

Monica Poletti

Università degli Studi di Milano

Víctor Sampedro

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

#### Abstract

We focus on the Spanish general election of 2008 with a bottom up perspective, by comparing uses, motivations and perceptions of innovative ICT trends. Six discussion groups were organized, with people selected on the dimensions of age, political ideology and activism profile. We explore whether generations, ideological self-positioning and different activisms make a difference in perceptions of the political cyber-environments. The resulting picture is a complex one: traditional differences among groups blur, no clear difference between technophobes and technophiles exist, while pro-democratic tones are used together with harsh criticisms of the use that political parties make of ICT.

Keywords: Web 2.0, elections, campaign, cyberdemocracy, new social movements, activism.

## Introduction

As in many other European countries, in the general election of 2008 Spanish party candidates created *Facebook* profiles, posted on *Tuenti*<sup>1</sup>, made virtual acts on *Second Life* and sent text messages in order to capture citizens attention and make them participate in politics. Scholars often ask and describe the use that politicians make of new media technologies. But what do citizens think of these strategies? What do they make out of these tools and of the increasing interaction of politics?

As part of a bigger project in which several methodologies and actors' perspectives have been used, we analyzed the increasing importance of ICT in the Spanish political context, focusing on the last general election of 2008. Following a global trend, changes on the realm of the so called 'cyberdemocracy' are taking place in several ways. On the institutional side, Spanish politicians and political parties have used new technologies in a more organized and innovative way compared to previous elections. Citizens, on their side, have increased the use of the ICT to follow the political campaign, changing their patterns of media consumption and possibly influencing the degree and forms of their political involvement and participation. The perspective shown in this paper is bottom up: we compare uses, motivations and perceptions that several groups of citizens hold about ICT innovative trends and of their political, electoral and democratic impact. People were selected on the dimensions of age, political ideology and activism profile, and two discussion groups were organized for each dimension, for a total of six.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the first section we contextualize this study in a broader range of literature about politics and ICT in European and US elections, along with the main research questions. The second section explains the methodology used and criteria for

---

<sup>1</sup>Social network similar to *Facebook*, very popular in Spain

group selection. In the third section we present the profiles of activists outlined in the narratives of participants of all groups. In the final section we summarize and discuss the most important findings and the implications that they may have on national politics and democracy.

## 1. Theoretical Framework

### *Politics and New technologies*

In Western democracies there is an increasing concern both among scholars and political leaders for disengagement of citizens from politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Putnam 2000), and at the same time, there is an increasing attention to new media as tools that can possibly help citizens to re-engage with parties and democracy (Bennett, 2003; Chadwick, 2006; Dahlgreen, 2003; Norris, 2005; Norris, Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2005). Yet, if we do not consider the peculiar success of Obama campaign in the US, nowhere forecasted Internet opportunities for changes in democracy have been fully exploited yet, neither by political elites nor by citizens (Norris, 2000).

Political parties that have used new technologies in electoral campaigns have generally used *top-down* communication logics, without fully developing the participatory potentials of these tools (Ward, Gibson & Nixon, 2003). Indeed, parties are reluctant in using horizontal communication models because *bottom-up* logic of the Internet makes it (slightly) more difficult for them to control content (Stromer-Galley, 2000). And when they do it, they try to minimize the possibility of unexpected events by restraining users' options (Cunha, Martìn, Newell & Ramiro, 2003). Citizens, on their side, have not been massively mobilized by new media yet. Hence, so far, Internet seems to have reinforcement effects, rather than being a mass mobilizing tool (Curtice & Norris, 2004). It is true that a growing number of citizens use the Internet for news gathering, but a relatively small number of them are actively involved in online politics and are

far from being new actors. Their profile is not significantly different from the profile of traditional activists that might use the Internet only to supplement their offline behavior (Ward & Vedel, 2006, p. 5). And being the Internet a selective media, it is the people that already sustain a party, a candidate or a social movement that are more likely to connect to their specific Website (Bimber & Davis, 2003). A term such ‘cyberdemocracy’ should then be used carefully, because it refers only to a small part of the population. Yet, as the two-step model of Norris and Curtice (2008) suggests, this minority is not necessarily irrelevant since e-activists can function as opinion leaders and gate-keepers. Besides, not only the Net is an effective tool for information exchange, but, thanks to its horizontal nature, it is also very important for creating and keeping networks, a pivotal step in order to spread messages, organize political action and (potentially) mobilize people (Bannon, 2004).

