Chapter 1
Internet Politics Beyond the Digital Divide

A Comparative Perspective on Political Parties Online Across Political Systems

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Abstract The Digital Divide has been considered key to understanding the relation between Internet and politics. However, today the use of the Internet is following a normalization trend and new country contextual factors must be taken into consideration in explaining the unequal use of the Internet in politics. This study focuses on the unequal presence of political parties online across political systems. By combining multiple sources, this study explores the relation between the unequal online presence of political parties in 190 countries, and country-contextual factors, including level of Digital Divide, and economic and democratic indicators. Here, the empirical findings resize the relation of causality between the Digital Divide and the use of the Internet for politics. They highlight that democratic status, among various other country-contextual specificities, is the strongest contextual factor in determining the unequal use of the Internet in politics for political parties.

Keywords Internet and international politics • Digital divide • Democracy • Comparativism in internet studies • Political systems

1.1 Introduction

Since the advent of the Internet, great attention has been paid on how political parties would benefit from being present on the Internet. Gibson and Ward (2009) identify three main lines of research in the field: first, the intra-party arena, referring to the use of the Internet by political parties to facilitate communication amongst its members; second, the inter-party arena, referring to how political parties use the Internet to compete with each other in campaigning; and third, the systemic-arena, referring to how political parties reorganise themselves so as to seize the new

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opportunities offered by the Internet. However, research in the field neglects a comparative analysis of the use of the Internet from political parties across countries and political systems. This was justified by global inequalities in using the internet. However, the fact that today the Internet is far more used, allows us to extend our analysis and attempt a worldwide comparative analysis.

Here, I address this issue by first exploring the worldwide distribution of political parties on the World Wide Web. Second, I explore whether their unequal distribution may be explained by the Digital Divide and by other local conditions, such as the democratic and economic status of each country.

1.2 Virtual Political Parties

Scholars have paid attention to how the Internet might facilitate better communication between politicians and citizens. In contrast with this expectation however, research has noted that Internet remains mainly used as a one-way flow of information: from politicians to the public (Johson 2003; Levin 2003; Ward et al. 2003). In this way, the Internet has been employed just like a traditional media (Castells and Sey 2004). Coleman (2005) has also questioned the quality of the information, arguing that in some cases while it may be good quality it is not easily accessible. Scholars also argued that the Internet would have a positive impact on mobilizing voters, though we are yet to have empirical evidence on this (Castells and Sey 2004). Ward et al. (2003) point out that in the UK only 38 % of political party web sites offer visitors the opportunity to become members online. In the opinion of other scholars, politicians do not make the most of the Internet to interact with citizens (Ward et al. 2003; Levin 2003). Ward et al. (2003) highlight that less than a third of UK political parties websites allow interactions. Even when politicians try to interact with citizens by opening forums, the experiments are questionable (Ward et al. 2003).

All this initial research in the field brought us to conclude that the general enthusiasm on the Internet as a useful tool for politicians, political parties and political campaigns, has not yet been founded with evidence of more inclusive and participatory politics. So far, research concludes that the websites of official political parties have not provided the opportunities expected of the Internet.

At the same time, today, more recent research on other aspects of the Internet provides host of counter arguments. The advent of the Web 2.0, for instance, has been lauded as a great opportunity to energize political participation by enabling easy interaction between political parties and voters. This is also confirmed in those cases when websites provide political opportunities, such as those designed with social network tools. Evidence can be found in the case of the last American Presidential election. By framing the concept of “cyber party”, Margetts (2006) explores how ICTs offer the opportunity to expand political parties at the grass roots level. Thanks to Web 2.0 tools, political parties may encourage the direct involvement of people in their activities, such as in contributing to parties’

campaigns with money, signing petitions, or even participating in consultations on policy issues.

