



## Do websites influence the nature of voting intentions? The case of two national elections in Greece

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on online political marketing by investigating the use of websites as a marketing tool in the 2007 and 2009 general elections in 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 to examine whether and to what extent the influence of trust-building factors changes over-time, as the online environment matures. The key findings of this research are that users tend to visit the websites of favoured candidates, which reinforces their positive perceptions of them, while as far as the websites themselves and their content and the services provided are concerned there is still room for improvement.

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### 1. 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 over another. A firm's website plays a key role in influencing consumers' perceptions of a product or services and subsequently, the final product choice (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2007). 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 are 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 websites as a marketing tool. The empirical focus is on the 2007 and 2009

general elections of the Hellenic Republic (hereafter, Greece). More specifically, in the empirical examination, we are primarily interested in the role that websites of members of the Greek parliament played in influencing voters' perceptions and views. Consequently, our main research objectives are: firstly, to establish whether a political candidate's website has an effect on the visitor's trust towards the candidate, the overall perception of candidates and the subsequent voting intention; and secondly, to examine whether and to what extent these trust-building factors and their influence change over time, as the online environment matures, by comparing the national elections in 2007 and 2009.

The paper initially reviews the relevant literature and draws links to a similar body of work that has examined the role of commercial websites in influencing consumers' decisions on purchasing products and services. We extrapolate relevant ideas and models in relation to the influential role of political websites on prospective voters' respective decisions. The paper continues by discussing the research design and the data collection process, before presenting the results and findings of our study.

### 2. Relevant theoretical perspectives

#### 2.1. Online political marketing

The last few years have seen the emergence of an expanding literature on political marketing (and with its criticism too, e.g. see Henneberg, 2004). This literature examines political marketing from various perspectives including the examination of relevant topics such as 'political management', 'packaged politics', 'promotional

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politics' or more broadly 'modern political communications' (see for example Scammel, 1999). Maarek (1995, 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" (O'Casey, 1996). 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 (Bowers-Brown & Gunter, 2002), facilitating a dialogue efficiently and effectively and rendering it an important aspect of any political marketing strategy.

Butler and Harris (2009) suggest that research progress in political marketing must recognize the parallel change in the base disciplines of marketing and political science. From an online marketing perspective, the Internet, as a political marketing tool, brings with it both many advantages and challenges (Bowers-Brown & Gunter, 2002). For example, Gibson and Ward (2000) suggest that by using the worldwide 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 stress 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" (Gibson & Ward, 2000). On the other hand, significant proportions of a country'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 following sections, we focus on the personal websites as tools for promoting political parties and establishing stronger relationships with citizens, in order to gain their trust and eventually influencing their voting intentions. It should be noted that although websites play a central role in a candidate's online campaign, many other online ways for influencing voters' intentions exist (e.g. using social media or email campaigns). In this paper, though, we are primarily interested in personal websites, as they tend to be the core of a candidate's campaign.

## 2.2. Evaluating political websites

Website 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 website undergoing the evaluation. In our case, the end-goal is for the citizen to cast a vote in favour of the party. The website by itself may not be adequate to achieve this, but it can play an important role in increasing the credibility, which in turn can increase the citizen's trust in that party, leading to a vote. According to Fogg et al. (2001), a highly credible website 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 and candidate websites should score highly against the criteria set by the methodological approach adopted. Such approaches offer either qualitative accounts of political websites based on largely descriptive and impressionistic evidence or adopt a more quantitative approach, constructing composite indices to measure various aspects of websites, such as design

sophistication, information content, and opportunities (Gibson & Ward, 2000). For example, Gibson and Ward (2000) 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. In addition, they clarified, conceptually and empirically, what they meant when they referred to a site's quality and sophistication and 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 possible the comparison of sites across different countries or even longitudinally, although the list of criteria/items to include would probably need to be revised in order 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 website without measuring its influence on voters, or at least identifying what they perceive as important, can be limiting. Insights can be gained by looking into the relevant literature and especially by focusing on what affects the formation of online relationships and trust in the context of commercial transactions.

