficient way to mark oneself apart from one's party. Furthermore, Ireland has not been immune to the growth in internet usage and access that has taken place in liberal democracies over the past two decades, and the latest census data places Ireland slightly above the EU average with 57% of Irish households having some form of internet access in 2007.¹⁵ New media technologies have been a discernable part of Irish political life for over a decade now, as the first Irish party made its debut online in 1998, with the launch of Sinn Féin's website, and the other main parties have swiftly followed suit. However, to date there has been a dearth of data collection and analysis on internet usage in Irish politics; this research seeks to address that lacuna.

Observers of the 2007 Irish general election campaign argued that internet usage by politicians was more prevalent than in any previous Irish election.¹⁶ Several candidates employed social networking sites; launching bebo, facebook and myspace profiles where other users could view the candidates' blogs and commentaries, upload comments or register as 'friends'. The Greens and PDs experimented with launching party political broadcasts online. All major parties had election campaign websites, though there was discernable variation in the quality of these sites, with the PDs lagging somewhat behind the other parties in terms of navigability and presentation.

In this section we present some data from the 2007 Irish module of the Comparative Candidate Studies Project on the candidates' use of the ICT campaigning tools during the 2007 campaign period.¹⁷ We use this data to present a snapshot of the types of web-activities undertaken by candidates in the 2007 campaign. For our explanatory analysis of factors influencing the likelihood of cyber-campaigning, we employ data gathered for all candidates participating in the election.

The survey contained a set of questions dedicated to the investigation of the forms of internet presence that candidates decided to establish during the campaign. Table 1 below summarizes the responses to these questions. Candidates were firstly asked whether they had a web presence during the campaign, without specifying what sort of page this was (i.e. a party-related page, an independent web page, a blog etc.), or who was in charge of maintaining it. The first descriptive finding is that 70% of the candidates were present online either during the campaign; on their parties' web pages and/or with their own personal pages.

Candidates were then offered a number of different options of possible forms of online presence and asked to indicate which ones they had employed during the campaign. More than half of the sampled candidates advertised web pages and email addresses on their campaign literature. Emails were used by 44% of the sample to organise activities and/or distribute information. The figures on interactive features provided by the candidates are quite low, indicating that a top-down form of communication is mostly preferred to a more interactive approach, which could fully exploit the internet's potential for voter engagement. This finding is in line with previous studies that have indicated that politicians tend to be disinclined to employ the user-generated features of the internet,¹⁸ fearing that these instruments hand agenda control during the campaign over to outside (and potentially

hostile) actors. Indeed, only 9% of candidates sampled stated that they had participated in two-way online ‘chats’ with voters. Blogs, however, are a relatively popular tool with 25% of sampled candidates stating that they had one, which is a high level of use for blogs when compared to figures from other countries. For instance in Germany, in 2005, only 10% of candidates were found to have employed blogs as reported by Zittel.¹⁹ Less popular among candidates is the practice of posting video on web; two party leaders (Pat Rabbitte of Labour and Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin) posted videos in support of their party, but this application does not appear to be widely used by ordinary candidates.

1. Percentages of candidates’ online activities

	Yes	No
Did you have an online presence during the campaign?	70%	30%
I advertised my web page and/or email address on campaign literature	64%	36%
I used email lists to distribute information and organise activities	44%	56%
I used a blog during my campaign	25%	75%
I posted a personal campaign video on the web	12%	88%
I conducted a number of online chats with voters	9%	91%

Source: Comparative Candidate Studies Project, Irish General Election 2007.

Overall, the picture emerging from the candidates’ point of view indicates a relatively high level of use of at least some form of online campaign instrument. Only a small proportion of candidates, however, used highly interactive or user-generated features – with most preferring to use the internet as a tool for information provision. It is also evident that there is significant variation among candidates with regard to their use of the internet during the campaign. It is this variance that we seek to explain in the analytic component of the article.

How and why do candidates go online?