To summarize, Chadwick (2006) singles out three key-points of the debate about how the use of the Internet may influence the political party landscape:

Internet increases (1) party competition. Marginalized new parties and non-party political movements may benefit from the Internet to raise their visibility. In many cases, minor political groups suffer from being small. With the Internet as a cheap medium, as well as more accessible than other communication technologies, they can compete with richer parties at a similar level of visibility. The Internet allows minor political parties to reach potential supporters similarly to main parties. The effect of this situation is an increase of pluralism, enabling citizens to better identify with specific claims motivating their political engagement. This may have the consequence of increasing voter turnout. Older media, such as the printed press and the television, still have great power in providing information and making advertising campaigns. However, their form of communication is not as rich and fragmented, as is that of the Internet. The Internet allows the spreading of larger amounts of information permitting people to examine political issues according to their own interest and needs. They are better able to form their own opinions, and thus are more likely to take part in political debates. The democratization of the Internet for making and receiving information is more likely to have an impact in a general framework of democracy.

Still according to Chadwick (2006), the Internet may also (2) diffuse power among citizens, increasing grassroots control over political leaders and candidates. The network structure of the Internet facilitates continued relations between candidates and their supporters who have then more power in controlling their leaders. This interaction can help politicians refine their political programs responding to the demands and expectations of supporters expressed with the Internet. At the same time, parties are able to coordinate their supporters more easily and quickly to mobilize them for instance in key moments of campaigning and fundraising. This is more likely to motivate people to be politically engaged and support their candidates more actively.

In spite of these new trends, Chadwick (2006) identifies the third key-point, also summarized by Morris (1999) in his normalization thesis, and defined by a few others (Davis 1999; Margolis and Resnick 2000; Resnick 1998), as (3) institutional adaptations. This argues that, in shifting the form of doing politics to the Internet, political institutions regulate the Internet's innovative potentials by reproducing the same trends as in off-line politics. While during the 1990s the Internet was the space hosting a proliferation of political websites whose visibility was not linked to the wealth of politics, today conditions have changed. Larger political parties and their candidates are now able to make their Internet communication techniques more effective. More incisive websites and talented staff are likely to work for the wealthiest political parties. They will also have better resources to increase their ability to converge media strategies, integrating television and Internet campaigns into one online and off-line form of communication. Party competition risks being

weakened by this, where the Internet is reduced to merely another space in which the already existing political inequalities in off-line politics are perpetuated.

Beyond party competition and the electoral landscape, parties also use the Internet for internal purposes. Analysis in this regard focuses mainly on how the Internet facilitates communication and coordination among local branches and headquarters, and in-groups. Scholars interested in the use of the Internet by political parties started their earliest research focusing on the use of the Internet for internal purposes. Smith and Webster had already highlighted in 1995 that the three main UK political parties were using ICTs to develop their internal communication since the early 1980s (Smith and Webster 1995). Ward et al. (2003) also confirmed this scenario in a later research on the UK party landscape. However, despite this early interest in the topic, scholars developed a limited scope of research. Empirical findings confirm that political parties use the Internet to develop internal communication with emails and the WWW. But, scholars also argue that this use is limited. Critics point out that the Internet has been used mainly to facilitate coordination among elites, rather than connection with members (Gibson and Ward 2009). According to Gibson and Ward (2009), we may expect that the spreading of Web 2.0 tools may change this scenario, though further research needs to be conducted to test this.

Today, it is still difficult to conclude that politicians and political parties make the most of the Internet. It is also difficult to generalize findings on how political parties use the Internet. The use of the Internet is fragmented and we are still experimenting how to include the Internet in political processes. In some cases, the Internet changes faster than our capacity to provide empirical findings on its effects. However, in the framework of the network society, the question is not only how political parties use the Internet, but rather whether they do at all. Given that using the Internet for campaigning is increasingly common especially in Western liberal democracies, political parties that are not on the WWW risk being excluded from political competition. In other words, the Internet could improve pluralistic competition if those parties with less resource could learn to use the Internet as effectively as their more well-off counterparts. The opposite scenario, of not being online, could be fatal to these poorer parties. Hence, a digital political parties divide, at least in Western liberal democracies, could have a serious impact on the wealth of party competition.