## 2.3. Forming online relationships and trust

Corbitt, Thanasankit, and Yi (2002) have 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 (Heider, 1958), advocating the view that a positive attitude is formed for people or objects with which they are familiar and associated. 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. (2002) 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 itself. 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 (2006) developed further a comprehensive model for the antecedents or sources of consumer trust when purchasing online travel. These included (Chen, 2006, 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 (2007) proposed similar issues based on a qualitative meta-analysis and 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 the 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 influence voters' trust and voters' intentions to vote for them (see for example work by Schlosser, Barnett White, and Lloyd (2006) 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 include, *inter alia*, the presentation of products for sale, the website atmospherics, price comparisons with competitors, which in conjunction with delivery and post sales support could influence consumer decision making and the "total customer experience" (see for example, *Petre, Minocha, & Roberts, 2006*). 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 influencing 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, especially if the aim is to become a credible and reputable source of information (see for example, *Harrison McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Koufaris & Hampton-Sosa, 2004*).

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, 2004*). 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). This 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, Hiller, & Smith, 2002*) 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 (*Luo, 2002*). On a positive note, consumers increase their transactions on the Internet when established brand names are part of what the website offers (*Ang & Lee, 2000*), 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 consumers and political voters are shaped in a complex, multi-faceted individual, social and cultural setting and some of these dimensions will be explored in our empirical work.

### 3. Methodology

Studies related to political marketing and to website evaluation tend to focus on large or developed countries (e.g. the following country cases covering a range of website issues and more broadly web-base political campaigning: Australia (*Van Onselen & Van Onselen, 2008*), Germany (*Gibson, Rommele, & Ward, 2003*), Italy (*Newell, 2001*), Malaysia (*Hassan & Li, 2005*), Netherlands (*Utz, 2009*), New Zealand (*Conway & Dorner, 2004*), Spain (*Sampedro & Perez, 2008*), United Kingdom (*Bowers-Brown & Gunter, 2002; Jackson, 2006*), United States (*Warnick et al., 2005*). Selecting a country such as Greece can offer unique insights into how parties operate within smaller electoral environments, in which direct personal relationships are relatively more easily formed.

Two studies exist related to the use of websites (*Coursaris & Papagiannidis, 2009; Lappas, Chatzopoulos, & Yannas, 2008*) by Greek candidates in the 2004 and 2007 general elections. The

current paper builds on these by following the general national elections of 2007 and 2009. This time the focus was not on the website as such, but on the voters who visited a candidate's website to find out more about the individual and his/her political agenda. The paper adopts a quantitative approach based on the use of a questionnaire issued to voters after the general national elections and mostly utilising an online convenience sample, as the majority of responses took place following 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. After removing the incomplete ones, the usable sample consisted of 201 and 178 responses for 2007 and 2009 respectively (*Table 1* summarises the demographics of the convenience sample). 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 websites. 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.

Our extensive questionnaire (please see *Appendix A* for a summary of the questions translated from Greek into English) consisted of both categorical and Likert-type questions, so a mixed analysis was used. 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 voters' expectations of content were exceeded, met, or not 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.

### 4. Results and discussion

Based on the previous discussion, we will address the following research questions:

- (i) How well does online political marketing serve as a promotional vehicle for candidates in the national elections of 2009? What are the key information elements users sought on political candidates' websites?
- (ii) What is a political candidate's website's effect on visitor's trust towards the candidate, the overall perception of the candidate, and the subsequent voting intention in the Greek national elections of 2009?
- (iii) Were there any key changes between the last two national elections' electoral periods (2009 vs. 2007) in terms of the effectiveness of candidates' websites in political marketing?