### *Parties and Election Campaigning Online*

Like other (Southern) European countries, where it is not very clear whether electoral campaigns can be labeled as *post-modern*<sup>2</sup> yet, Spanish parties were initially cautious in their approach to the Internet. After the street demonstrations following the terrorist attack of 2004 (*11M*<sup>3</sup>) in Madrid<sup>4</sup> (the so called *noche de los móviles*<sup>5</sup>), organized through the help of mobile

---

<sup>2</sup> Norris, P. (2000). *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-industrial Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> The terrorist attack of the 11<sup>th</sup> of March of 2004. Bombs exploded in few Metro trains in Madrid, killing 191 people and injuring around 1900. Aznar (leader of PP and chief of government at the moment) initially attributed the authorship of the attack to ETA terrorism. Proofs found in the days preceding the elections made this theory highly unlikely compared to the more probable authorship of Islamic terrorist

phones and Internet, parties made an attempt of re-appropriation of ICT with the purpose of mobilizing citizens for their own causes. At the beginning it did not sort many effects because parties gave more importance to the tool rather than to the network behind it. But electoral experts learned fast and they slowly, but systematically, incorporated partisan ICT tools in their campaigns, and they reached a normalization in 2008. During this election, characterized similarly to other Western democracies by permanent campaigning, negativism and personalization, participatory Web 2.0 applications, traditionally linked to new social movements, were transformed in strictly defined marketing tools (Sampedro, 2008). Innovative uses of ICT were made, using *Youtube* videos and channels, *Facebook* profiles and even *Second Life* avatars. Linked to this, the important novelty of this election was represented by ‘cybervolunteers’, namely members, supporters and sympathizers of a certain political party that could directly participate in the campaign in a voluntary and not remunerated way, by spreading electoral messages in a more or less organized way through ICT.

This paper explores up to what point a generational digital divide might exist in Spain and possible differences between right wing voters (the opposition party, at the time), and left wing voters (the government party). Finally we look in what ways new social movements (NSM) and political parties’ online activists differ in their use, know-how and meaning attribution to political uses of the Internet. Is it true that ICT are generating more egalitarian patterns of political action

---

groups linked to Al Qaeda. However, the right government officially maintained the first version for political advantages of it.

<sup>4</sup> For a whole depiction of this ICT mobilization see Sampedro, V., 2005 (Ed.) *13-M. Multitudes online*. Madrid: La Catarata. Full text available at [www.victorsampedro.net](http://www.victorsampedro.net)

<sup>5</sup> The mobiles night

and of political interests? And are NSM with scarce resources more interested in ICT than partisan activists?

## 2. Research Design

In this section we present data drawn from six discussion groups, designed to explore the relationship between new media use and different levels of political participation during the last electoral campaign. Since discussion groups are meant for gathering the range of opinions that exist in a population, not the distribution of those options (Morgan & Krueger, 1993), through these groups we explored how a broad range of participants interacted with and reflected upon the use of new media for political participation.

Participants were recruited according to three dimensions to reflect socio political groups with different levels of political engagement and use of the Internet (See Table 1). The first dimension was *age*: *younger* generations vs. *older* generations. The boundary set to define this group was the age of 40, with participants from 18 to 40, and another group of over 40s. Even if we were aware that very young people might have different behaviors than people in their 30s, we decided to include them in the same group because, due to school, free time or work, these two categories are both quite familiar with computers and the Internet, compared to older generations. The second dimension was *ideology* for which we selected voters with different ideological self-placement: *right voters* (PP<sup>6</sup>) and *left voters* (PSOE<sup>7</sup> and IU<sup>8</sup>). While the first two dimensions selected ordinary citizens, the third dimension, *activism*, focused on different

---

<sup>6</sup> PP: *Partido Popular* – Centre-right party, led by Rajoy

<sup>7</sup> PSOE: *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* – Centre-left party, led by Zapatero

