

An examination of candidate Web sites as a political campaigning tool in the 2007 Greek national elections

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Summary:

This research aims to study the usage of Web sites as political campaigning tool in the context of the 2007 Greek national elections. The questions guiding this research in this context are how popular were online campaigns in terms of candidate use of Web sites and which trust and credibility-building Web site design cues were leveraged by candidates. To answer these two questions we reviewed the entire population of candidates' Web sites and evaluated them against a framework that emerged from our literature review. Our analysis resulted in 24 features that we would recommend including in a Web site that is used as an online vehicle of political campaigning.

1 Introduction

The political landscape in Greece has experienced significant change over the course of the last two decades. Due to a fragmented political scene in Greece (relative to more consolidated ones, e.g. the U.S. displays two dominant parties) that consists of five major and more than a dozen minor parties, both candidates and parties seek to exploit every opportunity in reaching, informing, and influencing voters' opinions and voting intentions. In the end, the success of such influences is measured by whether the desired yield was realized, i.e. whether a vote was cast in favour of the candidate. This goal is achieved by two sets of elements related to a candidate's political campaign: i) internal factors, which include the candidate, the party, campaign strategy and resources; and ii) external factors, including the line-up of candidates, their organizations and competitiveness, the media coverage and the opinion polls (Juholin 2001; Bradshaw, 1995; Hamilton, 1995; Kavanagh, 1997; Newman, 1994; Sweeney, 1995; Thurber, 1995).

Focusing on the internal factors, candidates are faced with an array of resources available in executing their respective campaign strategies. Technological advances offer new political campaign capabilities found in emerging media. In the past, the World Wide Web had not been an important factor in pre-election campaigning, as low Internet penetration handicapped the effectiveness of online political campaigns. The 2007 parliamentary elections served as the pilot for the wider use of this medium in this context for the Hellenic Republic (hereafter, Greece). What becomes of primary importance is the ability of the Web to create the desired effects with respect to reaching and informing voters, and subsequently favourably influencing their perceptions of trust in and the credibility of the candidate, thus casting a vote in their favour (Kay 2007).

This research aims to paint a picture of the Greek political landscape regarding pre-election online political campaigns. More specifically, we examine the usage of personal candidate Web sites as a campaigning tool. The questions guiding this research in this context are: i) How popular were online campaigns in terms of candidate use of Web sites during the 2007 Greek elections and ii) Which trust and credibility-building Web site design cues were leveraged by Greek political candidates in their 2007 pre-election online campaigns. The paper continues with a literature review of relevant factors that are perceived as shaping voters' intentions to support a candidate in the upcoming elections, as well as an identification of the Web design elements that may be leveraged in support of this goal. We then present the methodology used to evaluate the candidates' sites, before continuing with the presentation and discussion of our findings. The paper concludes with potential avenues for future research.

2 Literature Review

This research does not delve into the issue of defining and differentiating between trust and credibility. This is an area that has long been in contention, as scholars have used the terms 'trust' and 'credibility' interchangeably (Jones 2004; Levi and Stoker 2000). For the purposes of our research, we will continue from the assumption derived from prior evidence (e.g. Hoopes 2001; Levi and Stoker 2000) that perceptions of trust in and the credibility of a candidate will have a favourable effect on a voter's intention to support the candidate at the upcoming elections.

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Building on this relationship, this section offers a review of literature related to the Web design (that includes structure and content) elements responsible for serving as credibility cues and inducing trust.

The early work of Abels *et al.* (1997) suggested that the appearance, content, linkage, special features, structure, and use of a Web site impact user perceptions. Fogg *et al.* (2001) further argued that items may have either a positive (i.e. real-world feel, ease of use, expertise, trustworthiness, and tailoring) or negative (commercial implications and amateurism) effect on perceptions of credibility.

