The Use of Facebook in National Election Campaigns: Politics as Usual?

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Abstract. The uptake of online media in election campaigning is leading to speculations about the transformation of politics and cyber-democracy. Politicians running for seats in Parliament are increasingly using online media to disseminate information to potential voters and building dynamic, online communities. Drawing on an online survey of the Facebook networks of the two top candidates running for seats in the 2007 Danish Parliament election, this study suggests that the online sphere is primarily populated by users who already know the candidates through the traditional channels of party organizations, and that they do not expect to influence the policy of their candidates. Instead, users view Facebook mainly as an information channel and as a means to gain social prestige.

Keywords: eParticipation, Social Networking Service, election campaign, e-democracy.

1   Introduction

The use of digital media in political campaigns in conjunction with the national elections has rapidly been growing worldwide. National elections in the US and the UK, among others, well exemplify this (e.g., [1], [2]). In other countries with the highest penetration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) among citizens, ICT is being applied in national political campaigning. The use of ICT for participatory purposes in general, is seen to be more likely to occur in contexts that are less affected by the issues of digital divide. Studies on the digital divide highlight the fact that social groups with a lack of financial resources are less likely to have access to, and to use ICT, particularly internet-enabled features [3]. Such a constraint on the demand of ICT-enabled forms of interaction affects the diffusion of the use and adoption of ICT for participatory purposes. However, research on the use of ICT in political campaigning has only just begun to investigate the impact on citizen participation in political campaigns that the most recent web 2.0 tools, such as RSS feeds, forums, wiki applications, and social networking services, would have [4].

In this paper we address the Facebook phenomenon and its use in the last Danish national election campaign (2007). We do so by posing two research questions: What communication tools and channels do social network users use to interact with politicians, and what benefits do they expect? Does the political orientation of the

candidate with whom interaction is sought make a difference in the use of social network by users?

Such research questions involve a twofold dimension of the way that ICT is assumed to have an impact on political participation. One is concerned with the potential of ICT-mediated communication to shape the traditional forms of citizen/politician interaction. The other is concerned with the role of political orientation in affecting the outcomes of such potential.

We conducted an online survey on Facebook users, attempting to understand the mechanisms underlying the decision to link with the political candidates by social networks platform users. We thus address the issue of which tools are actually used, and which benefits are expected from the engagement in different forms of interaction with the political actors through virtual social network.

The aim is to better understand the impact of social network interaction on eParticipation processes. We refer to the definition of eParticipation as "the use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives" [5]. Although there is a variety of current definitions of eParticipation, we acknowledge this one as being concerned not just with top-down government initiatives to engage with citizens, but rather to include all stakeholders in democratic participatory decision-making.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section draws on existing research on the issues of eParticipation processes as bottom-up processes that take place in virtual environments, and discusses how different existing models of political democratic engagement interact with different technological platforms. Section 3 presents the methodology of the study, carried out through an online survey of Facebook users during the 2007 Danish national election campaign. In Section 4 and 5, the findings from the survey will be illustrated and discussed, referring to the research questions formulated in the introduction. The conclusion sums up findings from the study, assessing the actual impact of Facebook on the modes of political participation, and provides a first suggestion on the hypothesis of participatory processes enabled by social networking services as "politics as usual."

2   Background and Prior Research

The swift development of the internet has inspired claims that large scale transformations in the structure of political influence in the US, the UK and the EU are under way: the populist claim that the internet will erode the influence of organized groups and political elites, and the community-building claim that the internet will cause a restructuring of the nature of community and the foundations of social order. These claims are significant because they address not only the currently fashionable subject of the internet but also fundamental questions about the causal role of communication in public life [6], [7], [8], [9].

The political scientist Robert Dahl [10] suggested with his book on pluralism that politics would progress to diversity and multifaceted communication channels and content. From this angle, eParticipation and the use of Facebook is yet another facet of democracy and could potentially add pluralism only. Transformation of politics or the

interaction between politicians and citizens would not be likely to occur. At best, the online network technologies, such as Facebook, would be expected to lead to "accelerated pluralism," with fragmentation of the present system of interest-based group politics and a shift toward a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence [11]. This would be supported by the work by Danziger et al. [12] that argues that the uptake of new technologies in politics would reinforce existing imbalances in power and would not be able to shift any balance between the dominant coalition and the opposition. The ones in order would actively use digital media that could help reinforce their position and structural and cognitive power, resulting in an actual enforcement of ICT-mediated political communication as "politics as usual" [13].