The question that now remains open here is: what can explain the unequal presences of political parties online worldwide? Is the Digital Divide determinant to describe the use of the Internet by political parties? In the relation between Internet and politics, how does the political scenario influence the unequal use of the Internet?

Here, I address these questions by, first, mapping the worldwide distribution of political parties online. Second, I explore the reasons for their unequal presence on the Internet.

1.3 Mapping Political Parties Online

So far, most of research on the presence of political parties on the WWW has been focused on the national level. Attention has been paid to the use of the WWW by political parties in the USA (Druckman et al. 2009), and, in Europe such as, for instance, in the UK (Gibson et al. 2005), and in Italy (Vaccari 2008). However, research in this field lacks a cross-national perspective of analysis. As I said earlier, we rely on only a few examples in the literature. With this study, I explore the distribution of political parties on the Internet from a worldwide perspective. I compare the presence of political parties online from 190 countries. I then contextualize the use by political parties of the WWW, by relating their presence online with the level of Digital Divide, economic and political factors.

In most cases, analysis at the national level explores whether and how political parties are online, by investigating the instruments that political parties include on their web pages. From a comparative perspective of analysis, Howard's (2010) study is pioneering in exploring the quality and the purpose of political parties' websites across Islamic countries. However, the study that I conduct here includes more than 3,000 political parties from 190 countries worldwide. The great size of these comparative data does not allow us to enrich this exploration with data on the quality and the efficiency of websites. Future research should address qualitatively the global characteristics of websites. In this study, we are however interested in exploring the unequal presence of political parties online and its causes.

1.3.1 European Political Parties on the WWW

One of the first comparative studies on political parties online was run at the European level by Trechsel et al. (2003). Here, authors compared the presence of parliaments and political parties online across all 25 European member countries. The authors included in their analysis only those political parties that had more than 3 % of seats at the election of the European Parliament in 1999. The report explored a total of 144 political parties.

Given that political parties included in the analysis gained a relevant amount of seats in the parliament, all political parties explored in the report were relevant in their countries of origin. The report does not focus then on whether political parties are online. Rather, the research question was clustered around how political parties use their websites. In order to address this investigation, the authors created an index aggregating six evaluating indicators: information provision, bilateral interactivity, multilateral activity, user-friendliness, presence of networking tools, and political parties' mobilisation potential.

Empirical findings highlighted a significant variation of the use of websites from political parties across European countries. However, in most of the European countries, political parties did not use forms or other tools to interact with website

visitors. Trechsel et al. (2003) concluded that political parties used websites mainly to circulate information about their activities and claims, as a mono-directional channel of communication. The authors also explored the causes of the variation in use of the Internet. Empirical findings led authors to reject the hypothesis that the Digital Divide and economic factors are determinant. Neither the nature of the party system and the colour of political parties affect the quality of websites. The report found no relations of causality to explain the variation in the use of the WWW by political parties across European countries. However, the analysis is updated to 2003 and refers to European countries with very similar political systems. We must expect that a different scenario rise by extending our analysis to the global level. This will allow us to compare political parties across different political systems and checking whether and how political parties behaviour online differ accordingly.