A Web site's credibility was then decomposed by Wathen and Burkell (2002) in three dimensions with respect to its surface, message, and content. These three dimensions parallel those proposed by Fogg *et al.* (2003), i.e. design, source, and information respectively. Items that fall under these three dimensions include: i) information: focus, usefulness, accuracy, bias, tone of writing; ii) design: design look, information design/structure, advertising; and iii) source: motive, name recognition and reputation, credibility. Similarly, Flanagin and Metzger (2003) proposed that credibility is gauged along three closely-aligned dimensions: message (i.e. the perceived credibility of the information residing on a Web site), site (i.e. the perceived credibility of the Web site as a whole), and sponsor credibility (i.e. the perceived credibility of the individual whose Web site is represented). Hong (2006) continued on this path and argued that message and site (or structure, as referred to by Hong) features impact a Web site's credibility, with the former (i.e. testimonials, statistics, authorship, references, currency) being more important than the latter. Lastly, and focusing on what Flanagin and Metzger referred to as site credibility, Tombros *et al.* (2005) proposed a long list of design elements as relevant factors, each containing a number of features: text, structure, quality, non-textual items, physical properties, and counted mentions of page features.

While political campaigns have previously operated as offline mechanisms and attempted to engage citizens through one-way media, the 2007 pre-election campaigns included a relatively new form of engagement by Greek standards found on candidates' Web sites. The scope of a candidate's Web site ranged from providing static information to engaging in real-time interactive political discussions (Foot *et al.* 2002). Communications tools, including email, chat, newsgroups, and instant messaging, offer unparalleled synchronous and asynchronous communication between a candidate and potential voters. Coupled with these and other online-exclusive campaign strategies, a candidate's campaign is further strengthened by the electronic fulfilment of traditionally-offline initiatives such as the distribution of print materials and soliciting of sponsorship. This dual campaign delivery facilitated via a single medium offers significant economies of scale and may translate into an advantage, especially in the early ages of the Web's adoption in a political context.

As with any Web-enabled initiative, from e-Government to e-commerce, quality is an important predictor of initial adoption and continued use (Wangpipatwong *et al.* 2005; Jie *et al.* 2007). Only a handful of resources exist to serve as guidelines in the development of a political candidate's online presence. These are discussed in more detail in the Methodology section, where the framework used in this study is also discussed in detail.

3 Methodology

3.1 Population and Sampling

In this study five parties (and their respective candidates) were included: New Democracy (ND), Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), the Greek Communist Party (KKE), the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), formed by joining various left wing forces including SYN (Coalition of the Left, of Movements and Ecology) and Democratic Social Movement (DIKKI) and Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS). These five parties represent about 99.05% of the total votes counted in the national elections of 2004 and 94.8% in the European Parliament elections of 2005 (see Table 1). The same patterns were repeated in the 2007 elections with the five parties gathering almost 97% of the votes and all 300 parliament seats.

Table 1: 2004 National and European Parliament Elections and 2007 National elections

Party	2004 National		2004 European		2007 National	
	%	MPs	%	Euro-MPs	%	MPs
 ND	45,36	165	43,01	11	41.83	152
 PASOK	40,55	117	34,03	8	38.10	102
 KKE	5,90	12	9,48	3	8.15	22
 SYN/SYRIZA	3,26	6	4,16	1	5.04	14
 LAOS	2,19	0	4,12	1	3.80	10
 DIKKI	1,79	0				

Source: Greek Ministry of Internal Affairs

For this study, candidate lists provided by the parties were used, where possible, and checked against the official list provided by the Greek Supreme Court (Areios Pagos). The compiled list consisted of 2045 candidates split among the 5 parties (411 for ND, PASOK and KKE, 410 for SYRIZA and 402 for LAOS), which accounted for almost the entire population of candidates and those finally elected. The number of candidates from each prefecture depends on its population and, not surprisingly, most of the candidates were running in Athens. Those honorary candidates nominated by each party that are not directly voted for, but elected based on their party's performance, were not included, as they do not need to organise a 'traditional' campaign.

The compiled list included information about the candidates' Web sites, with, most importantly, their Web address or Uniform Resource Locator (URL). The list was then complemented by Web sites found in three popular Greek directories. The directory of the Greek Parliament was also used to track those MPs that were running again and obtain demographic information. Next, the Google search engine was used to search for Greek pages using the candidates' full names; only the first 20 Web sites ('hits') returned from the search query were manually scanned, in order to find the Web sites of those candidates who had no record of having one. The majority of the Web sites found using Google featured in the first five Web sites returned, which suggests that using the first 20 Web sites was a good balance between the effort required to manually scan more than 1600 candidates and identifying candidates' Web sites. After all, if after such a search process a candidate's Web site did not emerge, then voters would have the same problem (if not greater) in finding them online too, thus a candidate's site would not achieve the desired effect regardless of its design. Still, as this was not an exercise to 'penalise' candidates, any Web sites that were found in an ad hoc manner while browsing election-related Web sites were also added.

