# Do web sites affect voting decisions? Exploring the findings from two general elections in Greece

## *Abstract*

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on online political marketing by investigating the use of web sites as a marketing tool in the 2007 and 2009 general elections Greece. The two main research objectives are firstly to establish the key factors affecting voters' trust when it comes to using politicians' websites and secondly whether and to what extent these trust-building factors and their influence change over-time, as the online environment matures.

Keywords: political marketing, electronic marketing, elections, Greece

## *Introduction*

The Internet has transformed the ways organisations operate and, at the same time, it has provided consumers with the ability to gain direct and 24/7 access to an organisation's products and services. One could argue that when consumers purchase products via the Internet, they make an unambiguous choice by favouring one product against another. A firm's website plays a key role in influencing consumer's perceptions of a product or services and subsequently, the final product choice [1]. In a similar vein, consumers could make use of political websites that could influence their perceptions, views and final decisions about specific political figures and parties. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Internet is playing an ever growing role in political marketing when it comes to both promoting individual candidates and political parties, given its ability both to reach individuals directly and also to mobilise groups via its Web2.0 capabilities. This influence is pivotal during elections, when political websites will be frequently visited by voters seeking information about a candidate or a political party.

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on online political marketing by investigating the use of web sites as a marketing tool in the 2007 and 2009 general elections of the Hellenic Republic (hereafter, Greece). More specifically, we are primarily interested in the role that websites of members of parliament played in influencing voters' perceptions, views and final voting decisions. Our main research objectives are two: to establish the key factors affecting voters' trust when it comes to using politicians' websites and secondly whether and to what extent these trust-building factors and their influence change over-time, as the online environment matures.

The paper opens by reviewing the relevant literature, where possible drawing links with the body of work that that has examined the role of commercial websites in influencing consumers' decisions on purchasing products and services, extrapolating relevant ideas and models in relation to the influence of political websites on prospective voters' respective decisions. The paper will then continue by discussing the research

design and the data collection process, before presenting the early results of this study resulting from our exploratory analysis phase.

## *Literature Review*

### Online political marketing

The last few years have seen the emergence of a coherent subset of the broad and rapidly expanding international literature connected by a focus on electioneering and political communications, which has seen many terms such as 'political marketing', 'political management', 'packaged politics', 'promotional politics' or more broadly 'modern political communications', trying to capture its essence [2]. Maarek [3](p.15) defined political marketing 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*". This is not, though, a simplistic exercise in which politicians and parties find out what the voters want and then tell them what they want to get elected. The central purpose of political marketing is to enable political parties and voters to make the most appropriate and satisfactory decisions and consequently "*the value of marketing is that its concepts promote and enable parties and voters to participate in a constructive dialogue for both specific and broader societal development and utilisation of social and economic goals*"[4]. As one of the more important features of Internet technology is that it allows a greater degree of interactivity, at a continuously more rapid pace, than most other forms of off-line engagement [5], it follows that it can facilitate such a dialogue efficiently and effectively, rendering it an important aspect of any political marketing strategy.

The Internet, as a political marketing tool, brings with it both many advantages and challenges [5]. For example, Gibson and Ward [6] suggest that by using the world wide web the volume of information and speed of communication can be increased, more formats (such as audio and video) allow for more dynamic and stimulating communication, the information and communication flow is not a one-way street, while there is also more individual control as to what is consumed and published. To summarise the above in their own words: "*web-based communication has the potential to be a more immediate, dynamic, in-depth, interactive, and unedited process than is possible in conventional media*" [6]. On the other hand, significant proportions of a county's population may have limited or no Internet access or may not have the skills required to fully engage online, excluding them from the online dialogue.

In the sections following we focus on using web sites as tools for promoting political parties and establishing stronger relationships with citizens, in order to gain their trust and eventually their votes.