1.3.2 Worldwide Perspective of Political Parties on the WWW

Norris (2001) conducted one of the first analyses on political parties online from a worldwide perspective. By using data updated to June 2000, the author highlighted that North America was the continent with the highest amount of political parties online. These were about 41 parties per country. The United States was the country with most political parties online (67 parties online). In Western European countries, an average of 24 political parties were online. In South America, the Middle East, and Africa, less than 5 political parties had a website. By comparing these data with those referring to the unequal distribution of internet users, Norris (2001) highlighted that the distribution of political parties online by countries is similar to the map of the Digital Divide. Political parties were more online in countries with a low level of Digital Divide. However, even if it appeared that the unequal distribution of political parties on the WWW followed the same worldwide inequalities in accessing the Internet, Norris (2001) also noted that there were too many exceptional cases providing a different picture. Further explanations were then required. By comparing the trend of the distribution of political parties online with other data, she confirmed that the Digital Divide was the strongest predictor to explain the unequal distribution of political parties online, though the economic and democratic status of each country also played a role in this regard. Political parties were 18 times more likely to have a website in richer countries than in poorer ones, and they were six times more likely to be online in countries with established democracies than in autocratic regimes.[1] Norris (2001) concluded that established democracies were more likely to have political parties online. In autocratic countries, where the political landscape is characterized by a one-party

[1] Norris defines democratic and autocratic regimes according to the level of democratization measured by the Freedom House Rate (1999).

regime, party competition is restricted and hence the proliferation of political parties online seriously hampered.

Norris's analysis (2001) refers to a scenario quite different from today's scenario. Ten years ago, the Internet was a new tool in most of the countries worldwide. The Digital Divide was at its first stages of normalization, and its size was determinant for the use of the Internet in all fields, including its use in the political domain. Conclusions provided by Norris (2001) about the impact of the Digital Divide on the distribution of political parties online matched with the arguments largely debated in this field at the time. These argue that the Digital Divide is the most determinant obstacle to influence politics via the Internet. However, here I criticize this conclusion, arguing that given the new scenario in which the Internet is more accessible, we have to look at other explanations. According to updated data (Internet World Stats 2011), today the size of the Digital Divide has changed. By following a normalization trend, the Digital Divide in terms of distribution of internet users is narrower compared to that of 10 years ago. Despite the continued serious concentration of owners of Internet domain names in a few countries, it has become easier to open a website today, thanks to the rapid spread of know-how. I then expect that the Digital Divide plays a minor role in explaining the unequal distribution of political parties online pictured below. Rather, I argue that the unequal distribution of parties online is determined by other national factors. In the domain of politics, I argue that political factors play a more relevant explanatory role. I expect that the distribution of political parties online is determined more by the democratic status of countries, rather than the Digital Divide and economic factors.

In order to test this expectation, I first map the worldwide distribution of political parties online today. I then explore how this data is understood in relation to the Digital Divide, and to the political and economic status of each country.

1.4 The Study

1.4.1 Methodological Framework

1.4.1.1 Digital Political Parties

The World Internet Access Report (WIA Report)[2] provides data on the unequal distribution of political parties on the WWW. In this study, I use data from 2008. The WIA Report's research team uses the CIA World Fact Book to collect the list of political parties from each country. The WIA Report then crosschecks the list with information available on Wikipedia. In order to discover how many of these

[2] http://www.wiareport.org.

political parties are online, the WIA Report uses the search engine Google. By combining these sources, the WIA report's research team checks the presence of each political party on the WWW.

WIA Report's research team includes in its dataset political parties that propose candidates for elections. It also defines "joke parties" as political parties that do not take part in elections. However, in the case of countries where political parties are illegal, the WIA Report also includes political parties without a proper party institution in the data set, referred to as "joke parties".[3] In countries with autocratic regimes, "joke parties" are then included in the dataset. The WIA Report's research team points out that in countries with weak democracy, party competition is also weak. "Joke parties" may then play an important role of expressing dissidence, thereby participating in the political debate of the country (Howard 2010).