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The above sampling procedure was successful in covering the vast majority of the relevant population. The resulting list was then cleansed by removing politicians' Web sites that had not been updated to include information about the 2007 elections. The final Web site list consisted of 373 Web sites (ND=187, PASOK=161, KKE=1, SYRIZA=10 and LAOS=14), i.e. 18.23% of the candidates of the selected parties had a Web site. It should be noted that only personal Web sites were included in the final list; for example, pages hosted at the parties' Web sites were not included. It is also interesting to note that only about 32% (or 121) of the 373 Web sites evaluated in this study were included in the lists provided by the parties themselves. Assuming the parties did not know of their candidates' Web sites one can only hypothesize that this was either due to information management issues or due to the parties not considering the Web as a primary campaigning channel.

3.2 Coding Scheme

To answer the second research question (i.e. which trust and credibility-building website design cues were leveraged by Greek political candidates in their 2007 pre-election online campaigns), the Web sites were then evaluated by adapting a framework emerging out of several works (see Institute for Politics Democracy and the Internet, 2002) in the area of evaluating Web sites in the context of political marketing, and proposed by Foot *et al.* (2002). Reviewing the categories and respective item pools, the only changes made were within the scale used to measure the level of activities pertaining to the "comparison and documentation on candidate Web sites" (Foot *et al.*, 2002). For this scale, the last four items (i.e. features) pertaining to the disclosure of campaign finances were removed, because this is not publicly practised in Greece. Still, elected candidates are required by law to submit an account of the campaign budget for auditing. It is also important to note that campaign-related expenditure is determined by law, based on the size of the electoral sector in which the campaign is undertaken.

3.3 Data collection

Measurement began the day the election campaign was officially over (i.e. 15/9/2007) and lasted for two weeks. This time period was selected to ensure that all candidate Web sites had reached their optimal content level. Data was gathered by three Greek-speaking gatherers, who were provided with training, detailed guidelines, and a sample evaluation. The evaluations were based on checking whether the framework's categories and their corresponding features (for example a biography section) existed or not. If a feature existed, then an entry of '1' was made, while an entry of '0' would indicate the feature was not present. This binary benchmarking works well for features that can be clearly identified, even though it does not provide a scale of the quality of that feature. For example, one biographical note may include a few lines about the candidate, while another has a very detailed section on the candidate's background. Still in both cases an entry of '1' was made. This became more complex when more difficult to benchmark features (e.g. "is the site easy to navigate?") were in question. As such questions can be very subjective and questions interpreted in different ways we checked the data for consistency to identify any bias among the data gatherers. Systematic and sampling checks were also applied.

4 Results

4.1 Basic Features on Candidate Sites

Basic candidate site features are defined as those that “reflect information that has traditionally been provided in printed campaign brochures” (Foot *et al.*, 2002). Kamarck (1999) described site sections such as a biography and issue positions as brochure-ware. In the last month of the campaign season for the 2007 national elections in Greece, a vast majority of candidate Web sites included most of these basic features (see Table 2): an email address for the campaign (100%), candidate biography (95%), party affiliation (94%), issues section (70%), and an e-mail list sign-up (57%). Additional features categorized as ‘basic’ for candidate Web sites, but found in far fewer sites, included the ability to view a calendar of future campaign events (19%), obtain information about making campaign donations (1%), obtain information about voter registration (0%), and the ability to indicate an interest in being a campaign volunteer (0%).

Table 2: Basic features on candidates' sites (highlighting those scoring over 50%).

Category/Feature	ND (n=187)	PASOK (n=161)	KKE (n=1)	SYRIZA (n=10)	LAOS (n=14)	TOTAL (n=373)
Email Address for Campaign	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Biographical Section	95%	95%	100%	100%	86%	95%
Party Affiliation Mentioned	92%	96%	0%	90%	93%	94%
Issues Section	66%	71%	100%	100%	71%	70%
Email List Sign-up	56%	61%	100%	40%	43%	57%
Campaign Calendar	18%	23%	0%	10%	7%	19%
Volunteer Sign-up	2%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Information About Making Donations	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Voter Registration Information	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Privacy Policy	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Based on analysis of 373 candidate Web sites, September 2007