#### 4.1. Online political marketing as a promotional vehicle in the 2009 Greek national elections

The majority (57.8%) of website visitors explored only one candidate's website; the rest explored either two (28.4%), three (6.5%), four (3.0%), or five or more candidates (4.3%). While this left much to be desired in terms of the effective reach of a candidate's

**Table 1**  
Participant demographics.

Measure	Items	2007		2009	
		Count	%	Count	%
Gender	Male	124	62	110	62
	Female	77	38	68	38
Age	<21	6	3	9	5
	21–25	34	19	22	12
	26–30	69	38	55	31
	31–35	31	17	30	17
	36–40	19	10	21	12
	41–45	13	7	13	7
	46–50	3	2	16	9
	51–55	2	1	5	3
Education	>55	6	3	7	4
	Middle/high school	2	1	20	12
	Diploma	4	2	14	8
	Technological educational institutions	16	8	22	12
	Bachelor	69	34	45	25
	Master	89	44	62	35
Income	Doctorate	21	11	15	8
	<10,000€	31	19	37	26
	10,001–20,000€	65	41	50	35
	20,001–30,000€	34	21	22	15
	30,001–40,000€	15	9	10	7
Occupation	>40,000€	15	9	24	17
	Unemployed	6	3	14	8
	University student	36	18	25	14
	Domestic	1	1	1	1
	Private sector employee	71	35	62	35
	Public sector employee	26	13	22	12
	Independent contractor	47	23	37	21
	Retired	1	1	4	2
Internet use frequency	Other	13	6	13	7
	Daily	186	93	169	95
	Every 2 days	4	2	4	2
	1–3 times/week	6	3	3	2
	1–3 times/month	0	0	0	0
Internet access speed	<1/month	5	2	2	1
	Broadband	160	80	149	84
	Dialup	21	10	20	11
Internet access point	No access	20	10	9	5
	Home	160	80	164	92
	Workplace (out of home)	150	75	130	73
	Internet café	25	12	17	10
	Other	16	8	18	10

website, we were interested in knowing whether those citizens who visited multiple candidates' websites (i.e. two or more) did so for more than one political party. Our results suggest that about one in four (26.7%) Greek citizens who visited multiple candidate websites actually visited individuals aligned with competing political parties.

The question that arose next was whether citizens were interested in engaging with unknown candidates or those they were already familiar with. The sample reported on whether they visited sites of candidates with whom they had some form of prior engagement/familiarity or not (mean1 = 1.49, mean2 = 1.16; where 1 = no, 2 = yes). A comparison of means revealed that there was a significant difference ( $t = 5.201$ ,  $df = 119$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in that citizens visited significantly more often sites of candidates with whom they were previously familiar. Consequently, the web appeared to be better suited to reinforcing perceptions of candidates, rather than initially introducing candidates to citizens and creating those perceptions.

Whether these perceptions were mostly formed during the one month pre-election period or throughout the 4-year period of a ruling party was assessed by comparing the reported means of website visit frequencies during each of the two time periods. Results

indicate that the month before elections is significantly more important in reaching candidates than the rest of a typical four-year period between elections. Potential voters visit such websites approximately twice a week the month before elections, compared to monthly the rest of the time (last month period mean = 2.74 vs. 4-year period mean = 3.75; where 1 = daily, 2 = bi-daily, 3 = 1–3x/week, 4 = 1–3x/month, 5 = Less Frequently;  $t = -8.025$ ,  $df = 68$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

While the month before the elections may be the most important one when it comes to reaching prospective voters, the quality of candidates' websites should be maintained constantly at a comparable level. A comparison of means reported for the overall impression of these websites any time prior to the one month of pre-election campaigning (mean = 3.55; st. dev = 1.39; where 1 = very bad/4 = neutral/7 = very good) and that final month before elections (for favoured candidates: mean = 4.21; st. dev. = 1.398; for unfavoured candidates: mean = 3.7; st. dev. = 1.437) indicates that there was a significant difference for the better in the quality of the websites the last month before elections, when compared to the rest of the earlier period ( $t = 4.859$ ,  $df = 80$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, this was the case for favoured candidates, but not for unfavoured candidates ( $t = 1.433$ ,  $df = 77$ ,  $p = .156$ , n.s.). Consequently, there

is a need to improve website maintenance and to use sites beyond the election periods, as it may otherwise affect supporters' perception negatively. Alternatively, candidates may have a site that is 'generic' and does not require regular maintenance and only launch and update a 'mini-site', either separately or as part of their main site, dedicated to the elections. Also, this finding indirectly suggests that politicians do not yet consider websites as a tool enabling them to maintain a constant bi-directional communication channel with the voters, but mostly as an information source about them. Overall, sites were perceived to be neutral (mean = 3.89; st. dev. = 1.274), and the political needs of visitors were not being fulfilled by the candidates' websites (mean = 3.17; st. dev. = 1.597; where 1 = not at all/4 = neutral).