Data are also categorized according to the "development status" of the country. In the WIA report, each country is labelled as "developed" or "developing" according to the categorization made by the CIA World Fact Book, which includes market-oriented economies of states members of the Organization for the Economic and Commerce Development (OECD). Just like for the United Nations Statistical Office, the designations "developed" and "developing" are intended here purely for "statistical convenience"[4] and do not express a "judgement about the stage reached by a particular country or area in the development process".[5]

1.4.1.2 Explaining the Causes

Once the unequal distribution of political parties on the WWW worldwide has been explored, I investigate the causes of this unequal distribution by running a multivariate regression. The ratio between online and offline political parties is the dependent variable here. I use as independent variables: the Digital Divide indicator (Internet Users), the economic status (PPP GDP xCapita), and the democratic indicator (Polity IV). By running a multivariate regression of Political Parties on the WWW on Internet Users, Democracy, and Economy, I then explore how these country contextual specificities determine the presence of political parties online.

1.4.1.3 Digital Divide

Before measuring the Digital Divide in reference to the distribution of internet users, we must first clarify what an internet user is. There is no agreement on this point. Various agencies have their own definitions. The International Telecommu-

[3] www.wiareport.org/index.php/57/political-parties-online-in-the-muslim-world.

[4] unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49.htm.

[5] *Ibidem*.

nications Union (ITU),[6] for instance, defines as internet user someone above 2 years of age who accesses the Internet at least once every 30 days. The US Department of Commerce,[7] meanwhile, defines an internet user anyone above 3 years of age "currently using" the Internet. For this study, I look to the Internet World Stats[8] for both my definition of internet user and as a main source of data. Internet World Stats considers an internet user "anyone currently in capacity to use the Internet" (Internet World Stats 2010). With this definition, Internet World Stats includes in their statistics a person who has both privately or publicly available access to an Internet connection point, and who, at the same time, has a basic knowledge of the use of the Internet. Referring to this definition, in countries where there is a broad use of public Internet points, such as public libraries or Internet cafés, data include internet users who share the same internet connection. This implies that, in these cases, the number of internet users is bigger than internet access subscribers and telephone lines available in each country. Internet World Stats gathers data by combining two main sources: the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and Nielsen/NetRatings.[9] The first is an international organization focusing on telecommunications. Today it is part of the United Nations (UN). Nielsen/NetRatings is a private company measuring Internet audience via surveys (Internet World Stats 2010).

1.4.1.4 Economic

Thus far, I have argued how the Global Divide is related to existing economic inequalities. In order to test this expectation I explore whether any relationship exists between the distribution of the Internet population worldwide and the economic factors facing each country. I use the Purchasing Power Parity Gross Domestic Product per capita (PPP GDP xCapita) to represent economic factors. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)[10] publishes these data annually in the Human Development Report (HDR).[11] I use data published in 2007. I place this data in relation to the population of online Internet users. This regression demonstrates whether access to information technologies is still related to economic factors.

[6] http://www.itu.int.

[7] http://www.commerce.gov.

[8] http://www.internetworldstats.org.

[9] http://www.nielsen-netratings.com.

[10] http://www.undp.org.

[11] hdr.undp.org.

1.4.1.5 Political

Given my focus on the relation of Internet and politics, I explore whether political factors also affect the distribution of the population accessing the Internet worldwide. The Polity IV Project[12] provides data on the political status of each country. In the political science framework, this is currently considered the most accurate data set for measuring political aspects worldwide (Treier and Jackman 2008). I use the indicator POLITY as my reference for the democratic condition of the countries compared in this study. This measures the democratic status within a range from −10, as the most autocratic state, to 10, as the most democratic state. This index is calculated from the combination of several indicators: (a) competitiveness of the selection process of the countries' chief executive, (b) the openness of this selection process, (c) to what extent the system of rules enables control by the chief executive's decision-making authority, (d) how competitive political participation is, and (e) to what extent rules govern political participation.

1.4.2 Digital Political Parties Divide

The map below (Fig. 1.1) shows the relationship between the total number of political parties for each country, and the total amount of parties with a website. The Web Party Penetration (WPP) is the indicator here. We calculate this by normalizing the number of political parties online with the total amount of political parties in each country. The map below shows the WPP for each country.

