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On: 17 July 2011, At: 22:50

Publisher: Routledge

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Political Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/upcp20>

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Available online: 29 Apr 2011

To cite this article: Rachel K. Gibson & Ian McAllister (2011): Do Online Election Campaigns Win Votes? The 2007 Australian "YouTube" Election, *Political Communication*, 28:2, 227-244

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2011.568042>

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Do Online Election Campaigns Win Votes? The 2007 Australian “YouTube” Election

RACHEL K. GIBSON and IAN McALLISTER

Studies of Web use during elections have focused mainly on the content of Web sites and on the major factors driving parties’ and candidates’ adoption of the technology. Evaluations of the electoral impact of Web campaigns have been more limited. This article examines the nature and extent of Web use by voters and parties in the 2007 Australian federal election, focusing particularly on the consequences of Web 2.0 campaigning for candidate vote share. The findings show differing levels of commitment to older and newer e-campaigning technology across parties and their supporters and significant electoral advantages are associated with minor parties candidates using Web 2.0 campaign tools. The results confirm existing studies’ findings about the impact of Web campaigns on contemporary elections, but that these effects are moderated by the type of Web tools used and party using them.

Keywords Web 2.0, campaigns, parties, candidates, elections

In little more than a decade, the Web has become a campaign medium that candidates and parties must engage with if they are serious about gaining office. Across advanced democracies, leading political figures and organizations have embarked on intensive efforts to court supporters, secure funding, and attract votes through the Web, apparently to great effect (Anstead & Chadwick, 2008; Davis, Owen, Taras, & Ward, 2008; Ward & Gibson, 2009). The highly sophisticated online community-building and fundraising efforts of Barack Obama in the 2008 U.S. presidential election are widely seen as having set a new standard for e-campaigning and have led to a scramble among politicians elsewhere to try to emulate his success.¹ Indeed, some see the Web to be revolutionizing the modern election campaign, in much the same way as television did in the 1950s and 1960s, but with even more far-reaching consequences.²

While there is little dispute about the Internet’s importance in the modern campaigner’s tool box, systematic empirical investigation of these claims has been quite

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The 2001, 2004, and 2007 Australian Election Studies and Australian Candidate Studies data were collected by Rachel K. Gibson, Ian McAllister, Clive Bean, and David Gow, and the studies were funded by the Australian Research Council. The data are available from the Australian Social Science Data Archive (<http://assda.anu.edu.au>). Our thanks to Rachelle Graham and Sophie Holloway for their work in collecting the data. An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, August 2009.

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limited. One of the first studies by D'Alessio (1997) of the 1996 U.S. congressional elections concluded that there were significant and positive effects for candidates' Web sites on their vote share. Subsequent survey-based work by Bimber and Davis (2003) in the 2000 election, however, disputed any marked effect for e-campaigning on voter behavior, fitting well with the "normalization" thesis claiming that the Internet reinforces rather than challenges contemporary political practices (Bimber, 2001; Davis, 1999; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004). Later work has returned to a more optimistic stance. A series of more comprehensive models tested within and outside the U.S. have consistently shown significant gains for those candidates utilizing the technology in their campaign efforts (Wagner & Gainous, 2009; Gibson & McAllister, 2006; Hoff, 2010; Rackaway, 2007; Suddulich & Wall, 2010).

This article seeks to contribute to this growing body of research by examining the extent, nature, and impact of candidates' Internet use during the 2007 Australian federal election. In particular, we seek to extend the literature by examining the effects of Web 2.0 platforms on voters' party choice and the levels of support candidates from different parties received in national elections, in addition to the effects of individual home pages or Web 1.0 formats. In addition to providing some original analysis of an important new feature of Web campaigning, we also seek to bring more order and clarity to this burgeoning field by providing a comprehensive overview of the studies that have been done to date and focusing on areas of agreement and difference in terms of substantive findings and methodological approach. Australia provides a useful case for analysis of these questions given its status as a global leader in levels of Internet use and also the high expectations that surrounded the 2007 federal election as breaking new ground in Internet campaigns. The growing popularity of Facebook, YouTube, and Google among the Australian electorate, combined with the high-profile launch by Labor of its leader Kevin Rudd's interactive site Kevin07.com, produced significant speculation among journalists that the medium would play a major role in the campaign.³

The analysis is based on data from the 2007 Australian Election Study (AES), which sampled voters, and the 2007 Australian Candidate Study (ACS), which sampled candidates. Through these two sources, it is possible to provide both mass and elite perspectives on the role of the Internet, and particularly Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 applications, in shaping the outcome of the election. The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, we summarize the wider literature on Web campaign effects, comparing models adopted and conclusions reached. The second section provides background on the Australian case and particularly its e-campaign readiness in the lead-up to the election of 2007. In the third section, we use data from the 2007 ACS and AES to profile the extent and range of e-campaigning by candidates, as well as voters' political uses of the Internet during the election. In the final section, we present our analyses of the Web's impact on voters by examining the extent to which it influenced individuals' vote choice and how far candidates' Web presence, and particularly their Web 2.0 use, predicts the level of support they received.