To determine which political needs were not being fulfilled by the candidates' websites, we asked participants to indicate the content that they were interested in and the content they actually found upon visiting the websites. We then compared for significant differences between the means for each content category. The results are shown in Table 2 below. From these data, we deduce that there is statistical evidence supporting the need for further information and especially promotional emphasis on issues related to *Biographical information*, *Political views/positions*, *Parliamentary activity*, and a reduced promotional emphasis on *Events* and *Photographs*. In the expectation column, 'Satisfied' suggests that the level of expectation was not significantly different from the level of offering, 'lower' suggests that the level of expectation was significantly lower than the level of offering (highly satisfied, but dangerously, as it may have become too much and to the detriment of other items), while, finally, 'higher' suggests that the level of expectation was significantly higher than the level of offering (dissatisfied).

Lastly, we asked participants to rate the perceived currency (mean = 4.38; st. dev. = 1.224) and accuracy (mean = 4.13; st. dev. = 1.304) of information, the website's ease of use (mean = 4.99; st. dev. = 1.34) and aesthetics (mean = 4.03; st. dev. = 1.486), and the security of their personal data (mean = 3.89; st. dev. = 1.486) (where 1 = not at all; 4 = neutral; 7 = very much). From the above results, we can conclude that the websites were rather moderate overall and that there was significant room for improvement.

#### 4.2. Website impact on trustworthiness of candidates and consequent voting intention (2009 elections)

Having examined the effective reach of political candidates' website, we then explored the impact of those exposures. We began by examining whether the voters' perceptions of candidates changed following a visit to these websites, both for favoured and unfavoured candidates. Comparison of means (see Fig. 1) indicated that favoured candidates benefited from their supporters' website visits, as perceptions improved (mean-before = 4.36; mean-after = 4.63; with 4 = neutral/7 = very good;  $t = -3.218$ ,

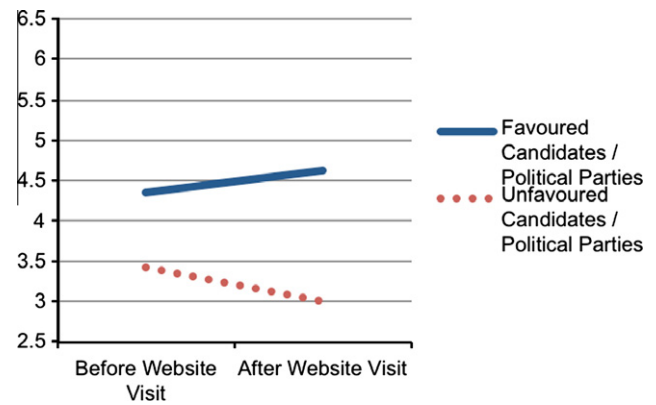


Fig. 1. Website influence of voters' perceptions regarding favoured and unfavoured political candidates.

$df = 99$ ,  $p < .005$ ), while unfavoured candidates were seen in a significantly more negative light (mean-before = 3.42; mean-after = 3.00; with 4 = neutral/1 = very bad;  $t = -2.304$ ,  $df = 96$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This may suggest that loyalty to a candidate and to a party may have moderating effects on the effectiveness of candidates' websites, but further research is needed.

Moreover, we were interested in knowing if the websites had an impact on visitors' perceptions of candidates' trustworthiness. Participants indicated a small positive effect on already favoured candidates' perceived trustworthiness (mean = 4.67; st. dev. = 1.048; where 4 = no effect/7 = very positive effect), and a small-to-moderate effect on the perceived influence of websites on candidate selection and voting decisions (mean = 2.69; st. dev. = 1.82; 1 = not at all/4 = moderate/7 = very large effect).

