Chapter 10
Do Web Campaigns by Party Leaders Enhance the Images of Party Leaders Held by Voters?
Experimental Evidence from Finland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines whether exposure to the personal Websites and blogs of party leaders during an election campaign affects the perceptions held by voters regarding the traits of party leaders. Additionally, the effects of Website exposure and blog exposure are compared. The chapter presents two experiments conducted during the 2007 Finnish general elections, where the leaders of the major parties had to deal with personal image concerns in their campaigns. The experiments used authentic Websites and blogs of party leaders as stimuli and young voters as participants. In both experiments, the impressions of the traits of party leaders were measured by a semantic differential consisting of bipolar adjectives. Limited effects were found. The perceptions of two of the three leaders were not affected either by exposure to their Websites or their blogs. However, the impressions of one leader were enhanced by exposure to his Website as well as his blog. The types of traits affected by blog reading and Website exposure differed respectively. In explaining the findings, Website features, blogging approaches, and participant expectancies are considered.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, the use of the web by political parties in election campaigning has become widespread across the globe (Gibson, 2004; Gibson & Ward, 2009; Kluver, Jankowski, Foot, & Schneider, 2007). Above all, party campaign websites have become a staple. In recent years, however, a new trend has emerged: parties are increasingly creating separate web outputs for their party leaders, giving them an emphasized personal presence online during election campaigns. Scholars have noted that parties maintain special party leader websites, which are different from the main party campaign site (Aagaard & Andersen, 2008; Semetko & Krasnoboka, 2003; Van Os, Hagemann, Voerman, & Jankowski, 2007; Voerman & Boogers, 2008). Furthermore, riding on the social media wave, party organizations are personalizing their party leaders during campaigns by using various social media tools, too. Hence, during campaigns, party leaders maintain personal blogs, create profiles on Facebook and post messages on personal Twitter accounts (Jackson, 2006; Funcken, 2009; Kalnes, 2009; Small, 2008, 2010; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013).

These new trends in party web campaigning—the marketing of party leaders by means of websites and social media—are connected with the presidentialization of parliamentary systems (Poguntke & Webb, 2005) resulting in increasingly leadership-centred electoral processes and personalized party campaigns (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006b; McAllister, 2007; Mughan, 2000; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). In such campaigns, an overriding aim is to build a bond between the party leader and the voters by stressing such personal traits of the leader that are believed to be perceived as positive by the voters. Against this background, the strategy by parties to give the party leader a strong personal presence on the web is understandable. However, the emergent trend by parties to maintain special party leader websites, blogs, Facebook profiles etc. begs an

obvious question: does it matter? Do these efforts affect the party leader character impressions of voters in a positive way?

In exploring this question, this study focuses on two types of web output. Firstly, we include an established form of web campaigning: websites. Secondly, in order to also comprise newer web devices—social media tools—we also include party leader blogs. In election campaigns, blogs, similar to other types of social media, tend to carry a more personal touch than websites (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006; Williams, Trammell, Postelnicu, Landreville, & Martin, 2005).

In this empirical study, we will examine whether exposure to the personal websites and blogs of party leaders affects the perceptions held by voters regarding the traits of party leaders. Moreover, since party leader blogs, as a form of social media, are expected to have a more personal touch than their websites, we will compare the effects on party leader impressions of exposure to websites and blogs by party leaders respectively. Methodologically, the study calls for an experimental research approach, since we wish to observe causation between exposure to party leader websites/blogs and party leader image impressions, while maintaining control over other factors that may affect the dependent variable. Empirically, we conducted two experiments during the campaign of the 2007 parliamentary elections in Finland, using actual party leader websites and blogs as stimuli and young adult voters as participants. The 2007 elections, although not the most recent, make an excellent case because the leaders of the three major parties all had to deal with personal image concerns in their personal campaigns (Arter, 2007; Karvonen, 2007).

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the following section, we review the significant literature and develop research questions. Thereafter, the empirical case, Finland and the 2007 elections, is presented. Sections four, five and six present our experimental studies and their findings. The

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