In this section we outline the factors considered to be important in explaining candidates’ online presence derived from previous studies in this area, and discuss our measurement of the activities of opposing candidates in some detail. The models developed in the literature so far refer to a small number of empirical studies, so that a comprehensive account of the reasons why candidates would decide to set up an online presence simply does not exist. Nonetheless, there are several patterns that have been noted in previous studies and these patterns and their underlying causes are discussed here.

It is logical to believe that, in marginal constituencies, candidates would use any campaign medium that could potentially allow them to win the electoral race, even if that medium could only swing a small number of votes.²⁰ As such, a hypothesis commonly tested in the literature is that candidates in more marginal constituencies should be more likely to launch personal campaign websites. Findings with regard to this hypothesis have been somewhat mixed, however. For example, Gibson and McAllister found that ‘the marginality of the constituency has no effect on whether a candidate has a website’ in the 2004 Australian federal election campaign²¹ and Jackson found no effect for marginality on cyber-campaigning in the UK.²² On the other hand, Ward and Lusoli²³ and Zittel²⁴ found that

marginality played a role in explaining candidates' web presence in the UK and Germany respectively, with candidates in marginal constituencies being more likely to launch a site than in non-marginal constituencies. Finally, in a recent comparative paper, it was found that that marginality has a significant impact in the UK and a non-significant impact in Australia.²⁵ We test this hypothesis in the Irish case at the candidate level, assessing whether candidates are more likely to establish campaign websites when their chances of winning a seat are marginal.

Party affiliation is also a crucial factor to consider when seeking to explain candidates' online campaigns. Gibson et al. claim that party culture and the levels of demand among party memberships for online content can influence candidates' decisions to go online. There are also more practical reasons why party affiliation might matter, candidates might seek resources from their parties with regards to web design templates or consultations, and members of smaller parties may feel that the web offers them a better chance of publicising their campaigns compared to the mainstream media.²⁶ The impact of party affiliation on whether a candidate establishes an online presence is a complicated issue, however, and one which requires a clear elaboration at the empirical level. Party affiliation may represent something different from party support, and we need to control for both elements. Gibson and McAllister's analysis includes an index of party support (at the candidate level) separate from party affiliation, with both being controlled for in the analysis.²⁷ We follow this approach, measuring party support in terms of resources allocated by the party to each candidate while controlling for the candidates' party affiliation. As well as the party affiliation of each candidate, we also investigate whether levels of intra-party competition influence candidates' decisions to go online during the campaign. The Irish electoral system often pits numerous candidates from the same party against each other in a given constituency. Moreover, if parties provide every candidate with some space on the party website, the only way for a candidate to distinguish themselves from their party competitors online is to launch an independent webpage. The theoretical intuition here is that, *ceteris paribus*, as the level of intra-party competition increases, candidates should be more likely to conduct a cyber-campaign.

The characteristics of the electorate in terms of socio-economic status and demographics are also believed to exercise an influence on the candidates' decision to establish an online presence as more wealthy areas are likely to have higher levels of internet access and usage among voters.²⁸ We take a very specific measure at the constituency-level with regard to new media technologies. We examine whether the ratio of homes with internet access in a constituency has any bearing on candidate's launching a personal website. Our expectation here is that candidates may be more likely to launch campaign websites in constituencies with higher levels of internet access.

It has also been pointed out that the candidates themselves explain their internet presence on the basis of their own individual-level attributes, for instance young candidates are expected to be more prone to establish an online presence compared to older candidates. However the socio-economic profile of candidates has been proved non-significant in previous studies.²⁹ Rather than focusing on candidates' demographic characteristics, we look at the resources that are available to them with regard to both monetary and political factors. While establishing a web presence is not necessarily an expensive undertaking (web domains can be registered for as little as 25 euro with a range of companies) our expectation is that campaigns with larger budgets are more likely to establish web domains and employ experts to update and maintain their sites. A further commonly measured resource is the incumbency status of the candidate, with incumbents often held to be more likely to have

developed an online identity than non-incumbents due to the resource advantages accruing to office holders. Finally, the political experience of a candidate generally might influence the decision to establish a web presence –as pointed out by Gibson and McAllister³⁰ - therefore we control for the number of years the candidates have spent as parliamentarians.