These effects may be attributed to a certain extent to the user experience afforded by the candidates' websites. Study participants indicated that the websites were moderately useful/valuable (mean = 3.49; st. dev. = 1.932; 1 = not at all/4 = moderately) in strengthening their personal relationships with the candidates, for example, by sending press releases, online invitations to events, and other tactics. Interestingly, visitors were significantly more sceptical about the information found on political candidates' website than any other sites on the Internet, for both those who visited just one party's candidate(s) (mean-trust-political content = 3.75; mean-trust-other content = 4.64;  $t = -4.775$ ,  $df = 117$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) or multiple parties' candidates (mean-trust-political content = 4.11; mean-trust-other content = 4.79;  $t = -3.012$ ,  $df = 72$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ).

#### 4.3. Online political marketing changes between the 2007 and 2009 Greek national elections

We had conducted the same study two years earlier during the 2007 national elections in Greece, which enabled us to compare

Table 2  
Web content sought after vs. found on candidates' websites.

Content	Measurement	Significance	Expectation
Website content category	M1 = sought after content M2 = found content	Significance	Satisfied
Biographical information	M1 = 5.99, M2 = 6.03	$F(1,191) = .052$ , ns	Satisfied
Political views/positions	M2 = 6.14, M2 = 5.06	$F(1,191) = 24.432$ , $p < .001$	Higher
Programmatic statements	M1 = 5.36, M2 = 4.93	$F(1,190) = 3.344$ , ns	Satisfied
Parliamentary activity	M1 = 5.70, M2 = 5.16	$F(1,191) = 6.176$ , $p < .05$	Higher
News/announcements	M1 = 4.88, M2 = 5.34	$F(1,191) = 4.137$ , $p < .05$	Lower
Events	M1 = 3.82, M2 = 5.58	$F(1,190) = 43.360$ , $p < .001$	Lower
Photographs	M1 = 3.71, M2 = 5.56	$F(1,191) = 47.925$ , $p < .001$	Lower
Multimedia/audiovisual material	M1 = 4.29, M2 = 4.42	$F(1,190) = .231$ , ns	Satisfied
Communicating with the candidates	M1 = 5.09, M2 = 4.61	$F(1,189) = 2.898$ , ns	Satisfied

the landscape of online political marketing between the two periods and examine if any significant changes had occurred. Out of the 30 questions, we report on the 3 items where such a change was observed. First of all, there was a notable increase in the proportion of proactive voters, i.e. 6.9% more of them (26.7% in total) visited candidates who did not belong to the same party in 2009. While a significant increase, the fact that only one in four voters visited the websites of candidates from multiple parties suggests a strong partisanship or underutilization of the online medium to engage non-supporters. Secondly, while a significant difference amongst voters was found in terms of their perceptions of candidates before and following a visit to candidates' websites (positive change for favoured; negative change for unfavoured), this effect was not observed in the previous elections of 2007. It is plausible that given the relative infancy of the medium and its utilization by candidates, either online presentations of the candidates were not designed effectively to elicit desired responses, or the small volume of website visitors were relatively firm in their outlook on the candidates. Lastly, regarding the content made available on candidates' websites it was observed that two content areas showed a significantly higher level of meeting expectations in 2009 than in 2007 (see Fig. 2), when these two items were not made available as often as site visitors had expected: programmatic statements (2007: mean-expected = 5.16, mean-found = 4.30;  $F(1,255) = 15.131, p < .001$ ; 2009: mean-expected = 5.36, mean-found = 4.93;  $F(1,190) = 3.344, ns$ ), and communicating with the candidates (2007: mean-expected = 5.13, mean-found = 3.64;  $F(1,254) = 39.938, p < .001$ ; 2009: mean-expected = 5.09, mean-found = 4.61;  $F(1,189) = 2.898, ns$ ).

Interestingly, the level of expectations from both of these content areas remained fairly consistent, with slight increases in programmatic statements. This observation gave rise to a post hoc analysis for the following question: what is the relative priority for political candidates to provide the various content areas on their websites? As evidenced by data from the two most recent, consecutive elections, content expectations are salient and a clear message is sent to political campaign managers regarding their online priorities. Shown in Fig. 3, these priorities are ranked by the voters' interests in the most recent elections of 2009.