### Evaluating political web sites

Web site evaluation usually revolves around decomposing a site into various elements and then measuring these against the criteria set, which may be specific to the nature of the web site undergoing the evaluation. In our case the end-goal is for the

citizen to cast a vote in favour of the party. The web site by itself may not be adequate to achieve this, but it can play an important role in increasing the credibility of a party, which in turn can increase the citizen's trust in that party, leading to a vote. According to Fogg *et al* [7] a highly credible web site is perceived to have high levels of both trustworthiness (the perceived goodness or morality) and expertise (the perceived knowledge and skill). To achieve these goals political party web sites should score high against the criteria set by the methodological approach adopted.

These either offer qualitative accounts of political web sites based on largely descriptive and impressionistic evidence or adopt a more quantitative approach, constructing composite indices to measure various aspects of web sites, such as design sophistication, information content, and opportunities [6]. For example, Gibson and Ward [6] pushed the second approach further by moving beyond predetermined composite indices to identify functionality, and by adopting a more flexible method that allows the sites to 'speak' for themselves, and secondly they clarified, conceptually and empirically, what they meant when they referred to a site's quality and sophistication. Their paper offered a coding scheme that measured about 45 criteria numerically. Such an approach can allow for a more objective evaluation and comparison among the sites examined. It can also make it possible to compare sites across different countries or even longitudinally, although the list of items would probably need changes to reflect technological and infrastructure developments. For example, a decade ago, the use of video content was not as popular as it is now, while social networking and other web2.0 features were not available.

On the other hand, evaluating just the web site without measuring its impact on voters or at least what they perceive as important, is limiting, as it does not shed light on the actual impact that a web site may have on voters. An insight into what affects the formation of online relationships and trust can be gained by examining the relevant literature in the context of commercial transactions.

### Forming online relationships and trust

Corbitt *et al* [8] identified a number of factors for the element of trust in the business-to-consumer (B2C) interface and developed a framework for the underlying relationships. They examined a range of relevant theories trying to model trust in the e-commerce setting, including the balance theory [9] advocating the view that a positive attitude is formed for people or objects with which they are familiar and associated with. Consequently, we could argue that the greater the experience the citizen has with using websites and the greater the element of trustworthiness allocated to websites in general, the greater the propensity to trust political websites. The latter is the case especially if the voter is quite familiar with a political figure as well. Corbitt *et al* [8] also found that trust is largely influenced by three elements in e-commerce transactions: e-commerce reputation in general, the actual consumers and the e-commerce website to hand. Accordingly, the overall political environment and the specific standing and reputation of the political party or candidate in the community could influence voters' perceptions, notwithstanding the separate opinion that voters may have about key individuals.

Chen [10] developed further a comprehensive model of the antecedents or sources of consumer trust when purchasing online travel. These included (ibid, p.199) "consumer characteristics (e.g. disposition to trust, attitude, perceived risk, general online experience, prior experience, personal values, gender, age, education), website characteristics (e.g. functionality, usability, efficiency, reliability, likeability), calculus-based trust (e.g. reputation), institution-based trust (e.g. tangible cues: situational normality and structural assurances) and finally knowledge-based trust (e.g. frequency of interactions with a site, service quality, overall satisfaction)". Park and Gretzel [11] proposed similar issues based on qualitative meta-analysis and further highlighted the role of interactivity (e.g. making use of interactive features and interactive communication) and personalisation (e.g. personalised or individualised attention, customisation of offerings and of information). Both can support the influential role of the website during consumer's decision making and subsequently, if the relevant political figures are willing to increase their website investment in these issues, they will be expected to increase voters' trust and voters' intentions to vote for them (see for example work by Schlosser *et al* [12] for how website investment increases consumer trust and online purchasing intentions). In general, the firm's image is portrayed on its website and key aspects including, *inter alia*, the presentation of products for sale, the website atmospherics, price comparisons with competitors, delivery and post sales support could influence consumer decision making and the "total customer experience" (see for example, Petre *et al* [13]). Similarly, the quality of political websites consisting of information about the political figure's past life achievements, his / her political views on key political matters, his / her communication with voters and any parliamentary contribution could prove instrumental in manipulating voters' views on that political figure. In addition, websites should provide accurate and up-to-date information and should aim to reflect consumer needs, or in this case political voters' needs if reputation and credibility can be built (see for example, Koufaris & Hampton-Sosa [14]; Harrison McKnight *et al* [15]).