In summary there are both empirical observations and theoretically coherent reasons to believe that the following factors should be accounted as powerful explanation of candidates' online presence: marginality, party affiliation, intra-party competition, party support, incumbency, individual-level political resources and constituency characteristics. Measures seeking to examine the predictive power of all of these explanations are included in the analytical model.

Apart from the above-described explanations of candidates' decision to campaign online, this study examines the influence of the online activities of candidates' rivals. We argue that, as the proportion of a candidate's constituency-level opponents using ICT campaign tools increases, the probability that a candidate establishes an online presence should also increase. The explanation underlying this proposition is relatively straightforward, and has been discussed in previous investigations.³¹ Firstly, having a campaign website is not only a means of winning votes; it may also be useful as a signal of certain traits of a candidate/campaign. For instance, having a website may serve to indicate that a candidate is aware of and able to use cutting-edge technologies and that their campaign organisation is professionalised and modern in orientation. In a situation where candidate websites are very unusual, their use may not be necessary for a candidate to signal these credentials. However, as candidate campaign websites become more common, those candidates not possessing a website may come to feel greater pressure to launch one, rather than look less modern, professional etc. than their opponents. This generates what Gary Selnow describes as a 'me too' effect³² at the candidate-level. Therefore, providing a control for the proportion of direct opponents of a candidate who are cyber-campaigning could add an important piece to the overall puzzle of why some candidates campaign online while others do not.

The variable that we construct to analyse the 'me too' effect represents a measure, for each candidate, of the proportion of their direct opponents in the constituency who have a campaign website.

The measure is calculated as follows:³³

$$W/O$$

Where, for each candidate, W is the number of opposing candidates with a personal campaign website in their constituency and O is the total number of opposing candidates in their constituency. The next section will briefly provide an account of the collection of the data employed for our analysis of online campaigning in the Irish 2007 general election.

Data collection

The literature on the use of new media technologies by political actors has tended to take parties as units of analysis; however recent studies have observed significant intra-party variation in candidates' online activities. The assumption that political parties can be considered as unitary actors, which is fundamental in many sub fields of political science, is therefore not made in this article.³⁴ This approach is particularly appropriate in Ireland, where the 'application of the single transferable vote (STV) in multi-member constituencies

gives an unusual degree of freedom to the voter to choose between candidates.’³⁵

Candidate web-campaigning

The dependent variable in this study is a dichotomous measure at the candidate level coded ‘1’ when a candidate launched a personal campaign website and ‘0’ when no such website was launched. This data was generated during the official campaign period for the 2007 election. Candidates’ websites were identified by looking at online directories (such as mycandidate.ie) and by employing Google searches with the candidates’ names and surnames as search strings.

A significant proportion of candidates launched personalised campaign websites. Over the entire population of 470 candidates, 152 had personal websites (a third of the population). This is a far smaller number than those having some representation on their party’s web pages; as all of the biggest parties: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Green Party and the Labour Party had spaces dedicated to individual candidates on the party websites. Table 2 details the distribution of candidates who launched personal campaign websites grouped by political party – we see that Fianna Fáil had the highest proportion of candidates with personalised campaign websites, and Sinn Féin had by far the lowest proportion. The partisan patterns of candidate campaigns are discussed in detail in the analysis section.

2.Frequencies of candidates’ personal web pages by party.

<i>Party:</i>	<i>%Yes</i>	<i>%No</i>
Fianna Fáil	53	47
Labour	36	64
Greens	34	66
Fine Gael	29	71
Progressive Democrats	23	77
Sinn Féin	5	95
Independents	31	69