The Internet and Election Outcomes: The Story So Far

Studies of the relationship between Web campaigning and voter behavior have been relatively limited in comparison to the wider literature on parties online and e-participation more generally (Davis et al., 2008; Gibson et al., 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2007). Initial work by D'Alessio (1997) on U.S. congressional elections using a highly parsimonious model of party affiliation and incumbency concluded that Web sites significantly increased candidate support levels by up to

9,000 votes. Bimber and Davis' (2003) use of survey data to examine individual voter responses to U.S. campaign Web sites during the 2000 election cycle, however, cast doubt on the Web's electoral importance, with the authors finding little evidence to suggest that viewing state or national candidate Web sites had mobilized or converted a significant number of voters. The findings were seen to be in line with the growing consensus within the e-politics literature that the Internet was leading to minimal or no change within wider institutions of governance and the citizen body as a whole (Davis, 1999; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001).⁴

The meteoric rise of Howard Dean in 2004 (Trippi, 2004; Hindman, 2005; Williams, Weinberg, & Gordon, 2004) renewed speculation about the Internet's mobilizing effects, and data from the Pew Internet and American Life project in 2004 confirmed significant increases in the consumption of online news and campaign-related information (Smith & Rainie, 2008; Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005). Subsequent studies have tended to confirm D'Alessio's original findings, albeit with more fully specified and increasingly sophisticated models and analytical tests. Gibson and McAllister's (2006) analysis of the 2004 Australian federal election using self-reported candidate data on Web site presence and a wide range of control variables not included by D'Alessio (including candidates' political experience, level of party support, and offline media exposure) reported a significant impact of campaign Web sites on votes. In a very similar study of the Irish 2007 national election, Suddulich and Wall (2010) used Irish National Election Study candidate study data to measure the impact of a campaign Web site on overall votes received and concluded that there were positive and significant effects. The authors were also able to add measures of candidates' front-runner status (bookmaker odds) and individual campaign expenditures. The results were then tested in constituencies with high and low Internet use and found to vary in accordance with the effects thesis, in that stronger effects were associated with those areas with high levels of Internet use.

Other studies of the U.S. have reached similarly positive conclusions using both subjective and more objective measures of Internet presence. Wagner and Gainous (2009), using a two-stage least squares regression analysis, examined the impact of candidate sites (as measured via Google page rank) alongside a range of individual and contextual factors including party affiliation, political experience, marginality, number of candidates in the race, and campaign expenditures on votes received in the most competitive races in the 2006 congressional elections. The two-stage approach was adopted to remove the potentially endogenous effects of a candidate's electoral popularity on uptake of the Web (i.e., the front-runner effect, controlled by Suddulich and Wall [2010] using candidates' betting odds). The results revealed that while Democrats' Web presence was significant in predicting support levels, this did not hold for Republicans. Given that Democrats also enjoyed a greater Web presence, the results were seen to suggest that their success in the 2006 mid-term elections was "due in part to their web efforts" (Wagner & Gainous, 2009, p. 515).

Work by Rackaway (2007) on the same 2006 election cycle used survey data from state legislative candidates in Kansas and North Carolina to examine the impact of a diverse range of technological innovations on their rates of election success, applying similar controls to earlier studies for candidates' party, political experience, and financial resources in a basic ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model. The results identified a positive significant effect for Web use, although this did not apply to all applications of the technology. Blogs and "grassroots mobilizing sites" were seen as the key drivers of votes, rather than Web sites, databases, text messages, and e-newsletters.

Finally, two other studies used individual survey data from visitors to national campaign Web sites in the United States in 2004 and Denmark in 2007 to assess their impact

on public levels of political mobilization more generally. Park and Perry (2008), using Pew Center data and a mix of propensity score matching techniques and structural equation modeling, found significant mobilizing effects of campaign Web sites on what they characterized as individual and instrumental participatory acts, such as sending e-mails to others persuading them to vote and making a donation, rather than more collective participatory acts such as attending a rally or canvassing for votes face to face.

Hoff (2010) analyzed survey data from a Danish Web panel that asked respondents about a range of online political activities undertaken during the 2007 national election, including whether they had visited campaign sites and their perceptions of the effect of this exposure on their vote choice and opinions of candidates. Results showed that less than 10% of those surveyed considered the Net to have changed their party choice, although this was found to vary according to levels of political interest, with the least and most interested less likely to see it as influential compared with those who were a little interested. The findings were seen as supporting Zaller's (1992) model of media influence whereby the most and least engaged citizens are insulated from its effects given that they either already have strong views or are not paying significant attention. In terms of Web campaign effects, the findings are significant in that they suggest that while candidates enjoy a small audience online, they are not simply drawing in existing supporters but may also be reaching a small but potentially significant minority of voters who are open to persuasion.

Despite the variety of data sources and methodologies employed to study the question of campaign Web effects, therefore, the consistent message that appears to have emerged as we have moved into the Web 2.0 era is that campaign Web sites can have significant effects on individuals' political behavior and vote choice and that these effects are detectable in aggregate analyses of candidates' electoral success. Of these studies, however, only Rackaway's (2007) analysis of U.S. state legislative candidates explicitly included use of Web 2.0 tools. Significantly, his analysis revealed that these more interactive tools (classified as blogs and grassroots activist sites) had a much greater impact on votes than static Web 1.0 platforms and e-newsletters. Of course, the idea that the Web 2.0 era has ushered in a more participatory dimension to voters' and parties' Internet use that enhances its power to generate support is not new. Ségolène Royal, the French Socialist party candidate for president in 2007, ran a very popular blog that was credited with lifting party membership. And Barack Obama's grassroots mobilization efforts in 2008 were seen as rooted in his effective exploitation of Facebook, Twitter, and official and unofficial online videos.⁵

As we move further into the Web 2.0 era, closer scrutiny of how much the newer types of Web campaigning may be affecting electoral outcomes is becoming an increasingly important topic for study. In addition, comparing the impact of different forms of Web campaigning allows for more nuanced and conclusive findings to be drawn about how and why the Web is affecting voter choice. To date, while most studies have reported a positive and significant impact of candidates' Web sites on their levels of support, the causal mechanism behind this finding has not been fully explored. The low numbers of individuals visiting Web sites has led most authors to concede that a direct effect, whereby voters convert to support the candidate after viewing the site, is unlikely (Gibson & McAllister, 2006). However, the possibility for indirect or two-step effects whereby the Web serves as a source of information for activists who go on to mobilize others in support of the candidate or via media has recently been set out as one explanation (Norris & Curtice, 2008; Quintilier & Vissers, 2008).