Finally, testing the relationship between the frequency of Internet use and whether respondents visited a political website, it was found that as Internet use increases, so does the likelihood of visiting a political party's website (2007:  $r = 0.168, p < 0.05$ ; 2009:  $r = 0.173, p < 0.05$ ).

### 5. Conclusion and future research

The objective of this paper has been to offer new insights when it comes to how a candidate's website may influence voters'

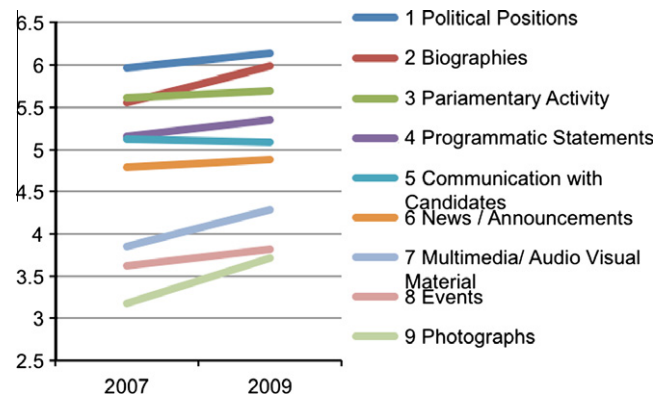


Fig. 3. Voters' content interests from political candidate websites.

perceptions and views, examining the factors affecting voters' trust when it comes to using politicians' websites and also the extent that these factors and their influence change over-time. Our first finding is that the Web presents a significant opportunity for candidates to reach out to voters and positively influence them; this is an opportunity that has not been fully utilised yet. This is in alignment with previous research related to the usage of candidate websites in the 2007 elections that found that there is much scope for improvement. More specifically when it comes to information available on candidate sites, what is of particular interest is that visitors are seeking information on politics and positions and that they would not mind having less information about the candidate (Table 2). This could be interpreted as a consequence of voters already having made up their mind as to whom they will vote for and would like to reinforce this view by visiting their chosen candidate's website. But why do voters need more information on candidates' political views and programmatic statements? If this additional information had been important for decision making, then voters would have visited many more candidates' sites too, which is not the case. Perhaps this is more related to the nature of Greek politics and how voting decision making is often undertaken based on existing direct personal relationships. If decisions have effectively already been made and voting intention is unlikely to change, then the potential effect any online political campaign (or any other type of campaign for that matter) can have is minimal. However, breaking into the cycle of trust and reinforcing what voters tend to seek when visiting candidate sites is bound to be difficult. Is it the case that candidates do not invest in their online political presence because they acknowledge the minimal impact or is the minimum impact a result of the limited investment? This is reminiscent of Porter's (2001) view that "the key question is not whether to deploy Internet technology – [candidates] have no choice if they want to stay competitive – but how to deploy it." Such a question can only be answered by studying candidates' online strategies, similar to the work of Jackson for the UK (Jackson, 2003). Further studies in this field could help shed light on arguably one of the most methodologically difficult vantage points, due to access challenges. 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). In turn, it would support the need for integrated political marketing communications that leverage the web for its strengths, and using it as a complementary tactic in the candidates' political marketing arsenal. Over time, the more voters go online and their Internet usage frequency increases the greater the role of websites and other online tools will become. Future research could examine such tools more holistically from both an information 'push' and 'pull' angle. For example, future

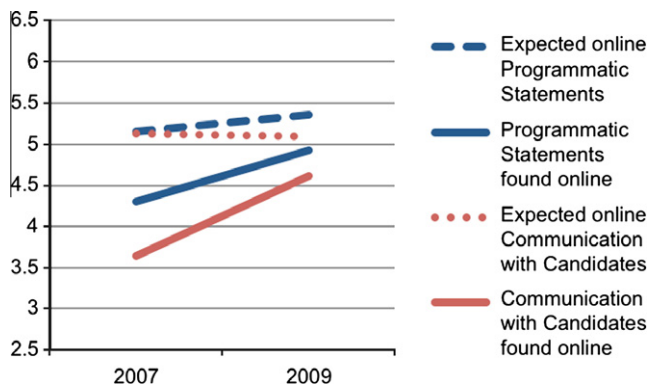


Fig. 2. Expectations for vs. retrieved content from political candidate websites.