In line with this, although voice and audio technologies are evolving, text-based participation applications have dominated the spectra of applications. Thus, governments lag behind in the uptake of media that support involvement based on audio-visual media and synchronous dialogue, such as chat. Also, most of the applications designed for involvement are done half-heartedly, in the sense that critical parameters, such as scalability, logs, and software transparency/ updates, are left unattended at the time of the first round of implementation of the application. Moreover, most applications for involvement seem to be top-down driven, supporting formal communication following the traditional administrative-bureaucratic procedures and standards, where institutional values are applied as measures. As depicted in Figure 1, representing the different direction of flows in bottom-up and top-down approaches, few applications are situated on the left hand side of the involvement flow.
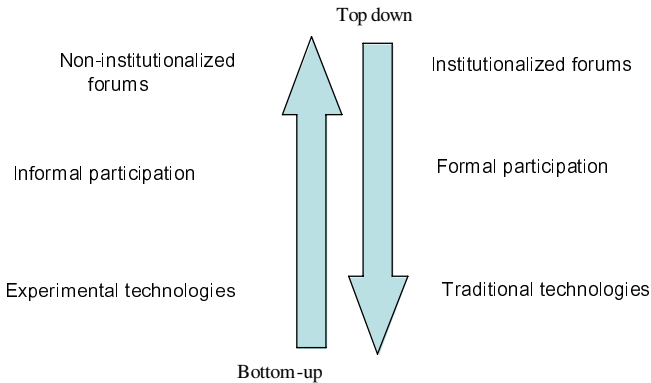

Fig. 1. Top-down and bottom-up approaches to eParticipation [14]

Different types of involvement enabled by ICT are thus assumed to have an impact on the type of interaction between citizens and governments in democratic systems. As a result, a range of models of democracy has been drawn in research focusing on the relationship between ICT and transformations in democratic systems. Hoff et al. [15] suggest four modes of ICT-enabled and supported democratic participation: the consumer, the demo-elitist model, the neo-republican model, and the cyber-democratic model. These modes are breaking new grounds for how to perceive the

Table 1. Emerging modes of democracy for the information age (Hoff et al. [15], adapted by Sæbø and Rose [16])

Characteristics	Consumer	Demo-Elitist	Neo-Republican	Cyber-Democratic
Dominant democratic value	Freedom of choice	Effectiveness	Deliberation and participation	Community, acceptance of diversity
Citizen's role	Voting for representatives (less active between elections)	Voting for representatives (less active between elections)	Active citizens as opinion formers	Active citizens as decision makers
Central form of political participation	Choice of public services	Consensus creation, lobbying	Public debate, associations	Virtual debate, virtual and real actions
Political nexus	Producer/consumer relation	Expert discourse	Public sphere, media	Electronic discussion (Internet)
Main political intermediary	Service declarations, consumption data	Negotiation and campaign institutions	Meetings, hearings (real and virtual)	Electronic networks, electronic communities
Typical ICT application	Websites, citizens cards, databases	Websites, mail, information systems, voter compasses	Geographically located and moderated discussion groups	Self-organised discussion groups (virtual communities)
Main objectives for the use of ICT	Disseminating high quality information to citizens	Supporting vertical relations, transparency	Quality of discussion and bi-directional information	Strengthening the essential network
Dominant political issues	Data security, privacy, service delivery	Re-legitimation and re-orientation of governance	Increasing participation, improving the quality of discussions	Increasing political reflexivity competences and autonomy

relations between the government administration and their citizens. Table 1 illustrates the four modes of eParticipation.