Building on this logic, we argue that a two-step Web effect may also be operating whereby candidates' home pages and particularly their Web 2.0 platforms serve to promote their message more widely and virally out to supporter/unofficial blog and social

network platforms, which is where the “real” conversion and/or mobilization may be taking place. This article, by systematically comparing the impact of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 campaigning on Australians’ vote choice while controlling for a wide range of individual, organizational, and contextual factors, allows us to assess this explanation (with regard to conversion specifically) as well as provide new evidence to examine the growing claims in the academic literature and wider media about the effectiveness of the Web in securing votes.

The 2007 Australian E-election?

The Australian federal election of 2007 provides a useful context for testing the impact of Web campaigning on voter choice on a number of grounds. Levels of Internet use have typically been among the highest in the world, and in 2007 Internet use stood at 69% of those aged 15 years and older, up slightly from 61% at the previous federal election in 2004.⁶ More significantly, around two thirds of households reported an Internet connection, with over 4 in 10 having broadband access, a significant increase from just over 15% in 2004–2005. From an institutional perspective, Australia has compulsory voting. This means that any significant increases in candidates’ support can only result from the conversion of already mobilized voters, since electoral institutions are ensuring individuals’ turnout under the threat of a state-imposed fine (around 95% of registered voters regularly turn out to vote).⁷ Such a constraint arguably makes the Australian case a more stringent test of the campaign effects hypothesis than in countries such as the U.S. or Ireland, since any such effects would occur only by changing the prior preferences of already activated voters and not through the mobilization of latent support.⁸ We return to the implications of this distinction for our findings in the discussion and conclusions sections below.

Looking more specifically at the levels of enthusiasm and Internet activity that were evident among key political actors leading up to the 2007 election, the electoral context appeared to be ripe for an active Web campaign. Candidates and parties were seen to be exhibiting signs of increased commitment to use of the new media compared to previous elections, following the lead of their counterparts in the U.S. primaries, where a wealth of new Internet-based campaign initiatives were being trialed.⁹ Even before the election announcement, several commentators had declared the “YouTube” election to be under way, as John Howard, the Liberal prime minister, launched his first video to announce new measures to tackle climate change. In doing so, he joined a number of his colleagues and opposition politicians who had launched themselves online via MySpace’s Australian Impact site,¹⁰ a purpose-built, interactive interface containing videos and information on candidates and key issues in the election. Subsequently, Labor took the initiative, launching the Kevin07 Web site; mirroring the efforts of the U.S. presidential candidates, the pages contained numerous calls for voters to donate, volunteer, and spread the candidate’s message online.¹¹ Among the electorate, excitement also mounted regarding a new receptivity to online campaigning. Use of newer Web applications such as social networking sites had accelerated rapidly since their arrival in 2004–2005. MySpace, one of the most popular such sites, reported that just over 4 million Australians had signed up by October 2007 (just under one fifth of the total population), and membership across all social networking sites was reported to have more than doubled in the 2 months prior to the election campaign.¹²

Despite the increasing fervor of anticipation that this would be Australia’s first fully fledged e-election, several reports produced shortly after the election proved highly critical of politicians’ efforts and any likely effects on voters (Kissane, 2008; Miskin,

2008).¹³ A survey of major party candidates' use of Web 2.0 applications (i.e., blogs, social networking, and video-sharing sites) conducted by the Australian Centre for Public Communication (2008) found that "use of new media among Australian federal politicians is, with a few notable exceptions, still low" (p. 10). While a majority had personal Web sites, only around 1 in 10 had posted videos to YouTube, and less than 1 in 10 used MySpace or ran a blog. In addition, analysis of the contents of their online efforts revealed little commitment to promoting voter engagement, with few personalized e-mail opportunities. Other studies of the major parties' e-campaigning concluded that most were attempting to capture mainstream media coverage rather than make a genuine effort to explore these new communication possibilities (Bruns, Wilson, & Saunders, 2007; Chen & Walsh, 2008a, 2008b). Indeed, some of the most successful examples of use of the new media came from outside the party sphere. An anonymously posted clip of Kevin Rudd's ear grooming efforts in the parliamentary chamber proved to be the "stand-out" viral video of the campaign, attracting over 1 million views.¹⁴

Despite the mounting international evidence, therefore, suggesting positive and significant effects of Web campaigns for candidates and earlier supportive evidence from the Australian election of 2004 (Gibson & McAllister, 2006), the story emerging "on the ground" from the Australian 2007 e-election proved to be a lot more skeptical that any real change was detectable among candidates or voters.

Data and Measurement

Our analysis seeks to help consolidate and clarify this picture by using the 2007 AES and the 2007 ACS data sets to explore the extent and type of online activities pursued at both the mass and elite levels and, furthermore, to link these sources in a bid to discover whether voters were influenced by what they read or saw and how far any gains or losses in candidate support can be attributed to the Web presence of the candidates. Conducted since 1987, the AES is a national postelection survey of voters conducted by mail self-completion. The response rate in 2007 was 40.2%.¹⁵ The ACS is a postelection survey of all major and selected minor party candidates conducted by mail self-completion; the response rate in 2007 was 49.9%.¹⁶

The AES contains an extensive battery of questions dealing with Internet use, some of which have been asked over a period of several elections, allowing us to trace the increasing utilization of the Internet. Other questions were asked in 2007 for the first time and cover a range of new applications such as social networking sites, blogs, and online video channels. In the AES analyses, the dependent variable is the probability of voting for one of the main parties. The ACS also asks the election candidates a wide range of questions concerning their political background, the conduct of the election campaign, the resources they could draw on during the campaign, and their use of the Internet. In the ACS analyses, the dependent variable is the percentage of first preference votes attracted by lower house candidates.