Expenditure Data

The public availability of detailed data on campaign spending in Irish elections is still a relatively new development. The 2007 general election was the third to have taken place since the introduction of the Electoral Act (1997) and only the second under which the full provisions of the act with regard to disclosure of and upper bounds on expenditure have applied. The reported expenditure is broken down into expenses incurred by the candidate’s election agent and expenditure incurred by the party’s national agent on the candidate.³⁶ Spending is measured over a common period; defined by the 1997 legislation as the period between the official dissolution of government and the day of the election. In the case of the 2007 election, the campaign period began on 29 April 2007 and concluded on 24 May 2007 – a total of 26 days. Spending limits are imposed on both candidates and parties, depending on the size of the constituency – spending cannot exceed €30,150, €37,650, €45,200 for 3, 4 and 5 seat constituencies respectively. While these limits are set relatively low, they do not impose an artificial ‘low-ceiling’ which every candidate spends. Rather, there is meaningful variation in candidate expenditure – with the median candidate in the 2007 elections spending €16,693 in total and an inter-quartile range of €3,213 to €22,942.

Given the restricted period during which campaign expenses are recorded it is probable that the measure fails to capture spending as part of longer term campaigns or even 'permanent campaigns' conducted by candidates. While this is a concern, we would echo Benoit and Marsh's argument³⁷ that it is unlikely that those candidates who spend heavily on organisation and campaigning outside of the official campaign period would suddenly stop spending during this period. Rather, it is probable that patterns of spending during the electoral period are broadly reflective of the patterns of spending generally, even though they may only represent a small proportion of overall spending for some candidates.

Marginality and intra-party competition

Any empirical analysis of cyber-campaigning has to deal with the concept of marginality. Given the peculiar characteristics of the PR-STV electoral system, the operationalization of marginality is particularly difficult. In single-member districts marginality is generally established on the basis of the difference in the share of vote between the first and the second most voted-for candidates; if such a difference is less than 10% the constituency is considered marginal. In the Irish case, however, it is more appropriate to measure marginality at the candidate level.

Our measure of marginality was based on Gallagher's observation that 'if a candidate won above 0.65 of a quota they had a good chance of election, if they won 0.5–0.65 they had an even chance, if they won less than 0.5 they had little chance' (2002: 112).³⁸ Given this assertion, we took the midpoint of Gallagher's 'marginal' category (.575) and measured the absolute distance of each candidate from that point. As the distance increases, candidates increasingly become either 'safe' with a surplus of votes, or 'no hopers' with a very small vote share. As the distance decreases, candidates approach the marginal position of having an even chance of being voted in. The expected relationship here is therefore a negative one, as our measure increases (i.e. the candidate becomes less marginal); the likelihood of a candidate having a website should decrease. Obviously, this measure gives an *a posteriori* account of marginality, while the theoretical account of the role of marginality refers to a candidate's perception of their marginality in the run-up to the election. However, we would argue that data from the 2007 election is more reflective of the true marginality of a given candidate in that election than data from the previous election.

We also seek to measure the amount of intra-party competition that each candidate was subject to in the election. In order to do so we measure, for each candidate, the number of candidates from the same party running in their constituency. To control for variations in constituency size, we divide this figure by the district magnitude of the constituency. The intuition behind this approach is that a candidate faces a higher level of intra-party competition when they have two party colleagues running in a three seat constituency than when they have two party colleagues running in a five seat constituency. As this measure increases, the level of intra-party competition faced by the candidate increases.

Constituency characteristics

Data on constituency characteristics are taken from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and they are based on the 2006 Census, therefore they represent a fairly fresh snapshot of Irish society, and they offer an overview at the electoral constituency-level. The measure of internet penetration is the number of internet connections per household in the constituency.

Candidate Characteristics

Data on candidates' party affiliation, incumbency status and years spent in the Dáil (Irish parliament), were gathered from publicly available sources (SIPO, Houses of Oireachtas, electionsireland.org and mycandidate.ie) by the authors.