The above results in the formation of a similar kind of experience, which we term the "total voter experience", which could result in the formulation of positive or negative repercussions for these political figures. A positive "total voter experience" could also be the starting point for the implementation of a customer / voter relationship management programme, where the website will have the ability to offer customised propositions to the voter who could then be the recipient of relevant information (see for example, Koufaris & Hampton-Sosa [14]). Another part of that experience is related to the subsequent use of the voters' personal data and possible exposure of their political beliefs when making use of these websites (e.g. when submitting requests or opinions via the website). The latter mirrors similar concerns with Internet customers who favour extra security features included as a safeguard in a website and are also concerned about the loss of their privacy (see Belanger *et al* [16]) as the information collected about them could be sold to other firms. Even worse, consumers are worried about security when online financial transactions are involved [17]. On a positive note, consumers increase their transactions on the Internet when established brand names are part of the website offering [18], indicating the extra trust being placed by consumers in these reputable products. Similarly, we could argue that an established politician with a reputable political history could transfer his / her positive image to the website or even that a

political website cannot add much to a politician who is already well-respected and valued within a community. What is becoming clear is that the perceptions, views and opinions of consumer and political voters are shaped in a complex, multi-faceted individual, social and cultural setting.

## *Methodology*

Political marketing studies and studies more specifically related to web site evaluation and their use tended to deal with bigger countries (e.g. the following country cases covering a range of web site issues: Australia [19], Germany [20], Italy [21], Malaysia [22], Netherlands [23], New Zealand [24], United Kingdom [5, 25], United States [26]). Selecting a small country such as Greece can offer unique insights into how parties operate within smaller environments. In the context of this paper we followed the general national elections of 2007 and 2009 held in Greece, adopting a quantitative approach. This revolved around a questionnaire that was issued to voters after the general national elections, utilising an online convenience sample, as the majority of responses came as response to invitations in online forums, blogs and social networking sites. The responses were analysed anonymously with participants asked to leave their email addresses voluntary. Those who did so in 2007 were invited to complete the 2009 survey too. For the 2007 elections we had 249 responses in total, while for the 2009 election there were 233 responses. Among these there were voters who had not visited the website of a political party. Their responses were used as a control and for comparison purposes with those that had visited political web sites. Also, as the questionnaire was available for many weeks after the general elections, a recall bias may have affected those completing the survey towards the late stages of the data collection, although no test has been run for this developmental paper to conclude the presence of such bias.

Our extensive questionnaire consisted of both categorical and Likert-type questions, so a mixed analysis was taken. Paired sample t-tests to compare means were run to compare differences between the two samples (from the 2007 and 2009 elections respectively). Paired sample correlations were also used to test effects such as the Web's role in political marketing as a medium mostly leveraged to reinforce prior perceptions and preferences or to create new ones. One-way ANOVA was run to test whether prospective voters' political needs were also being met in terms of providing wanted content (e.g. biographical information, political views/positions, photographs, etc.) on the candidates' websites. ANOVA reported on whether the voters' expectations of content were exceeded, met, or failed to be met by what was actually provided online. Descriptive statistics were also obtained to highlight the levels of various factors of interest, e.g. prospective voters' perceptions of trust and overall attitude toward political candidates.