research could examine how candidates and voters affect social networking and whether peer-influence rather than candidate-influence is a more effective strategy to adopt, not just for the election period, but even before and after it. Relevant articles have already started appearing (for example Andersen & Medaglia, 2009; Gueorguieva, 2008; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010), but more cases would help shed light on a rapidly growing phenomenon. This could be either by concentrating specific services (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.) or by building up country profiles. These can offer a holistic understanding by adopting different methodological approaches, which can be particularly useful when it comes to practice.

## Appendix A. Questionnaire (translated from Greek into English)

### A.1. Trust and influence

1. During the election period of the October general elections (5th September–4th October) did you visit any political party websites?
2. During the election period of the October general elections (5th September–4th October) how many candidate websites did you visit?
3. If you visited candidate websites, did these belong to the same party?
4. Generally speaking, before your recent visits (i.e. during the election period of the national elections of 2009) to websites of candidates belonging to the party that you voted for in 2007, what was your view of the candidates?
5. Generally speaking, after your recent visits during the election period of the national elections of 2009, to websites of candidates belonging to the party that you voted for in 2007, what was your view of the candidates?
6. Generally speaking, before your recent visits (i.e. during the election period of the national elections of 2009) to websites of candidates belonging to a party that you did not vote for in 2007, what was your view of the candidates?
7. Generally speaking, after your recent visits during the election period of the national elections of 2009, to websites of candidates belonging to a party that you did not vote for in 2007, what was your view of the candidates?
8. How much was your final decision as to whom to vote for influenced by your visit to candidate websites?
9. Did you mainly visit websites of candidates with whom you had a prior relationship? (e.g. you have voted for them or attended their events or met them, etc.)?
10. Did you visit any websites belonging to candidates with whom you had no prior relation (e.g. you have not voted for them or attended their events or met them, etc.)?
11. In your opinion how much do candidate websites affect your trust towards them?
12. How useful were the candidate websites when it came to strengthening your personal relations (e.g. via receiving newsletters or invitations to events, etc.)?
13. How much do you trust the information you find on candidate websites?
14. How much do you trust the information you find on the Internet (not just political/candidate websites)?

### A.2. Frequency of visits/overall experience

15. How often did you visit candidate websites during the election period (5th September–4th October)?
16. How often do you visit candidate websites when it is not an election period?

17. During the election period (5th September–4th October) what was your opinion of websites belonging to candidates that you voted for in the previous elections (2007)?
18. During the election period (5th September–4th October) what was your opinion of websites belonging to candidates that you did not vote for in the previous elections (2007)?
19. What is your overall opinion of candidate websites when it is not an election period?
20. What is your overall opinion of candidate websites?
21. How much do candidate websites meet your expectations and meet your political needs?

### A.3. Qualitative website features

22. When I visit a candidate's website I am interested in:

Biographical note	Events
Political views and statements	Photographs
Programmatic statements	Multimedia
Parliamentary activity	Communicating with the candidate
Latest news	

23. When I visit a candidate's website I usually find:

Biographical note	Events
Political views and statements	Photographs
Programmatic statements	Multimedia
Parliamentary activity	Communicating with the candidate
Latest news	

24. How current is the information that is available on candidates' websites?
25. In your view, how accurate is the information that is available on candidates' websites?
26. When it comes to using candidate websites, how easy was it for you?
27. How do you rate candidate websites aesthetically?
28. How satisfied are you with the protection that candidate websites offer in terms of your personal data?
29. Which candidate websites or party websites did you visit during the election period (5 September–4 October)? Please enter the names of the candidates or parties or their URLs. (Optional)
30. Which party did you vote for? (Optional)
31. What are your views or suggestions related to this questionnaire? (Optional)

### A.4. Demographics

32. Gender.
33. Age.
34. Education.
35. Annual income.
36. Occupation.
37. How often do you use the Internet?
38. Where do you use the Internet from?

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