The four modes of involvement demonstrate that, depending on which model guides government, there are different levels of involvement and different means of interaction. The *Consumer* model focuses on the value of freedom of choice by citizens as consumers of public services, and leaves the normative view on the role of

institutions – such as parliament, elections and the party system – unaltered. The *Demo-Elitist* model of democracy enabled by ICT also leaves the role of representative institutions unquestioned, while stressing the need to delegate management powers to an elite group of experts who ensure efficiency and effectiveness of public decision-making. The *Neo-Republican* model assumes citizens to be active and take part in deliberation processes within a public sphere, especially at the local level; politicians and citizens alike are thus brought together in ICT-enabled shared spaces to engage in debate and confrontation, leading to decision-making to be subsequently implemented by professional policy executors. Finally, Hoff et al. [15] draw a model representing radical change enabled by ICT, the *Cyber-Democratic*, in which traditional institutions completely leave space to network-based groups and self-organised communities interconnected by ICT means. Political discourse gets scattered across networks, while decision-making powers are decentralised from institutions and put in the hands of citizens.

Concerning the role of political orientation of the actors involved in ICT-mediated interaction – raised by our second research question: "Does the political orientation of the candidate with whom interaction is sought make a difference in the use of social network by users?" – we have to take into account the argument that the political views endorsed by decision-makers on policy-making, and specifically on the relationship between citizens and government in a political context, can have an influence on the ways eParticipation is adopted as a means of involving citizens in the public sphere process. Involving citizens in the public decision-making process is a much debated policy issue that is obviously heavily linked to underlying views about the role that both the politicians in charge and the citizens should play in governmental activities, reflected in the above discussed models.

The relevance of technological innovation in shaping the structure of the relationship between citizens and governmental bodies – that is, the political public sphere – has been highlighted and investigated since the work of Jürgen Habermas on the structural transformation of the public sphere [17]. The diffusion of printing technology in Europe in the course of the XVII century is argued to have enabled the emergence of a public discourse transcending face-to-face communication and has shaped the agenda of confrontation on political matters.

The development of different democracy models related to different views on the role of ICT in the relationship between citizens and governments arose from classic modelling of democratic regimes, as in David Held [18], or Carole Pateman [19]. In particular, Held's distinction between historical ideal-types of democracy (Classical Athenian, Republicanism, Liberal and Direct Marxism) and contemporary models (Competitive Elitist, Pluralist Legal and Participatory) has influenced the development of models of democracy as enabled by the introduction of ICT.

However, on the empirical side, the research literature has thus far produced very little formal theory or evidence linking political ideology to choice of ICT for participation [20], [21], [22]. Guthrie et al. [23] have argued that local political culture shapes the use of technology within an urban context, in that more liberal cities with inclusive politics will be more likely to use information technology to improve citizen participation. The relative importance traditionally attributed to political values, such as social inclusion and participation in the political community by left-wing oriented

parties and political actors, can thus be argued to match the adoption of ICT for participatory purposes [24].

Although there is a poor empirical basis supporting such an argument – when not explicitly bringing evidence against it [25], [26], [27], [28] – it is still found prudent not to overlook the role of the actors' political stance in tackling a sensitive issue concerning the relationship between citizens and governments, such as the one involved in eParticipation forms of interaction.

Musso et al. [28] interestingly suggest that one might expect that members of "third parties" on both ends of the ideological spectrum would voice more demand for information technology because members of third parties are more likely to feel dissatisfied with the status quo, and thus may have more interest in having an alternative, possibly ICT-enabled, forum for expressing their concerns. Moreover, members of third parties may have few opportunities to see their views publicised in the "mainstream" media, and also in "off-line" traditional channels.

Even if this latter argument can raise some interest, it is found prudent to hypothesise a higher likelihood of adopting eParticipation features by social democratic parties, as opposed to liberal ones. Centre-left political actors traditionally tend to argue in favour of administrative reforms to support improved citizen participation, more than centre-right ones which, on the other hand, tend to stress the need for a reduction in administrative costs by improving management efficiency and, thus, are more likely to endorse Schumpeterian models of democracy [18] that do not contemplate the bottom-up involvement of citizens [24].

3   Methodology

The two top candidates running for the seat of Prime Minister in the 2007 Danish National Election (held on November 13, 2007), Ms. Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Mr. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, have used Facebook as part of their campaign, with Anders Fogh Rasmussen having 2,367 registered "friends" and Helle Thorning-Schmidt having 2,134 "friends" (figures captured November 6, 2007). From the online list of their friends, we selected the subgroup "Denmark" to ensure they presumed interest in the national election, and then we selected one in every ten persons listed until reaching the sample of 210 persons for each candidate.