4.2 Online Campaigning: Adapting Traditional Practice

The Greek political marketing environment has traditionally leveraged both direct (i.e. face-to-face) and mediated (e.g. print and broadcast media) interactions, but with the 2007 national elections has begun to more actively exploit the World Wide Web for reaching out to voters. In the midst of this transition, it is interesting to examine the way that traditional political marketing activities are being adapted to the Web. Three sets of activities in terms of popularity emerge out of this analysis (for complete list, see Table 3). First, the majority of political candidates adapted three traditional campaigning techniques to the Web, including the posting of campaign event photographs (73%), inviting visitors to e-mail the campaign (91%), and providing contact information for the campaign (72%). Second, about one half of the candidates used the WWW to

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distribute video campaign advertisements (41%), distribute news and press releases (58%), and offer speech texts (51%). Lastly, the online activities that were not implemented by either the minority or none of the candidates include political endorsements (1%), the ability to receive campaign contributions online (1%), information about contributors (0%), encouraging site visitors to write letters to newspaper editors in support of the candidate's campaign (3%) and promoting the distribution of campaign materials to offline venues (e.g. posting news articles or audio files for visitors to send to local newspapers or radio stations) (1%).

Table 3: Online Campaigning: Adapting Traditional Practices

Category/Feature	ND (n=187)	PASOK (n=161)	KKE (n=1)	SYRIZA (n=10)	LAOS (n=14)	TOTAL (n=373)
Invitation to email the campaign	90%	92%	100%	90%	93%	91%
Photographs of campaign events	77%	73%	100%	40%	43%	73%
Telephone number or address for campaign	76%	68%	100%	50%	71%	72%
Campaign news	53%	65%	100%	50%	43%	58%
Speech texts	50%	55%	0%	60%	21%	51%
Campaign ads	41%	45%	100%	0%	14%	41%
Encourage letters to the editor	2%	4%	0%	0%	0%	3%
System to make online contributions	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Offline distribution of campaign materials	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Endorsements	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Information about contributors	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Based on analysis of 373 candidate Web sites, September 2007

4.3 Adopting Web-Exclusive Campaign Practices

The previous section examined traditional offline campaign practices that were adapted to the Web in the recently held 2007 parliamentary elections in Greece. Next, this section explores the use of Web-exclusive campaign activities by Greek political candidates. As shown in Table 4, Web-exclusive campaign activities are still at an infancy stage among the candidates of all parties.

Table 4: Adopting Web-Exclusive Campaign Practices

Category/Feature	ND (n=187)	PASOK (n=161)	KKE (n=1)	SYRIZA (n=10)	LAOS (n=14)	TOTAL (n=373)
Site-specific search engine	28%	46%	0%	0%	57%	36%
Multimedia content	21%	22%	0%	10%	21%	21%
Interactive campaign calendar	18%	23%	0%	10%	7%	19%
Visitor comments	6%	14%	0%	10%	50%	12%
Interactive polls	10%	6%	0%	0%	0%	8%
Send links	9%	8%	0%	0%	0%	8%
Web toolkits	4%	5%	0%	10%	7%	5%
Pop-up windows	5%	4%	0%	10%	14%	5%
Other languages	4%	4%	0%	0%	0%	4%

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Facilitate letters to editor	2%	4%	0%	0%	0%	3%
Electronic paraphernalia	3%	2%	0%	10%	7%	3%
Accessible to persons with disabilities	3%	1%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Ability to individualize site content	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Online events	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Solicit user's Web messaging handle	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Based on analysis of 373 candidate Web sites, September 2007

4.4 Linking Strategies

The inherent value of the World Wide Web is the interconnectedness of nodes and corresponding information sets. In the context of political marketing, this Web is of critical importance as it enables site visitors to reach related Web sites, thus becoming more informed and empowered with respect to their upcoming voting decision. Table 5 reports on the degree to which candidates' Web sites linked to other Web sites. These links are categorised by the nature of the entity a candidate's Web site is linked to. While the volume of such links is also important, this study measured and reports on the simple presence of links (i.e. either present or absent). For example, a single link from a candidate's site to their affiliated party would be scored as 'present'. From the data it became apparent that the vast majority of candidate sites linked to other politics-related Web sites.