## *Results and discussion of exploratory analysis*

From the preliminary analysis of the collected data, several noteworthy findings emerge regarding the political marketing landscape in Greece:

- Use of political candidates' websites increased by 7 percent between 2007 and 2009, suggesting an upward trend of proactive/informed voters.
- Websites, as a medium of political marketing, showed to contribute in significantly improved opinions in 2009 compared to 2007, both for favoured and non-favoured candidates (for the latter, more negative opinions were formed)≥
- Websites were found to be equally likely to impact voters' perceptions of political candidates by influencing in both directions, i.e. more positive and more negative opinions
- All participants in this study reported some degree of influence by the candidates' websites, and a small but significant effect on the voters' final decision was present.
- The web was shown to act primarily as a medium ideal to reinforce existing perceptions of the candidates and preferences toward specific candidates rather than create new ones.
- Prospective voters are significantly more sceptical (distrusting) of the information found on candidates' websites than that found elsewhere online
- The Web's effectiveness was found to be ideal for the pre-election period during candidate debates, but significantly less so as a medium to engage prospective voters for on-going political marketing promotion.
- Beyond the above point, the Web appears to be improved during the pre-election campaign period and increased on-going emphasis should be placed on candidates' Web sites.
- The overall perception of candidates' websites by prospective voters was neutral (i.e. neither highly liked nor highly disliked), suggesting the large potential for improvement in the design of these political marketing spaces.
- Political needs are somewhat satisfied by the candidates' current web presence, reinforcing the previous point on the opportunity that exists to improve their online political marketing tactics.
- Prospective voters indicated that in 2009 their expectations of relevant content were either exceeded, met, or failed to be met for various types of content; specifically:
  - News/Announcements, Events, and Photographs made available on candidates' websites significantly exceeded voters' expectations
  - Biographical information, and multimedia/visual-audio material available online met voters' expectations
  - Political views/positions and parliamentary activity provided online was significantly below voters' expectations regarding this content
  - Programmatic statements and communicating with the candidates showed a significantly higher level of meeting expectations in 2009 compared to 2007

From the above, it becomes apparent that the Web presents an important opportunity for online political marketing in Greece, and one that is not fully utilized to date. Several areas of improvement have emerged such as specific types of content that need to be made available at an increased level, as well as the need to maintain the candidates' websites continuously (i.e. beyond the pre-election period). Lastly, in its current form, the Web seems optimal in reinforcing prospective voters' opinions of candidates, but less so

in creating new ones or transforming prior ones (from negative to positive or vice versa). This finding supports the need for integrated political marketing communications that leverage the Web for its strengths, and is used as a complementary tactic in the candidates' political marketing arsenal.

## *Extending this work*

As part of extending and completing this work we are planning to consider the following questions:

- How proactive are voters in becoming aware of their political alternatives?
- Do Web sites influence voters' perceptions of favoured political candidates, and if so how (favourably or unfavourably)?
- Do Web sites influence voters' perceptions of non-favoured political candidates, and if so how (favourably or unfavourably)?
- Overall, do Web sites influence voters' perceptions of political candidates, and if so how (favourably or unfavourably)?
- Do Web sites influence voters' intentions?
- Is the Web being used as a vehicle primarily to create or reinforce perceptions/preferences?
- Do Web sites influence voters' perceptions of candidates' trustworthiness?
- If Web sites influence visitors' perceptions of candidates' trustworthiness, do they consequently influence visitors' intentions (to vote for them)?
- Are Web sites perceived as valuable in the context of engaging voters?
- Is the Web's effectiveness as a vehicle primarily during the pre-election period (i.e. 1 month)?
- Are visitors' impressions of favoured candidates' Web sites favourable (during the pre-election period)?
- Are visitors' impressions of non-favoured candidates' Web sites favourable (during the pre-election period)?
- Are visitors' overall impressions of candidates' Web sites favourable (during the pre-election period)?
- Are visitors' overall impressions of candidates' Web sites favourable (not during the pre-election period)?
- Is the Web's maintenance effective on an on-going basis, or primarily during the pre-election period (i.e. 1 month)?
- Are visitors' overall impressions of candidates' Web sites favourable (generally)?
- Are visitors' political needs met (i.e. expectations satisfied) by the candidates' Web sites?

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