An online survey was prepared and sent as a link in an email to each of the sample members. The online survey software SurveyMonkey™ was used to collect and analyse the data.

We asked each candidate three sets of questions:

- What is your relation to/ knowledge of the candidate?
- Which digital communication do you have with the candidate?
- Which benefit do you expect to get from linking with the candidate?

A reminder was sent to non-respondents in the first round. The final response rate of the survey was 69.7%.

4   Findings

The substance of the survey was to understand the motivation of Facebook users for being "friends" with the two politicians, to find out what type of digital communication they had with the candidates, and to understand whether, and what, they had gained from the virtual link they had established.

The following table shows findings concerning the type of relation between the Facebook users and the candidates.

Table 2. Knowledge/ relation to the candidate, distributed on the candidate linked

	Sum		*Social democratic candidate*		*Liberal candidate*	
What is your relation to/ knowledge of the candidate?	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
We are friends (personal)	2	2%	2	2%	0	0%
We are colleagues (work)	4	3%	3	4%	1	2%
I know him/her through the party	72	54%	47	56%	25	51%
I know him/her through Facebook only	53	40%	31	37%	22	45%
We are family related	2	2%	1	1%	1	2%
Total	133	100%	84	100%	49	100%

Data shows that the overwhelming majority of the respondents have an indirect knowledge of the candidates, either through the party (54%) or through Facebook only (40%). While there are no relevant differences in percentages between the social democratic and the liberal candidate, it is striking to see that the number of Facebook users claiming to know the candidates through the party are relevantly higher than the number that claim to know them through Facebook. This clearly suggests that, in the case of Facebook, the impact of the presence of the candidates on the social network of the virtual platform is relevant, but yet to a lower extent than that of traditional communication channels, i.e., the party organization.

The following table illustrates the array of different tools of interaction that respondents use to communicate with the candidates, also distinguishing between users linked to the social democratic and the liberal candidate.

Table 3. Digital communication with candidates, distributed on the candidate linked

	Sum		Social democratic candidate		Liberal candidate	
Which digital communication do you have with the candidate?	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Through Facebook	81	57%	49	57%	32	57%
Mail	9	6%	8	9%	1	2%
Chat through other programs such as MSN and Skype	10	7%	6	7%	4	7%
None	42	30%	23	27%	19	34%
Total	142	100%	86	100%	56	100%

Figures show that the majority of the respondents use the Facebook platform itself to communicate with the candidates, while only 13% use other means to establish an interaction, such as mail or chat services. It is interesting to see how almost one out of three social network users do not use any of the digital tools to communicate with the politicians that they are "friends" with. This could be interpreted as a share of users that approach virtual social network contact with political actors in a passive, non-interactive fashion. Such a relevant share of users appears to be made more of virtual "spectators" of what goes on in the political arena – in a way that is similar to processes occurring within the traditional political communication of broadcast media – rather than to seek active engagement in political activity by digital means.

The last table shows data concerning the benefits expected by social network users from linking with the political candidates, also distinguishing between users linked to the social democratic candidate and the liberal one.

Table 4. Benefits expected from linking with the candidate, distributed on the candidate linked

	Sum		Social democratic candidate		Liberal candidate	
Which benefit do you expect to get from linking with the candidate?	N	%	N	%	N	%
Increased knowledge about their policy	53	45%	32	46%	21	45%
Influence on their policy	11	9%	6	9%	5	11%
Visibility on the internet	34	29%	24	34%	10	21%
Social prestige	19	16%	8	11%	11	23%
Total	117	100%	70	100%	47	100%

Data show that, overall, the majority of the motivators for linking by virtual means with the candidates are concerned with the opportunity to increase knowledge about the candidates' policy (45%), and to obtain visibility on the internet (29%). Similarly to the other questions, there is no relevant difference in this issue between users that link with the social democratic candidate and those that link with the liberal one, except for the fact that the latter seem to identify social prestige as a motivator to link to a slightly greater extent, while users that link with the social democratic candidate appear to be more motivated by visibility, compared to those linking with the other candidate.