Figure 1.1 shows that in 20[13] countries all political parties (100 %) have a website. Italy follows, where 97 % of political parties are on the WWW, and Greece with 95 %. In contrast, in 22[14] countries no political party is present online.

1.4.3 Political Parties on the WWW: Over the Time

I already mentioned that scholars commonly highlight that the Internet plays an important role in increasing competition among parties. Yet, the Internet has also evolved, potentially increasing its impact. If all of these considerations are true, I expect that, today, compared with data a decade old, the number of political parties

[12] http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/polity.

[13] These are: Switzerland, United States, Canada, Japan, Denmark, Norway, Slovenja, Hungary, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Maldives, Malta, Saudi Arabia, Barbados, Equador, Colombia.

[14] These are: Azerbaijan, Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Central Africa, Comoros, Congo, Ghana, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Korea North, Laos, Niger, Oman, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, Samoa, Solomon Island, Swaziland, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates.

Fig. 1.1 Percentage of worldwide political parties on the WWW. Ratio of *online/total*, %. (*Source*: *WIA Report*, *University of Washington*, *January 2008*)

on the WWW should have increased as dramatically as the use and development of the Internet.

The graph above (Fig. 1.2) provides a snapshot of the trend on the presence of political parties on the WWW over 7 years. It shows that, from 2000 to 2007, there has been a significant increase of political parties on the WWW. Looking at the "development status" category, we see a serious difference between "developed" and "developing" countries. The graph shows that political parties in "developing" countries are more likely to be online. However, the WIA Report (2008) points out that this is likely to be improved over time. It is important to highlight that many improvements have been introduced in collecting these data since 2005. In the past, "joke political parties" were included in the data set. In 2007, the WIA Report research team decided to include into its analysis only political parties that propose candidates for elections. "Joke parties" are then excluded by this last analysis. However, this decision did not affect countries where political parties are illegal. In these cases, the WIA Report research team decided to keep including "joke parties" in the data set.

Finally, we are able to test the expectations proposed at the beginning of this study: does the Digital Divide affect the unequal presence of political parties online? Alternatively, are other contextual factors such as the political and economic status of a country more important?

1.4.4 Causes

I ran a multivariate regression in order to address this question. The presence of political parties worldwide on the WWW (Web Parties on the Web) is the dependent variable here. I use the Digital Divide indicator for 2007 (amount of Internet Users), democratic indicator (Polity IV), and economic status (PPP GDPxCapita). I

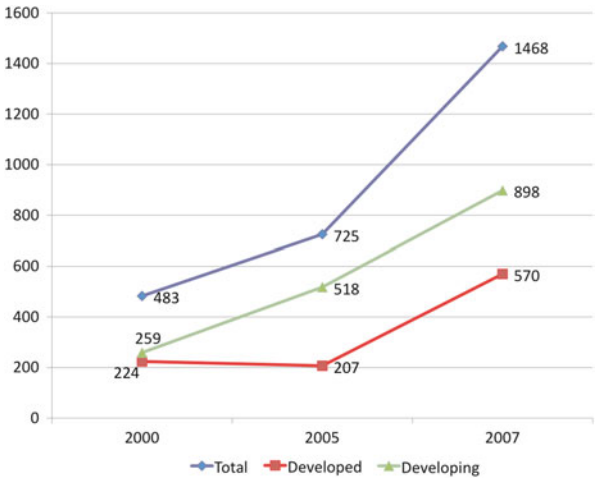

Fig. 1.2 Timeline worldwide perspective of political parties on the WWW, $N = 190$. (*Source*: *WIA Report 2008*, *University of Washington*, *January 2008*)

do not use the normalized values of internet users (Internet Penetration Rate—IPR) because this is already correlated to the value of the democratic status of the country. By including this variable in the regression, we would violate the exogeneity assumption typical of standard regression analysis.

