Chapter 7

Greek Politicians and the Use of Online Technologies for Citizen Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how politicians utilise Internet technologies to create an online presence, the motivating and hindering factors for doing so, and the perceived significance such a presence can have. The authors present empirical data collected via in-depth interviews with Greek politicians taking part in the general elections of 2012. The findings suggest that although politicians are increasingly interested in engaging with citizens using online technologies, their efforts are not always focused on achieving measurable and tangible results. Consequently, they do not make full use of the potential online technologies offer. Instead, the authors conclude, online strategies need to be organised around predefined objectives and based on clear communication and engagement plans.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although political parties and their affiliated politicians may have often reacted slowly in grasping and adopting technological developments, they are gradually recognising the importance that online technologies have and the opportunities and challenges they may give rise to. An example of

this can be seen in Barack Obama's presidential campaign and the way social media were utilised (Luck, Beaton, & Moffatt, 2010; Sevin, Kimball, & Khalil). Having a web site and organising a page on Facebook, which were considered an innovation just a few years ago, are now becoming an essential ingredient of any campaign, as they enable not only the promotion of the candidate,

but also more active engagement with voters. Undertaken effectively, online campaigning can yield great returns. Undertaken poorly, it can backfire, creating irreversible damage to a candidate's profile. It is not unusual to come across web sites, blogs, Facebook pages and other online spaces created just for the sake of campaigning, signalling to visitors the lack of real interest in and understanding of such technologies by the candidates. Such late efforts would have a limited impact anyway. This work's main objective is to study how politicians use their Internet presence (e.g. their web sites and social media) to engage with citizens during different circumstances. More specifically, the questions it sets out to answer are firstly what is the perceived significance of establishing an online presence for politicians and what are the motivating and hindering factors for doing so, secondly what is the role of social media within the context of a politician's online presence and thirdly how do politicians form their online presence strategies and how do they plan and implement their engagement plans.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Using the Internet to Engage Citizens

Political marketing has grown as a discipline over the past two decades, attracting the interest of marketers, political scientists and communication experts (Yannas, 2005) (for an account of its emergence and development see Scammell, 1999; Shama, 1976). Wring (1997, p.653) suggests that political marketing is concerned with a "party's or candidate's use of opinion research and environmental analysis to produce and promote a competitive offering which will help realise organisational aims and satisfy groups of electors in exchange for their votes." In other words, it aims to identify what the voters want so a value proposition resulting in a favoured voted

can be put forward. Maarek's (1995) agrees with the above statement, but goes a step forward, explicitly referring to the use of online and online approaches. He defines it as "the use of online and offline advertising, marketing and promotion techniques to influence individual voters to cast their vote in favour of a specific political party or candidate" (Maarek, 1995, p.15). For O'Cass (1996) political marketing promotes and enables parties, candidates and voters to participate in a constructive dialogue for both specific and broader societal development and utilisation of social and economic goals. Finally, Hughes and Dann (2009, p.244) adapting the 2007 commercial marketing definition of the American Marketing Association defined political marketing as "a set of activities, processes or political institutions used by political organisations, candidates and individuals to create, communicate, deliver and exchange promises of value with voter consumers, political party stakeholders and society at large." Arguably, the above mentioned definitions consider political marketing as having an important role to play, not just in terms of communicating political views, but also facilitating the democratic process. Still, from an online perspective, prior to social media, the role of political marketing was mostly confined to influencing voting intentions and not sensing the political environment via direct interactions with users. For instance, in the Greek context, Papagiannidis et al (2012) found that users tended to visit the websites of favoured candidates, reinforcing their positive perceptions of them, while as far as the websites themselves and their content and the services provided were concerned there was room for improvement.

Although political marketing is considered as having much potential to fulfil, it has also seen its share of criticism. Dean and Croft (2001) maintained that many of the more detailed criticisms made of marketing in politics echo a broader questioning of the role of marketing in society as a whole, calling for an examination of the relevance of any current broad marketing formulae

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