Most interestingly, figures show that the least cited motivation for linking with the candidates is the possibility of influencing their policy. This finding strikingly suggests that users appear not to gain benefit from the social network platform in terms of the participatory use of it – that is, to "have a say" in the political process. Only less than one out of ten respondents claim to use Facebook to affect the politicians' activity. In this case, the use of social network clearly seems not to be intended by users as a channel of eParticipation.

5   Discussion

The findings enable us to provide some initial answers to the research questions, even though the overall empirical basis of the data is still not particularly robust, and thus

findings should be regarded as being suggestive, rather than as statistically based considerations.

As far as the type of knowledge that social network users have of the political candidates is concerned, the study suggests that social network platforms seem not to have any revolutionary impact on the traditional means of knowledge and communication between politicians and the electorate. Social network users that link to candidates most frequently do so while already being in contact with them through the party organizations. The impact of Facebook, therefore, seems not to be relevant in this case, in the sense that the creation of a virtual "friendship" on the social network platform does little more than reproducing the existing channels of contact with the politicians, as in the "off-line" world.

When investigating the array of digital tools that Facebook users adopt to interact with their "friend" candidates, we observe that there is poor integration between communication occurring within the social network and other digital tools available for the citizen-politician relationship. In other words, the average Facebook user uses only Facebook itself to interact with the candidates, without seeking any other digital means. It has to be specified, however, that this applies only to social network users who do interact somehow with the candidates that they link with. It is to be noted that a striking around 30% of social network users do not engage in any ICT-enabled interaction at all. This rather relevant share of users appears to look at social network contact as an occasion for being passive spectators in the candidates' arena only, without seeking any form of interaction or active engagement.

The scenario is summed up by looking at the last research question, that is, the benefits expected by Facebook users in linking to the candidates. The social network platform is mainly seen as a means to obtain information, that is, establishing a one-way relation in which information is retrieved from policy-makers for use by citizens. Such a relation established with the sole objective of obtaining information is described as the lowest level of eParticipation enabled in the citizen-politician relations by ICT means [29], [30]. Moreover, no significant difference on this question, as in the others, is related to the political orientation of the candidates that users link with: users that link with the social democratic party candidate do not seek to influence the candidates' policy more than those linked with the liberal party candidate do.

Summarizing, the findings, overall, clearly suggest arguments against a significant impact of the social network type of interaction on the way that political processes, such as a national election, work. If we refer to the models of ICT-enabled democratic relations discussed in section 2, it is to be acknowledged that a clear-cut move toward a Cyber-democratic mode of ICT-enabled participation is definitely not occurring by the means of the existing social networking platform. On the contrary, the case of Facebook users in the Danish National Election is arguably to be encompassed within modes of ICT-enabled democratic relations that give citizens a more passive role – such as the Consumer mode or the Demo-elitist mode. In this sense, findings suggest that the citizen-politician interaction within the Facebook environment does not introduce significant changes in the way politics traditionally works. In other words, Facebook politics, at least thus far, is "politics as usual."

6   Conclusion

In this paper we addressed the Facebook phenomenon and its use in the Danish national election campaign. We did so by posing two research questions: what communication tools and channels do social network users use to interact with politicians, and what benefits do they expect? Does the political orientation of the candidate with whom interaction is sought make a difference in the use of social network by users? On the substantive dimension, the paper proposes that Facebook politics appears to be "politics as usual," in the sense that the Facebook users who decide to link with the two candidates are already connected with them through the traditional, off-line channels, such as previous employment or membership of the political party. Moreover, their expectation to obtain information on politics through social networking can be attributed to the previous knowledge and network, rather than to the expectations of the impacts of the Facebook connection per se. Thus, social network users do not expect to gain increased influence on politics.

At this stage, there is clearly a need to investigate the underlying motivations of the propositions suggested in this paper. This particularly applies to the observation that social network involvement is clearly not seen as a means to actively participate in the political process by influencing the politicians' proposed policies. In this perspective we need to understand, for instance, whether this phenomenon occurs because Facebook network users, as such, are not interested in actively engaging in the political sphere – even if the possibility were to be given – or whether the phenomenon occurs because the social network platform per se is not perceived as being apt to enable eParticipation in a relevant way.

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