The resulting regression (Table 1.1) provides interesting evidence with resulting estimates that are highly significant. The amount of the Internet population, political, and economic factors combined explain 36 % of the variation in the worldwide presence on the Internet of political parties. An *F* test of joint significance indicates that the model has strong explanatory power compared to an intercept-only model. The model also shows that the level of the Digital Divide, measured with the amount of internet users per country, is less significant than other indicators.[15]

The coefficient estimates (B) imply that the variation of 1 unit in Polity IV, measuring the Level of Democracy, implies a change of almost 1 percentage point (0.96) in Political Parties on the WWW. Increasing the number of Internet Users by one million raises the percentage of Parties on the WWW by 0.156. Increasing PPP GDP xCapita by 1,000 dollars, which is roughly the difference in PPP GDP xCapita of a country leads to a change of 0.001 percentage points in Political Parties on the WWW.

In conclusion, the direct effect of democratic status on the presence of political parties on the WWW is stronger than the direct effect of the dimension of the Digital Divide measured by the number of internet users. However, the Digital Divide is, in turn, strongly affected by democratic and political variables. The evidence clearly shows that democratic and economic conditions are the most important determinants of the use of the Internet for political purposes by political parties.

[15] I tested for multilinearity correlation among the independent variables. None of them is correlated beyond the 0.5.

Table 1.1 OLS regression of political parties online on internet users, democracy, and economy

	Political parties online (ratio)
Internet users (× million)	0.156*
	(0.093)
Level of democracy (polity)	0.965**
	(0.355)
Economy	0.001***
(PPP GDP xCapita)	(0.000)
Constant	27.67
	(3.049)
N	190
R-squared	0.365

***$p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$ (one-tailed test)—Standard errors in parentheses

Source: Internet Users (Internet World Stats, November 2007); PPP GDP xCapita (UNDP, 2007); Polity (Polity IV Project, 2007)

1.5 Conclusion

This study explored the unequal presence of political parties on the Internet across countries. I have, first, explored how politics may benefit from the use of the Internet in the framework of party competition. I have also highlighted that research in this field still lacks a comparative perspective. Despite the difficulty of measuring how political parties use the WWW in over 190 countries, I pointed out that, given the increased centrality of the Internet in the framework of politics, the unequal presence of political parties on the WWW may reduce the plurality of the political landscape of a country. This is why, in the second part of this study, I explored the unequal distribution of political parties on the WWW worldwide. I have then investigated in which country contextual factors, such as the level of the Digital Divide, the economic and the democratic status, are more significant for explaining how political parties are unequally present online worldwide.

Empirical findings led us to conclude that the Digital Divide is not the most determining factor explaining the unequal presence of political parties online. By running a regression on the ratio of political parties on the WWW and those off-line, on national conditions such as the level of the Digital Divide, and the economic and the democratic status, I provided empirical evidence in this regard. As I expected, all contextual specificities influence the use of the Internet by political parties. However, the Digital Divide is the least significant factor. Economic and democratic factors in each country matter more from the unequal presence of political parties online. This empirical evidence led us to conclude that political parties use the Internet mainly depending on the political framework in which they are active.

A high level of democracy implies a political life characterized by party pluralism and political competition. This last is one of the variables measured by the Polity IV index. Within this framework, being online for political parties is important for competing in party competition systems. This helps us understand why, in

countries with high levels of democracy, political parties are more likely to be online. A low level of democracy implies a limited role of party competition in national political life, making parties less likely to be active in campaigning online.

To conclude, the use of the Internet is spreading across countries and diverse political systems. We must not expect that the Internet will be equally used to practice politics across countries. Rather, the use of the Internet to practice politics adapts to the context in which it is used. This is why we must extend our research in the field by further addressing comparative approaches, and including other contextual factors in our analysis. This study shows that the use of the Internet for political parties is determined more by the specificities of country's political systems, than by conventional understandings of the Digital Divide.

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