Empirical analysis

The causal model predicting the likelihood of a candidate having a campaign website is tested using a logistic regression specification. The unit of analysis is an individual candidate in the 2007 Irish general election. The analysis of the changes in probability of a candidate having a website at different levels of the independent variables is implemented with the `qsim` command in the `clarify` package in STATA.³⁹ The theoretical account above indicated that the marginality of the electoral race, candidates' political affiliations, intra-party competition levels in a candidate's constituency, candidates' levels of monetary resources and political experience, the characteristics of the constituency in terms of internet usage, as well as the activities of direct competitors should all exert some influence over a candidate's decision to campaign online. Combining these factors, we evaluate the following casual model of a candidates' probability of campaigning online:

$$pj^i = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-z}}$$

Where:

$$z = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6 + \beta_7 X_7 + \beta_8 X_8 + \beta_9 X_9$$

pj = Probability of having a campaign website

X_1 = incumbency

X_2 = marginality

X_3 = party affiliation

X_4 = campaign expenses (candidate)

X_5 = campaign expenses (party)

X_6 = candidate political resources

X_7 = technological profile of the electorate

X_8 = level of intraparty competition

X_9 = me too effect

The logistic regression output detailed in Table 3 indicates that a number of variables play a statistically significant role in determining the likelihood of a candidate cyber-campaigning. Candidate spending, party spending, party affiliation (though not for all parties) and the ratio of opponents in the constituency with a campaign website (that is, the 'me too' variable) are all found to be statistically significant predictors of a candidate having a personal website in the Irish 2007 election campaign. None of marginality, incumbency, political experience of candidates, and levels of intraparty competition were significant predictors.

3. Predictors of candidates' website presence

Logistic regression

	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Robust SE</i>
Technological profile of the electorate	1.12	1.84
Candidate expenses	.090***	.018
Party expenses	.006**	.002
Incumbency	.211	.411
Fianna Fail	.929*	.521
Fine Gael	-.329	.498
Sinn Fein	-2.62**	.861
Green Party	.391**	.493
PDs	-1.39	.559
Independents	.444	.494
Years in the Dáil	-.031	.024
Marginality	.307	.622
Me too effect	4.77***	.772
Intraparty-competition	.054	.876
Constant	-4.42	.985

N: 448

Nagelkerke R2: .40

Note: Significant at $p^{***} < 0.01$, $p^{**} < 0.05$, $p^* < 0.1$.

Logistic regression estimates showing coefficients of independent variables predicting websites presence. Variables were coded as follows: Length of Dáil membership (years), Candidates' expenses (thousands of euros) Party expenses (thousands of euros), Incumbency (1, 0), Me too and Intraparty competition (see data section) Technological Profile of the electorate (ratio household with internet access over total household in the constituency) Marginality (see data section). For party membership, the excluded category is Labour Party candidates.

Candidate Resources

The candidate expenses variable is positively signed and statistically significant at the 99% level; indicating that the more a candidate spends the more likely he/she is to have a personal website. Party expenses are significant at the 95% level of confidence, showing that the higher the party budget per candidate, the higher his/her chances of launching a campaign site. We note here that, according to the campaign expenditure data, the amounts of expenses incurred by parties are typically much lower than the amounts incurred by individual candidates; with a mean of approximately 1500 euros for party expenses per candidate compared to a mean of approximately 15,000 for individual candidate expenses. Nonetheless, both candidate and party-incurred expenditure positively affect the likelihood of a candidate having a personal website.

However, the variables which account for the political experience of the candidates, their incumbency status and the number of years spent in the Dáil, are not statistically significant predictors of their likelihood to launch a web campaign. As such, we find mixed support for the contention that better-resourced candidates are more likely to campaign online, it seems that monetary resources are more important in the Irish case than levels of political experience or seniority.

Symbolic and Strategic Considerations.

The 'me too' variable is significant at the 99% level and is positively signed. Therefore, the intuition that this factor would play a role in explaining cyber-campaigning is supported by empirical analysis. Candidates appear to look at each other's behaviour with regard to online campaigning, and once a certain number of candidates in a constituency have websites, the remaining candidates take measures to avoid falling behind. Logistic coefficients are not self-explanatory, but we can estimate shifts in the probability due to changes in one of the independent variables, *ceteris paribus*. We estimated the changes in the probability of a positive outcome produced by setting the 'me too' variable at different levels, while holding the other variables at their mean values. The results are displayed in table 4 below. When this variable is set to its observed minimum of 0 (that is, no opponents in the constituency launch a personal website) and the other variables are set at their means, the likelihood of a candidate launching a site is 7%. When the 'me too' variable is set at its observed maximum of .81 (that is 81% of opponents launched in the constituency launched a website), the likelihood of a candidate launching a site jumps to 89%. When the 'me too' variable is set at its observed mean (.31) the probability of a candidate setting up a website is 27%.