Results

Below we profile the basic findings about voters' and candidates' overall Web use and probe the extent to which these can be seen to cluster into distinctive practices oriented toward Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. We then move on to analyze the extent to which these patterns of Web use can be seen to have affected individual voter choice and ultimately aggregate levels of candidate success.

Voters' Use of the Web

Looking first to the voters, the data from the AES certainly support the picture of increased voter interest in online election sources, with considerably more use of the Internet to access election news reported in 2007 than at any time in the past. The AES shows that in 1998, just 1% of the electorate used the Internet to access election news on any regular basis, and almost three quarters of the electorate had no access to the Internet at all (Table 1). By 2007, that situation had changed dramatically: Three quarters of voters had Internet access; 1 in 5 used the new medium to get news or information about the election; and 1 in 20 used it on a regular basis. Placing these trends within the broader context of media use during elections from 1987, Figure 1 shows that the Internet is still far behind television as a source of election news but that it is rapidly catching up with newspapers and the radio, which are, with the exception of 2007, found to be in decline.¹⁷ If these trends continue, the Internet is likely to surpass radio as a source of election information within a decade.

Voters' use of Web-based election information has grown exponentially in Australia as access to the Internet has increased. How far does Web use distinguish between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 applications? Certainly, growing use of applications such as video and file sharing sites, blogs, and social networking pages has been in evidence in other contexts, leading to a revival of discussion about the participatory potential of new media (Brownstein, 2008; Elmer et al., 2007; Gueorguieva, 2008; Rainie, 2007; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Zittel, 2008). Empirical accounts of the spread of Web 2.0 usage in U.S. elections have revealed increasing interest among voters in these creative types of software. According to the Pew Internet and American Life project, 1 in 5 of the U.S. population had engaged in some type of campaign-related activity online once a week during the 2008 primary season, and just under one quarter had received an e-mail from a candidate for support. Ten percent of the population as a whole reported posting or forwarding some type of online political content (Smith & Rainie, 2008; Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005).¹⁸

Table 2 reports Australian voters' use of the various types of sites available during the 2007 election. The first column shows the proportions of voters who said that they accessed the Web for a particular type of information or resource during the campaign. Not

Table 1
Growth of Internet use for election news, 1998–2007

Used Internet for election information	1998 (<i>N</i> = 1,826)	2001 (<i>N</i> = 1,763)	2004 (<i>N</i> = 1,739)	2007 (<i>N</i> = 1,834)
Yes, many times	1	1	3	5
Yes, several occasions	1	3	3	6
Yes, once or twice	3	5	6	9
Subtotal	5	9	12	20
Have access but did use for election information	23	50	55	55
Don't have Internet access	72	41	33	25
Total	100	100	100	100

Note. Values are percentages. The question used was "Did you make use of the Internet at all to get news or information about the [1998/2001/2004/2007] federal election?" Source: 1998–2007 Australian Election Studies.

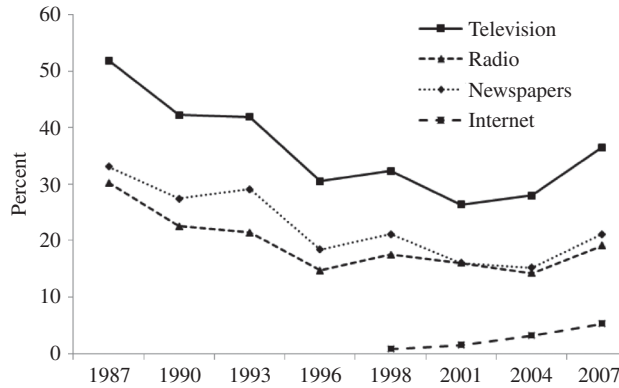


Figure 1. Sources of election news. Figures are “often” (1987, 1990) and “a good deal” (1993–2007) except for the Internet in 1998–2004, which is “many times.” The Internet estimates are only for those who had access to the internet. See McAllister and Clark (2008) for question wording. Source: 1987–2007 Australian Election Studies.

surprisingly, the mainstream news media Web sites were most frequently visited, with 1 in 5 respondents reported having visited them. Next was the Australian Electoral Commission Web site, the government agency responsible for running elections, with 10% of mentions. Party Web sites were mentioned by 8% of the respondents, followed by YouTube, which 7% of voters accessed. The remaining sites received relatively few mentions, notably blogs

Table 2
Voters’ Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 Internet use (Factor analysis)

	Percentage accessed	Factor loadings	
		1	2
Campaign/Partisan sites			
Your own MP’s Web site	2	0.72	–0.01
Other Web sites of candidates in electorate	2	0.68	0.14
Other Web sites of candidates outside electorate	2	0.68	0.06
Federal parliament Web site	3	0.58	0.26
Info/Web 2.0			
Mainstream news media Web sites	20	0.07	0.69
YouTube	7	–0.01	0.69
Political Weblog/blog	4	0.13	0.67
Party Web site	8	0.45	0.51
Australian Electoral Commission Web site	10	0.32	0.45
Eigenvalue		2.81	1.24
Percentage variance explained		31	14

Note. Values are varimax rotated factor loadings from a principal components factor analysis with unities in the main diagonal. Reliabilities (Cronbach alphas) for the factors are .62 and .61, respectively. The question was “During the 2007 election campaign, did you visit any of the following Web sites?” Estimates are for only those online ($n = 1,371$). Source: 2007 Australian Election Study.