Table 5: Linking Strategies of Candidates

Type of Link	ND (n=187)	PASOK (n=161)	KKE (n=1)	SYRIZA (n=10)	LAOS (n=14)	TOTAL (n=373)
Political Parties	60%	73%	100%	80%	57%	66%
Government Sites	57%	57%	100%	50%	29%	56%
Civic or Advocacy Groups	33%	45%	100%	70%	36%	39%
Local or Community Sites	34%	34%	100%	60%	21%	34%
Press Organizations	23%	26%	100%	50%	43%	26%
Portals	10%	12%	0%	40%	14%	12%
Other Candidates' Sites	3%	3%	0%	20%	14%	4%
Opponents' Sites	3%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Individual Citizen Sites	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%

Source: Based on analysis of 373 candidate Web sites, September 2007

4.5 Documentation and comparison of issue positions

The previous section reported on the linking activity between a candidate's Web site and another politics-related Web site. While linking is an enabling mechanism for enhancing the information supply to voters, offering clear information within a candidate's site during a campaign can also help visitors become more informed voters without expending extra effort. For example, information on who is sending the messages received by visitors, where the candidate stands on various campaign platform issues and why, is of great value to site visitors. Yet, only these three activities are undertaken by a slight majority of candidates, while more advanced documentation related activities are found sporadically. Foot *et al.*'s (2002) study referenced such advanced documentation activities suggested as 'Best Practices' of Internet campaigning by the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (2002). As shown in Table

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6, only 22% of candidate sites referenced an independent publication in support of claims made in the issue statements; and only 6% of candidate sites compared the candidate's positions with those of his/her opponent. The least pursued activities in this area include providing visitors with statements identifying shared values or interests between the candidate and other political figures or groups (1%), and discussing campaign finance information or sharing related issues (0%).

Table 6: Comparison and Documentation on Candidate Web Sites

Feature	ND (n=187)	PASOK (n=161)	KKE (n=1)	SYRIZA (n=10)	LAOS (n=14)	TOTAL (n=373)
Present Issue Statements	63%	70%	100%	90%	86%	68%
Provide Rationale for Positions	49%	58%	100%	90%	57%	55%
Site Sponsorship Identifier	50%	57%	0%	60%	64%	53%
Cite References in Issue Statements	25%	20%	100%	20%	7%	22%
Compare Positions to Opponent	1%	12%	0%	10%	7%	6%
Compare Positions to Other Group	1%	7%	0%	0%	7%	4%
Identify Shared Values with Others	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Discuss Campaign Finance Issue	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Present Campaign Finance Data	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Identify Campaign Contributors	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Report Campaign Expenditures	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Report Personal Financial Statement	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Link to FEC Report	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Based on analysis of 373 candidate Web sites, September 2007

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper we have evaluated the entire population of Web sites for the political candidates running for office in the Greek 2007 parliamentary elections. The findings began by offering insight into the political sphere in Greece. Specifically, it was discovered that 18.23% of Greek candidates had a Web site extending their campaigning online. Although a minority, this is a significant mass that is likely to push other candidates to online campaigning. This trend will also be partly in response to a likely growing expectation by voters to find information about candidates online now that almost one in five candidates are already on the Web.

Examining the trust and credibility-building Web site design cues leveraged by Greek candidates resulted in the identification of norms and oversights. While not all Web site design and campaign features are expected to be implemented by all candidates, the following list is a recommended short list (24 of identified 58) of features, a 'must have' of sorts, for any new entrants in online campaigning:

- Basic features: email address for the campaign, candidate biography, party affiliation, issues section, e-mail list sign-up, a calendar of future campaign events, and a privacy policy (although such policies are currently not commonly found).
- Adapted traditional campaigning techniques online: posting of campaign event photographs, inviting visitors to e-mail the campaign, providing contact information for

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the campaign, distributing video campaign advertisements, distributing news and press releases, and offering speech texts.

- Adopting Web-Exclusive Campaign Practices: a site specific search engine, electronic paraphernalia, and posting of visitor comments (note: despite their popularity, the authors feel that pop-ups should not be considered a 'Best Practice' given the usability and accessibility issues that arise from their use).
- Linking Strategies: link to government and/or political party sites, civic or advocacy groups, press organizations, local or community sites, and other politics-related Web sites.
- Documentation and comparison of issue positions: including site sponsorship identifiers, issues statements, and providing a rationale for positions.

Future research should examine the voters' perceptions of the effectiveness of candidates' Web sites in building trust between them. It should also examine what the politicians themselves consider important when it comes to online campaigning, the key benefits they believe they will attain by campaigning online and what they consider the major obstacles in achieving them to be.

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