4. – Probability of website presence as 'Me too' varies

	Probability of Positive outcome	Shift
<i>Me too</i> is at its minimum	.07 (.020)	
<i>Me too</i> is at $\mu - \sigma$	.12 (.024)	+5%
<i>Me too</i> is at its mean	.27 (.027)	+15%
<i>Me too</i> is at $\mu + \sigma$	.48 (.042)	+21%
<i>Me too</i> is at its maximum	.89 (.047)	+41%

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. μ = variable mean. σ = variable standard deviation.

The marginality variable produces a coefficient with large a standard error and the coefficient is positively signed, contrary to our expectation that the relationship between our measure of marginality (which decreases in value as the candidates become more marginal) and the probability of a candidate going online would be negative in direction. However, the coefficient for this variable cannot be distinguished from random error. With regard to our measure of intra-party competition; the coefficient was positively signed, in line with our theoretical proposition that higher levels of intra-party competition would lead to greater incentives for politicians to campaign online. However, as was the case with marginality, the standard error associated with this coefficient too large to assert that the relationship is distinguishable from random error with any reasonable degree of confidence. The technological profile of the electorate does not appear to be significant either.

Collectively, these findings indicate that, in the Irish context at least, the choice to cyber-campaign is better explained by symbolic than strategic considerations. Neither the closeness of the electoral race, nor the level of intra-party competition faced by a candidate, nor the proportion of homes with internet access in a candidate's constituency provide robust predictors of the likelihood of a candidate launching a campaign website. However, the activities of other candidates, irrespective of their party affiliation, are a good predictor,

with candidates being significantly more likely to launch websites in constituencies where a high proportion of their opponents have done so.

Table 5 reports shifts in the probability of a having a website, setting the significant variables (apart from party affiliation) at their minimum, maximum, mean and mean $\pm$ one standard deviations of each variable's observed values. Party affiliation is considered and analysed in the next section. Table 5 gives an impression of the combined effects of candidate monetary resources and the presence of other candidates with campaign websites in their constituency on a candidate's likelihood of having a campaign website.

5. Probability of website presence as expenditure and 'me too' vary

	Probability of Positive outcome
Party expenses, Candidate expenses, Me too At their minimum	.02 (.009)
Party expenses, Candidate expenses, Me too At $\mu - \sigma$	.05 (.017)
Party expenses, Candidate expenses, Me too At their mean value	.25 (.027)
Party expenses, Candidate expenses, Me too At $\mu + \sigma$	.68 (.038)
Party expenses, Candidate expenses, Me too At their maximum	.92 (.20)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. μ = variable mean. σ = variable standard deviation.

We can see that the probability of a candidate campaigning online is extremely low (2%) if they have a limited campaign budget and face few candidates with an online presence in their constituency. On the contrary, when all those factors are set at their maximum levels, the probability of a candidate setting up a campaign page is extremely high (92%) with a shift of 90 percentage points, though we note that there is a 20% standard error associated with this estimate, while the other estimates have standard errors under 5%. The shift in probability from one standard deviation below the mean for these variables to one above is less dramatic, but striking nonetheless, going from 5% to 68%. In other words, when these values are set relatively high – a candidate is over 60% more likely to launch a campaign website than when they are set relatively low.

Party Affiliation

In line with previous findings from the UK and Australia, we find that both party affiliation and party support play a role in explaining the likelihood of a candidate launching a campaign website. A detailed account is provided in figure 1 below, where the levels of probability of a candidate campaigning online are shown by party. As discussed above, the predicted probability also depends upon the levels of campaign budget (party and candidate) and the proportion of the candidates' opponents in the constituency having a website, so these variables are set to their minimum, maximum, mean and mean $\pm$ one standard deviations of each variable's observed values to facilitate comparative analysis.