(4%) and all of the sites run by the candidates (2%). Overall, the results suggest that voters divided their attention to sites based more on the type of information being offered than along Web 1.0 versus Web 2.0 lines.

In order to explore more systematically the differences in voters' political uses of the Web, the nine types of Web activity were factor analyzed, and the results are reported in the last two columns of Table 2. What emerges is a clear distinction between voters who were interested in expressly candidate campaign-related information versus those who were seeking more general information and using a range of homepage (i.e., Web 1.0) resources as well as blogs and video (Web 2.0). Such findings suggest that voters' use of the Web during an election campaign was more content than application driven. A small group of voters appear to use the Web to directly source information about the candidates and electoral choices on offer. More commonly, however, voters are going online for general information and are using official resources such as the mainstream media, the electoral commission, and parties as well more dynamic and less official sources, including online video and blogs.

Candidates' Use of the Web

Using the ACS data, Table 3 shows the proportion of party candidates who used various Internet services as part of their election campaign. The most commonly used application was a profile on party Web pages, with almost 90% of Green candidates doing so and close to 8 out of 10 of those from the Liberal-National Coalition following suit. Labor candidates lagged behind, with just under two thirds opting for a party profile. Personal Web sites were almost as common among the major party candidates, although Greens were far less likely to have one; only 3 in 10 had such a site. Overall, the figures show a significant, though not dramatic, increase since the 2001 election, when 55% of Coalition candidates and 40%

Table 3
Election candidates' use of Internet services, 2007

	Liberal-National (<i>n</i> = 64)	Labor (<i>n</i> = 65)	Green (<i>n</i> = 104)
Web pages on party site	78	63	88
Personal Web site (independent of party)	69	60	31
Advertised Web page/e-mail on campaign literature	58	79	64
Profile on social networking site (e.g., MySpace)	44	40	43
E-mail newsletter	34	32	42
Personal Weblog or blog	13	6	20
Video diary/Vodcasting (e.g., YouTube)	9	11	19
Podcasting	3	3	4
Online chats with voters	2	6	12

Note. Values are the percentages of candidates providing each type of service. The specific question used was "Did you provide any of the following services during the election campaign?" Source: 2007 Australian Election Study, candidate sample.

of Labor candidates had a personal Web site.¹⁹ About one third of both Coalition and Labor candidates said that they had used an e-mail newsletter to contact voters during the campaign, with slightly more Green candidates engaging in this technique.

In terms of Web 2.0 activities, the most frequently used application was a social networking site, with 4 in 10 candidates maintaining a profile. Overall, the other activities associated with Web 2.0 were less likely to be used, although this appears to be particularly so among Coalition and Labor party candidates. While 1 in 5 Green candidates maintained a blog, only 1 in 10 Labor and 1 in 20 Liberal candidates did so. A similar picture emerges for use of video diaries and YouTube. Green candidates were also more likely than other candidates to engage in online chats with voters. It would appear, then, that Web 2.0 tools have some way to go before they become mainstream communication devices, although the Greens were significantly more adept and open to incorporating them into their campaign efforts.

In the next step, we sought to examine how these apparent patterns of Web use held up to closer scrutiny by factor analyzing candidates' use of seven of the nine Web tools.²⁰ The results reported in Table 4 show that candidates can be distinguished by their preferences for the older and more established Web 1.0 approach (i.e., placing pages on a party site, sending out e-mail newsletters, and advertising one's address via traditional outlets) and the more interactive Web 2.0 format (i.e., establishing social networking profiles, blogging, and setting up interactive video channels), with each group of activities forming a distinct factor. In addition, a third factor, campaigning via a personal Web site, emerged to form a separate factor. This finding was unexpected and seen to challenge the notion that candidate home pages should be interpreted simply as a "basic" Web 1.0 tool.

Given that we know from Table 3 personal Web sites were more common among major party candidates, such findings indicate that personal sites now contain a richness of

Table 4
Candidates' use of Web campaigning (Factor analysis)

	Factor loadings		
	1	2	3
Web 2.0			
Personal Weblog or blog	0.73	-0.06	0.21
Video diary/Vodcasting (e.g., YouTube)	0.70	0.20	-0.01
Social networking site (e.g., MySpace)	0.61	0.30	0.14
Web 1.0			
Web pages on party site	0.04	0.81	0.09
Advertised Web page/e-mail on campaign literature	0.15	0.67	0.38
E-mail newsletter	0.37	0.57	-0.13
Personal Web page (independent of party)	0.16	0.12	0.91
Eigenvalue	2.43	0.94	0.85
Percentage of variance explained	35	13	12

Note. Values are varimax rotated factor loadings from a principal components factor analysis with unities in the main diagonal. Reliabilities (Cronbach alphas) for the first two factors are .56 and .51, respectively. Estimates are for Liberal-National, Labor, and Green candidates only ($n = 281$). Source: 2007 Australian Election Study, candidate sample.

content and require a level of maintenance that is possible only for certain actors possessing the necessary resources. Integrating the findings of Tables 3 and 4, therefore, we conclude that there is an interaction between party and Web campaign approach. While candidates from all parties appear to subscribe to a Web 1.0-based approach, those from the major parties favor the development of personalized sites, and the smaller parties (i.e., the Greens) favor the cheaper and more participatory Web 2.0 alternatives.