<sup>8</sup> IU: *Izquierda Unida* – Post-communist party, led by Llamazares

type of people, giving a privileged view from people linked to organizations or movements. An online activist was defined as an active user (e.g. content production, forwarding emails, etc.) of the Internet for political purposes that have direct or indirect link with socio-political organizations. We wanted to compare participants of partisan politics with participants of social grassroots politics. For the previous we selected *partisan cyberactivists* - citizens connected with the two main ideological party choices, the right wing PP on the one side, and the left wing PSOE and IU on the other – while for the latter we selected *social cyberactivists* - citizens connected with some NSM organizations at a local or national level. A total of six discussion groups were organized in March 2008 in Madrid, a week after general election<sup>9</sup>, specifically for the purpose of this study<sup>10</sup>. The size was set to 8 people for group for a total of 47 persons<sup>11</sup>.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

### 3. Political Activists Profiles

In this section we present the profiles of activists outlined in the narratives of participants of the groups. The age groups generally described a cyber political activist as a young person that has either free time, software knowledge or both. While older people did not spend much time on

---

<sup>9</sup> March, 9<sup>th</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Participants were all Internet users - ranging from soft to addicted - and interested in politics. The groups also covered both sexes and both right and left wing affinities (This does not apply to the two groups of voters - quite homogenous on ideological self-placement - and to the *Social Cyberactivists* - that do not identify with any political party but they tend to be 'progressive'. Each group discussion ran for between 1.5 and 2 hours, they were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

<sup>11</sup> In Group 6 (*Social Cyberactivists*), one participant did not show up

this issue, the other three groups of ordinary citizens - young people and voters of left and right - outlined several typologies of political activists in their discussions classified them for different types of involvement and motivation to participate. They were asked what kind of political uses, according to them, citizens were making of the Internet. This question was not meant to report individual experiences, but rather to start a discussion through which profiles were collectively defined and refined by participants within their group. These profiles were outlined according to experience but also to their knowledge and impressions of the use made by friends and acquainted, as well as the Internet environment in general. As discussion groups are not meant for generalization to the whole population, this process allowed us to map the types of existing users profiles in a rather unexplored field. These profiles are particularly interesting since all groups listed quite similar ways of using the Net, increasing their validity. It must be noted that a clear distinction cannot be made among them: boundaries are fuzzy and profiles are not mutually exclusive, since citizens can use the Net in several ways at different time and for different issues, but using distinct profiles can still be analytically useful. Through an inductive process, the seven profiles discussed by groups have been grouped into four analytically relevant dimensions: *NSM politics*, *party politics*, *self-expression* and *entertainment*.

Starting from the last, in the dimension of *entertainment* we included three slightly overlapping profiles that we called: *not well-thought cyber-activists*, *cyber-activists for fun* and *cyber-activists to tease*. We grouped them together since in all these profiles an element of entertainment and trivialization of politics was included. Two of them were identified only by young people and right voters. Although not generalizable, this suggests that at the time being, in Spain, critical opinions of cyberactivism are placed more on the conservative ideological axis rather than on the progressive one.

a) *Not well-thought cyber-activists* - people who almost automatically forward emails to their friends, sometimes without knowing or checking the content, even if they are aware that their contacts will probably not read it as well. They engage into any kind of cyberactivity without too much thinking, since, they claimed, ICT make it easier to attend both relevant and irrelevant demands. In this case ICT have the risk to make politics superficial. This typology was outlined only by young people and right voters.

b) *Cyber-activists for fun* - young people that record and edit videos for fun, sometimes only because they are bored. People who usually make videos for several issues, and during election time they make videos on political themes (e.g. parodies of politicians). If they do not produce content they participate by sending funny and original political contents, usually about opposition parties, to people with similar ideological affinity.

c) *Cyber-activists to tease* – people that participate by sending messages to voters of other political parties in order to make fun of them, as a mere provocation. This typology has not clear boundaries with *cyber-activist for fun* typology since the teasing is sent to people with similar or dissimilar view, depending on the degree of conflict a person is able to handle.

The dimension of *self-expression* is described with one single profile:

d) *Cyber-activists for self-expression* - people who just want to express their opinion in a blog or in a forum. This typology was identified by youngsters and by some partisan cybervolunteers and social cyberactivists, and there were divergent interpretations on it. Some held that people write without a real political compromise, only to express their identity, to let their friends know what they think and to be on the spotlight for a short while. Somebody else, however, maintained that writing has always some kind of purpose, particularly when talking about politics. However, everybody agreed that these people are not usually (or not necessarily)

connected to a political party. They are not political activists, but persons who act independently and who want to express their opinion.