We can clearly see that there is significant variation among party groups, with Fianna Fáil candidates being the most likely group to set up a campaign website. When party and candidate spending and levels of opposition web-campaigning are set to their mean, Fianna

Fáil candidates (with a probability of .5) are just more than twice as likely to cyber-campaign as Fine Gael candidates (.23). Labour candidates (.29) are somewhat more likely than Fine Gael candidates to campaign online. Therefore, talking of a general trend among mainstream (as opposed to smaller) parties would not be correct; as the three largest parties appear to demonstrate distinctive patterns of behaviour. The same applies to fringe parties: when party and candidate spending and levels of opposition web-campaigning are set to their mean, Green Party candidates (.37) are more than twelve times more likely than Sinn Féin candidates (.03) to set up a campaign website. Nonetheless, the two parties with the lowest levels of probabilities (Sinn Féin and the Progressive Democrats) are among the smaller parties in the Irish legislature.⁴⁰

Candidates from Sinn Féin are the by far the least likely party members to have a personal website. This is not a straightforward finding to explain without further research; however, it is in line with the historical tradition of the party, with candidates typically being extremely loyal to the party and not keen to emphasise the role of the individual over the party. Furthermore, given the peculiar history of the party, and its past associations with extra-constitutional violence, it seems to be a general party policy not to disclose personal information on members to mass media generally, and the low numbers of candidates with personal websites may reflect this policy.

Finally, a particularly interesting finding is the relatively high propensity of independent candidates to launch campaigning sites.⁴¹ With a value of .37 when relevant conditioning variables set at their mean values, independents are more likely than candidates from any party, other than Fianna Fáil, to set up a campaign website. Several factors may help to explain this finding. Firstly, independents play an unusually significant role in Irish politics,⁴² and currently hold more than 5% of seats in the lower chamber of parliament. As such, independents are often serious candidates, with a good chance of winning a seat. Secondly, our measure possibly captures a higher proportion of online activity for independents than for party members. As discussed above, the main parties all provided candidate information on their party websites, whereas independents, by definition, do not belong to parties and therefore do not feature on party websites.

Overall, Fianna Fáil candidates are more likely than candidates from any other party to have a personal campaign website, *ceteris paribus*. The party with the smallest number of candidates online was Sinn Féin. In terms of left-right ideological position, Ireland represents an exception *per se*, as the left right cleavage has very little explanatory power in Irish politics.⁴³ Therefore, we did not expect to find a clear pattern distinguishing left wing parties from right wing ones. Such a pattern does not exist according to our findings nor does there seem to be consistent differentiation between fringe and mainstream parties.

1. Likelihood of candidates to launch a campaign website by party as the significant predictors vary. (Significant predictors: Party Expenses, Candidates Expenses, 'Me too' effect)

Conclusions

Examining the relationship between resources and cyber-campaigning sheds light on the potential transformative effect of the internet on political life – will fringe political actors exploit the flexibility and relatively low cost of the internet to a greater extent than more established groups? Or will usage of the internet simply mirror politics as usual, with established groups and better-resourced actors having a more professionalised web-presence than their marginalised counterparts?

Our findings in this regard for the Irish case indicated that, in general, better resourced candidates are indeed more likely to campaign online. This undermines the notion that ICTs, which are low cost and facilitate new host-user dynamics, would invert existing political power structures. The type of resource that matters most in this regard are monetary resources and campaign budgets generally offer a good indicator of web activity, with big budget campaigns being more likely to launch a candidate website. This would support the claim that as the internet becomes more of a mass medium, offline equilibria are eventually reflected in the online world, so that 'those who have been powerful in the past - the established organizations, the wealthy and the privileged - are moving into cyberspace and taking their advantages with them'.⁴⁴