Electoral Consequences of Web Use

We move now to examine the research question central to this article, namely whether candidates' and voters' use of the Web makes a difference in the election outcome. To do this, we conduct our analysis in two stages. In a first stage, we examine voters' choices in the election and how far this was influenced by their Web usage, as defined in Table 2. The analysis is conducted in the form of a multinomial logistic regression that tests the relevance of a series of standard vote choice predictors alongside Web use, as defined through the factors identified in Table 3. Thus, we include a wide range of social background characteristics and socioeconomic status as well as partisanship. We also control for preferences on three major issues in the election—health, the environment, and industrial relations—that are likely determinants of vote choice above and beyond individuals' party identification and sociodemographic background.²¹

The findings reported in Table 5 show that while Web use was predictive of vote choice, this did not hold for all types of online activities or all parties. Accessing candidate-related campaign information was not significant in predicting vote choice, suggesting that such activity was evenly distributed across the supporters of each of the parties. Use of more generalist information sources and use of Web 2.0 tools were significant predictors of support, but only for the Greens, not for Labor and particularly not for the Coalition. The results hold up in both cases, controlling for partisan identification and also preferences on environmental and health issues.

To explore this link further and particularly the apparently differential effects on the Green vote, we conducted a second regression analysis, this time among candidates, to predict the impact of varying types of Web use on percentage of vote received. To ensure that we estimate the net effect of Web use, we apply a range of controls for the background characteristics of candidates (age, gender), the resources they commanded during the election campaign (party workers and campaign activities), and, most crucially, their party characteristics (length of party membership and incumbency).²² In addition, to account for the possibility of endogeneity in the model between our dependent variables—electoral support and Web presence—we included two measures designed to capture the overall popularity of the party and candidate rather than the skills, experience, and resources that each candidate brought to the campaign.²³ These were the swing in the two-party preferred vote between the 2004 and 2007 elections, one of the main measures of the declining or ascending fortunes of the major party candidates in the race, and incumbency. We then estimated the equations separately by party.²⁴

The results reported in Table 6 confirm our expectation that Web campaigning style and particularly use of personal sites and Web 2.0 had differing electoral consequences across the parties. Campaigning via a personal Web site increased support for Liberal-National and Labor candidates—though not significantly so—and had no effect on Green candidates' support. There were no significant effects for Web 1.0 use for any of the three parties. However, in terms of Web 2.0 use, as the results in Tables 3 and 4 had led us to expect, the Greens were the strongest beneficiary. Green candidates increased their vote

Table 5
 Voters' use of Web 1.0 and 2.0 and the vote (Multinomial logistic regression)

	Labor vs. Liberal-National		Labor vs. Green		Liberal-National vs. Green	
	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
Social background						
Gender (male)	0.03	0.26	0.12	.32	0.10	0.36
Age (years)	0.01	0.01	0.00	.01	-0.02	0.01
Urban resident	0.13	0.11	0.11	.14	-0.01	0.16
Socioeconomic status						
Tertiary education	0.18**	0.32	-0.87**	.35	-1.04**	0.41
Occupation (manual worker)						
Nonmanual worker	-0.36	0.30	-0.09	.38	0.27	0.43
Family income	0.00	0.00	0.00	.00	0.00	0.00
Partisanship						
Labor	2.59**	0.38	1.53**	.38	-1.06*	0.50
Liberal-National	-3.61**	0.32	-0.34	.52	3.26**	0.50
Green	1.16	1.09	-3.16**	.48	-4.33**	1.07
Importance of issues						
Environment	0.64**	0.24	-0.37	.33	-1.01**	0.36
Health	0.60**	0.27	0.44*	.31	-0.15	0.35
Industrial relations	0.30	0.22	0.58*	.26	0.28	0.29
Web use						
Campaign use	-0.17	0.14	-0.02	.17	0.16	0.18
General/Web 2.0 use	0.15	0.09	-0.15*	.08	-0.30**	0.11
Intercept	2.03		2.59		0.56	
Nagelkerke R^2				.80		
N				1,699		

Note. Values are parameter estimates and standard errors predicting probability of party vote. Variables are scored zero/one unless otherwise indicated. Campaign use is an additive scale of the four items identified in Table 4, namely: visited own MP's site, sites of other candidates in electorate, sites of candidates outside electorate, and federal parliament Web site. General/Web 2.0 use is an additive scale of the five items identified in Table 4, namely: mainstream news media Web sites, YouTube, political Weblog/blog, party Web site, and Australian Electoral Commission Web site. Issue importance ratings were extremely important, quite important, and not very important. Source: 2007 Australian Election Study.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

by almost 1% of the vote for each additional Web 2.0 tool used (based on a mean vote for Green candidates in the survey of 7.7%).

Summary and Conclusion

Web campaigning and its electoral effects have become an increasingly important area of study. Work to date on this issue has built an increasingly consistent picture of positive and significant effects across different national contexts, despite the varying models and levels of analysis that have been used. Our understanding of how any such effects may

Table 6
Candidates' Web campaigning and the vote, by party (OLS regression)

	Liberal-National (<i>n</i> = 63)		Labor (<i>n</i> = 73)		Green (<i>n</i> = 104)	
	<i>b</i>	β	<i>b</i>	β	<i>b</i>	β
Web campaign						
Personal Web page	0.14	0.05	0.22	0.22	-0.02	-0.02
Web 1.0	0.43	0.04	-0.51	-0.05	0.19	0.06
Web 2.0	-2.52	-0.15	-1.53	-0.10	0.83**	0.23**
Control variables						
Age (years)	-0.20	-0.16	-0.33**	-0.23**	0.02	0.05
Gender (male)	1.17	0.04	-0.51	-0.02	-1.28**	-0.19**
Length of party membership (years)	0.40***	0.32***	0.22**	0.24**	0.13**	0.20**
Party workers (number)	-0.33	-0.08	0.31*	0.17*	-0.01	-0.01
Campaign activities (hours per week)	0.05	0.12	0.03	0.09	0.02	0.14
Incumbent	13.32***	0.49***	14.86***	0.59***		
Vote swing 2004–2007	-0.64*	-0.19*	0.51**	0.18**	-0.34***	-0.34***
Intercept	38.42		45.60		4.84	
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.56		0.55		0.27	