The *party politics* dimension includes profiles of citizens dealing with conventional political participation, either because they have some connection or interest in political party organizations:

e) *Involved cyber-activists* - voters with a strong faith in a particular political party who promote their party among other people without being formally connected to it. They decide to participate forwarding “serious” messages (e.g. participation to demonstrations), or creating videos based on the degree of political affinity with certain information. These actors are not member of any political party and they act autonomously.

f) *Partisan cyber-volunteers* - people with political concerns that choose to participate in a serious way, and that are paid or encouraged by political parties. Young people claimed that these people do not necessarily need time or knowledge: they are mainly young university students or young workers that dedicate a daily bit of their time updating Websites, sending SMS or email. Voters of both ideologies claimed that political parties provided guidelines of how to be cyber-activist and documents with ready-made support arguments, in order to make this type of actor act as their “press agents”.

Finally, in the fourth dimension, *NSM politics*, includes the seventh and last profile:

g) *Social cyber-activists* - actors that are connected to NSM and (at least apparently) differ from people linked to more conventional party politics. They deal with different issues and have different views of society and politics.

Compared to the other groups, the two groups of activists added further information to the typologies in which they recognized themselves into. Both groups defined *partisan cyber-activists* as citizens that voluntarily participate directly or indirectly in the political campaign of a

specific party without necessarily being a member of it. They described them as young middle class persons, in their 20s or 30s, but in any case lower than 40 years old. The group of *social cyberactivists* specified that these people follow with interest the online political campaign, they have minimal technical skills but that can dedicate a lot of time to it. *Partisan cybervolunteers* added that activists are mainly men, with middle/high culture, and they are generally students, graduates or young professional. They claimed that this profile matches the one that political parties addressed when looking for cybervolunteers. There are of course exceptions, such as older people that want to keep connection with younger generations, but they are just a minority.

In both groups there was disagreement regarding whether *partisan cyber-volunteers* were members of political parties or not, and some *social cyberactivists* also proposed the idea that activists “make a lot of noise” but they are actually quite few in number. They argue that it is like a concentric structure in which few people have high skills, more people with lower skills publish news or videos on their blogs, then much more people with even lower skills spread the message using their networks.

Discussing the way NSM is active in politics, *social cyberactivists* agreed that there has been an evolution in the last five years of the profile of social movement activists due to ICT use. They claimed that traditional activists used to be few “nerds” that were participating actively in one single association with a small mailing list, even though at the same time they were also subscribed passively to several other mailing lists. Now things are different: traditional activists participate actively in more associations, while more people (potentially everybody) can participate because tools are easier to use and more interactivity is allowed. This phenomenon is interesting since the socio-political use of ICT has already increased compared to the past. Yet there has been a virtual fragmentation in the use: different groups of people use different tools. Few activists also claimed that since the goal of activists is mainly to spread messages, in order to

reach more people they should abandon both old prejudices and traditional tools, only to embrace new participatory tools such as commercial-based social networks (e.g. *Facebook*).

Going back to what emerged from discussions in all the groups, general problems and obstacles were identified on the characteristics of the Internet and of the way political activists use it. The generational groups, and particularly young adults, stressed the importance of networks of friends in political action. Yet, a recurrent theme linked to this was distrust. Young people focused on the legal security concern for data protection in massive mails, while older people focused on the issue of data manipulation, particularly related to online polls<sup>12</sup>. Another problem they perceived was educating old people to use new technologies. Youngsters held that while it is true that not every old person is interested in learning, or that their use of the Internet is limited to few tools, there are not enough training courses for this purpose. Older people also talk about the difficulty of surfing the Internet by listing the number of necessary learning steps required: namely having a computer, learn how to use it, and discover where to look for relevant information, not an easy task for them without any advice or training.