Secondly, such studies allow us to assess the character of web-campaigning; is it motivated principally by strategic concerns such as constituency marginality and intra-party competition? Is it restricted to constituencies where web-usage is very high? Is it determined by the activities of competitors, with candidates not wishing to be seen as out-dated when competing with internet-savvy opponents? With the ever-growing penetration of the internet into every-day life, and the continual refinement of online campaigning strategies, cyber-campaigning may become a mainstream, vote-winning technique in future elections in Ireland and across a host of representative democracies. Indeed, given the enormous potential benefits accruing from a well-organised online campaign, it is difficult to imagine that this will not eventually be the case. Nonetheless, the research presented here indicates that neither the marginality of a campaign, nor the degree of intra-party competition faced by candidates, nor the levels of internet penetration in a candidate's constituency are significant predictors of the likelihood of that candidate launching a campaign website. These factors are indicators of the strategic calculus associated with cyber-campaigning, where campaign websites are viewed strictly as vote-winning tools. Our findings indicate that, in the Irish context, such considerations are not central to a candidate's decision to cyber-campaign. Despite the indications from empirical research that cyber-campaigning is an effective tool when it comes to winning votes; candidates do not seem to demonstrate awareness of this potential. It would appear that cyber-campaigning in Ireland is better explained in terms of 'keeping up with the Murphys' than as a conscious vote-winning strategy. This finding may be unique to Ireland, where traditional campaign practices continue to play an unusually large role in campaign strategies and in voter calculus; however, our approach is easily replicable for future studies in alternative political contexts.

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10 *Ibidem*.

11 Explanations of the observed positive impact of cyber-campaigning include the possibility that (1) a politician's having an online presence generates greater coverage for that candidate in mainstream media; (2) that the measurement of cyber-campaigning may, in fact, represent a proxy for the extent to which a campaign is innovative or modernized generally, rather than the effects of cyber-campaigning specifically and (3) that better resourced and higher profile

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- candidates are more likely to go online in the first place, meaning that the observed positive relationship between cyber-campaigning and electoral performance may be due to endogenous causation.
- 12 R. Gibson, S. Ward and W. Lusoli, *op. cit.* p. 168.
 - 13 M. Marsh, 'None of that Post-modern stuff around here: Grassroots campaigning in the 2002 Irish General Election', *British Elections & Parties Review*, 14, 2004, p. 262.
 - 14 Irish National Election Study, 2007.
 - 15 Source 'Information Society and Telecommunications 2007' published by the Irish Central Statistics Office available online at http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/pr_inforsociety.htm
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 - 17 This survey was carried out over a 2-3 month period immediately following the Irish general election, which took place on 24 May 2007. Copies of the survey were distributed by post to all candidates who registered for the election. The respondents broadly corresponded to the population's properties in terms of the gender and incumbency ratios. With regard to party affiliation, both Sinn Féin and the Progressive Democrats comprise small groups of respondents (12 and 9 respectively) as a result of having smaller numbers of candidates than the other parties as well as lower than average response rates.
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 - 28 R. Gibson et al., 2008, *op.cit.*
 - 29 R. Gibson and I. McAllister, 2006, *op. cit.*
 - 30 *Ibidem*.
 - 31 See, for example, Gibson et al., 2003, *op cit.*
 - 32 G. Selnow, *Electronic Whistle-stops: The Impact of the Internet on American Politics*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998.
 - 33 For a given candidate, this measure is calculated using the following formulae:
W-1/N-1	for candidates with a website
W/N-1	for candidates without a website.

Where W is the total number of candidates with a personal campaign website in the constituency and N is the total number of candidates in the constituency.

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- 34 Although the roles of party affiliation and support are examined in some detail, and are found to play an important, though not determinant, role at the candidate level.
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- 36 The Standard In Public Office (SIPO) agency collects the expenditure returns and make them available to the public.
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- 40 Indeed, in period following the 2007 election the Progressive Democrats were disbanded due to their winning only 2 seats.
- 41 As independents do not represent a unified group, they are not represented in figure 1.
- 42 L. Weeks, 'We don't like (to) party: Explaining the significance of Independents in Irish political life', Presented at The First Annual International Conference on Minor Parties, Independent Politicians, Voter Associations and Political Associations in Politics, Institute of Local Government Studies, School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham November 29-December 1, 2007.
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