Note. Values are ordinary least squares regression coefficients predicting percentage of first preference vote in the 2007 election for House of Representatives candidates only. Source: 2007 Australian Election Study, candidate sample.

p* < .10; *p* < .05; ****p* < .01.

be occurring has lagged somewhat behind the clarity of the empirical findings, although more recent studies have suggested that the newer Web 2.0 tools may actually be the “real” source of e-campaigns’ impact. This analysis sought to test this assumption from both voter and candidate perspectives, controlling for a wide range of factors, and particularly to see if the assumption holds up across different party contexts. In doing so, we have reached a number of important conclusions that advance our understanding of the electoral significance of the Web in Australian elections and more generally.

First, it appears that in line with the wider international literature on Web campaign effects, and in contrast to the more pessimistic postelection national reports, online campaigning of some form was quite widespread among candidates in the 2007 election and did yield electoral benefits. Almost all candidates had some kind of online electoral presence. In addition, a relatively sizeable minority of voters (around 1 in 5) claimed to have paid some attention to online sources during the campaign. Identifiable patterns of mass and elite usage of the technology did emerge, with candidate use falling into three basic types of presence: pages within official party sites, personalized Web pages, and use of more informal Web 2.0 participatory platforms. Voters were found to be less distinctive in their Web use, tending to divide into a smaller niche group of consumers of campaign-specific information and more general searchers for election-related news in both Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 formats.

Despite there being a relatively small portion of the electorate accessing online election sources and particularly campaign sites, it does appear that this use made a difference for certain voters in determining their vote choice. In particular, Green voters were found to have been significantly influenced by their exposure to Web-based election material, and particularly that of the more interactive 2.0 variety. Voters for the two major parties were not so affected. When we turned our attention to assess candidates' fortunes, we confirmed that Green candidates who invested in Web 2.0 tools were the main winners in vote terms, enjoying an almost 1% boost in support compared to those who did not use these technologies. Major party candidates were not similarly rewarded by their online efforts. While we cannot rule out the possibility that the effect of these Web 2.0 platforms may have been direct (i.e., candidate blog posts and Facebook profiles succeeding in converting the votes of a small but significant number of voters), the viral quality of these applications suggests a likely indirect effect whereby the interoperability and interconnectedness of Web 2.0 spaces led to the messages being transmitted to a wider audience of social media users.

Overall, then, our findings can be seen to provide further support to the conclusions of the wider literature that Web campaigning matters, and indeed perhaps particularly so given that (as noted earlier) any significant gains in candidates' support in the Australian system can only occur through the conversion of existing voter preferences rather than mobilization of latent preferences. Our results also present two significant challenges to the literature, however.

The first is that we break the link between personal Web sites and electoral success found in earlier studies. It is the Web 2.0 technologies that now appear to make the difference to voters. We account for this in two ways. First, many of the previous studies did not distinguish between different types of Web presence, and notably the one that did (i.e., Rackaway, 2007) found that once the alternative Web 2.0 platforms were included in the analysis, the effect of personal Web sites was removed. While Rackaway did not distinguish how far this effect held across the parties as we do here, our combined findings suggest that at least for those studies conducted in the post-Web 2.0 era, personal Web sites may be acting as a proxy for more interactive and innovative Web usage. Such an explanation does not help account for the strong effects of personal Web sites in the pre-Web 2.0 era, however, when Web campaigning was less differentiated (D'Alessio, 1997; Gibson & McAllister, 2006). Here we can only speculate, but it does seem plausible that in earlier times, personalized Web sites constituted something more of a rarity and may have helped a candidate stand out from the crowd and convey an image of openness and modernity. Also, having a personal site may have been a proxy for a degree of candidate professionalism and competence not captured by the standard ACS measures.

On a second front, our findings issue something of a challenge to the normalization thesis that has been a dominant narrative of Web studies since the turn of the millennium. In the party context, this is the idea that the major players are simply replicating and indeed reinforcing their offline dominance in the online sphere. Here we find that despite the fact that major parties continue to lead in the development of personalized Web sites, smaller parties' exploitation of the free and more grassroots-oriented types of new media technologies is actually having more resonance with the electorate and yielding a much better "return on investment." Whether this equalizing effect can be sustained in the longer term is of course an open question. A move by the major parties to follow the Barack Obama example of building their own "in-house" Web 2.0 platforms in the shape of the MyBarackObama.com site may be some way off. However, were such tools to eventually filter down and out among local candidates, it would no doubt be the representatives of the better resourced Australian parties who would be best placed to make use of them.

Whether these are spaces the voters would choose to inhabit, however, is something for the Australian electorate to decide and future research to investigate.

Notes

1. See “Conservatives Do It Obama-Style with New Website MyConservatives.com,” by Arun Sudhama (<http://www.prweek.com/uk/news/944017/Conservatives-Obama-style-new-website-MyConservativescom/>), and “Germany Fumbles with Obama-Style Election Tactics,” by Madeleine Chambers (<http://www.reuters.com/article/politicsNews/idUSTRE57J1S920090820>).

2. See “Lessons from the Barack Obama Social Media Campaign,” by J. A. Vargas (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/15679573/Lessons-from-the-Barack-Obama-Social-Media-Campaign>); “The First 21st Century Campaign,” by R. Brownstein (http://www.nationaljournal.com/njmagazine/cs_20080416_3324.php); and “How Obama’s Internet Campaign Changed Politics,” by Claire Cain Miller (<http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-Internet-campaign-changed-politics/>).

3. Writing in a range of news outlets, journalists were quick to proclaim that “online is the big campaigning innovation of 2007.” See “Rush for Cyberspace Has Traps for New Players” (*Sun Herald*, August 12, 2007, p. 31) and “The YouTube Election” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, July 14, 2007, p. 23).

4. For a fuller summary of the findings from the empirical analyses of voters’ responses to and interest in Web campaigning, see Gibson and McAllister (2006).

5. See “Politics Is No Longer Local, Its Viral,” by Jose Antonio Vargas (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/26/AR2008122601131.html>), and “France’s Mysterious Embrace of Blogs,” by Thomas Crampton (<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/27/technology/27iht-blogs.2314926.html>).

6. Figures for broadband and 2007 Internet use are from *Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2006–07* (Australian Bureau of Statistics), and refer to use of the Internet in the 12 months prior to the interview (http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/DFEED0F4BFFE51E0CA2573B6001F777B/File/81460_2006-07.pdf). Figures for 2004 are from the International Telecommunications Union statistics database (<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx>). The 2007 level of Internet use is 68%, matching very closely the ABS figures.

7. In the 2007 federal election, turnout was 94.76% of the registered electorate.

8. The AES always includes an item asking whether the respondent would vote if it was not compulsory. The correlation between probability of turnout and frequency of Internet use is .09 ($p \leq .000$), suggesting that if voting were voluntary, the Internet would hold some potential for voter mobilization. We do not extend our analysis to include this variable here, however, since the survey question involves intended turnout in a hypothetical context.

9. See “The Ron Paul Money Bomb” (http://www.politicsonline.com/content/main/politicker/politicker_view.asp) and “Campaign 2008 Presidential Hopefuls Star on Google’s Stage” (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/06/04/GOOGLEFORUM.TMP>).

10. See <http://www.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=impact>.

11. See “www.Kevin07.com.au: Rudd Ups the Ante in the Cyberspace War” (*The Age*, August 8, 2007) and “Labor to Increase Internet Dominion” (*The Australian*, September 27, 2007, p. 33).

12. See “MySpace Slips to Middle-of-Road as Facebook Surges Ahead,” by Julian Lee (<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/10/21/1192940905046.html>).

13. Miskin (2008) reports that no political topics were featured in the Google and Yahoo lists of most popular search terms for 2007. Further, while the Kevin07 Web site proved popular with journalists and the party faithful, the proportion of voters visiting the site on a typical day was infinitesimally small (measured at less than 0.01% of the total electorate).

14. See http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Kevin+Rudd+eating+ear+wax+during+Question+Time&dupe_id=3832307318889745409. This is in stark contrast to the less than 100,000 views of John Howard’s initial climate change announcement, despite its greater

mainstream media fanfare. For the Howard climate change speech, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5jtiJPiv4Y&feature=related>.

15. The AES is a mail-out mail-back survey, and in line with most other mail self-completion surveys, there is a response bias toward the better educated and English speakers, though the bias is relatively small (Dillman, 1991). Comparisons of Internet use figures do reveal AES estimates to be somewhat higher (approximately 6%) than those reported by the ABS (see Note 6). However, a slightly higher rate of Internet use in the AES sample is not a priori seen as a potential source of bias in estimating its relationship to vote choice.

16. Green candidates had the highest response rate (63.9%) compared to Labor (46.7%) or the Liberal-Nationals (39.9%). Since we analyze the parties separately, these interparty differences in response rates should have no substantive effects on the reported results. For further methodological details on both the AES and ACS, see McAllister and Clark (2008, Appendix B).

17. The reversal in these trends in 2007 was largely due to the increased competitiveness of the election. Labor was seen as having a genuine chance of unseating the Liberal government for the first time in 13 years under the new leadership of Kevin Rudd. See McAllister and Clark (2008) for details.

18. Similar results were found in France during the 2007 presidential elections (Vedel & Michalska, 2007; Vacari, 2008). However, results from the 2007 Danish parliamentary elections show no such seismic shift toward the use of Web 2.0 tools (Hoff, 2008).

19. In 2001, 28% of Green candidates had a personal Web site. In 2004, 47% of Coalition candidates, 42% of Labor candidates, and 50% of Green candidates had a personal Web site.

20. Podcasting and online chats with voters are excluded because of the very small numbers of candidates who said they used them.

21. Issue item wording was as follows: "Here is a list of important issues that were discussed during the election campaign. When you were deciding about how to vote, how important was each of these issues to you personally?"

22. We use a more limited range of controls because of the small number of cases. Using the full range of control variables does not change the substantive results, but it does increase the standard errors and therefore the significance level.

23. Question wordings for items not reported elsewhere are as follows. Length of party membership was worded as "In what year did you join the political party for which you are now a candidate?" Number of party workers was worded as "Approximately how many workers could you count on to work for your campaign on an average day?" Campaign activities was worded as "We are interested in the amount of time you spent in your electorate and what you did there. Thinking back over the past year, about how many hours per month did you usually devote to the following activities within your electorate?"

24. There were no incumbent lower house Green candidates. An alternative method would be to estimate two-stage least squares equations (see, for example, Wagner & Gainous, 2009). However, identifying the most appropriate instrumental variables is problematic, especially with surveys of both voters and candidates. For that reason, we took the simpler step of controlling for as many potentially confounding factors as possible.

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