While *partisan cybervolunteers* showed a more restrictive and less inclusive consideration of the adequate type of cyberactivism, *social cyberactivists* claimed that due to the peculiarity of ICT tools, it is now more difficult to set a clear boundary between public and private spheres. Compared to the past, everything is now “more private and less political in the classical sense”. ICT have brought changes also in the way people talk to each other, fostering confidence between previously unknown people who meet online. This spurs strong emotional intensity in

---

<sup>12</sup> For the reasons of distrust see Sampedro, V.; Vizcaino, R. and Tucho, F. (2008) *Las webs de los partidos: virtualidad y propaganda, censura y desinformación*. In V. Sampedro (Ed.) *Medios y elecciones, 2004*. (pp. 133-201) Madrid: Ramón Areces. Full text available at [www.victorsampedro.net](http://www.victorsampedro.net)

online discussions, also for the feeling that personal opinions are taken into account, either positively or negatively. This group identified also other problems. First of all, since changes are going very fast, there is often a wrong usage of tools that might make less involved people turning away from mailing lists and from participating. Even though every tool has its own privacy features, when writing online it is never completely clear who the public is going to be and in this respect there were divergent views about the fact that people are more or less aware and responsible of the consequences of their actions. Second, writing is a communication modality that citizens are not much used to use and therefore can not control very well, even though, they claimed, this is probably going to change with *digital native* younger generations that will produce a cultural change in culture in the next future. Third, emotional intensity in debates on the one side distorts reality, because it produces perceptions of the extremely importance of things discussed; on the other side, debates do not seem to have any big consequences in real life, since discussions are not seen as very problematic by users. Fourth, there is a stratification of ICT use, because people use the Internet at different levels also within the same group. They identified two types of users: what they called *nerds*, connected 24 hours per day and participating frequently, and *occasional activists* that only read pages and sometimes publish something. However, they held that while activism could once be explained by educational levels and economical resources, now it is not clear anymore who participate online. Stratification might also lead to problems when issues discussed online are brought up in offline meetings, since soft internet users do not know what the issue at stake is. Fifth and finally, there is a different level of implication in the online and the offline, and this is raised as a critical point. Cyberspace is perceived as being real, but the street is still “more real” than the Internet. Sometimes it is not even clear whether tools such as Web 2.0, Web 3.0 or social networks are actually used or are “only pseudo-marketing tools” since they are perceived by users as “very

distant”. The traditional development process for ICT tools used by NSM usually has its origin for a special need and it is developed by few hackers and university activists. Only later on it spreads in society. Now, however, they claimed that the trend is changing: ordinary citizens might know at an earlier stage how to use a tool, but they increasingly do not know what is worth for.

#### 4. Analysis And Discussion

In this section we discuss in detail the most important findings of the analysis, synthesizing few theoretical conclusions for each dimension, along with some general considerations drawn from the main points of (dis)agreement among groups.

##### *New and older generation*

We wanted to see up to what point a generational divide existed in Spain and whether an open and plural mobilization is now possible. As a general answer to this we must notice that clear differences between younger and older people still exist in Spain for the use of ICT. Occasionally, older people even set themselves apart in their discussion, remarking their poor knowledge and the importance that cybercampaign had in arising interest and participation of youngsters - (potential) new voters - rather than adults. Despite of this, it clearly appeared that older people were also quite exposed to sensationalist Internet content, such as *Youtube* videos and acknowledged the influence that TV debate had on the Net.

Agreements between the two generations were predominantly centered on general evaluations of the techno-political environment. Both groups had the perception that political and media interests imposed barriers to the Internet, and they acknowledged the importance of these interests for Internet initiatives to have an impact. Differences in groups narratives referred

instead to the fact that young generations use the Internet in a more autonomous and less structured ways, as well as with a more interactive and proactive attitude than older people. This was also revealed by the list of obstacles outlined by older people, by youngsters' detailed criticisms of the Net and by the several cyberactivists typologies they were able to outline.

P3: the Internet has a lot of steps, you must have all the devices, then you need to have...

P1: ...training...

P3: ...training, yes, to learn how to use it and to go online. Once you go online you need to know how to use information [...], where you can find pages with..., with abstracts, with information, with titles, even if they are only titles, and contrast them with several sources. Then, at that point you can see from titles of one media and titles of other media...you can see how everything works because there are never the same titles for different newspaper: neither the sun shines nor it gets dark. For this reason the Internet is more costly, of course, it is much easier to use the radio. Even more, when you are listening to the radio you can...

P1:... yes, you can cook or stew...

(G2 – Older, line 1020-1035)

Finally, we can say that young and older people tended to agree in their positive and negative evaluations over the real uses of the Net. Interestingly, they both ascribed negative evaluations to bad uses of citizens or institutions and not to intrinsic features of ICT.

P6: [...] For instance in these newspapers [digital versions] suddenly there are opinions at h. 11.31, at h.11.32 at h.11.33... different opinion, uh?, with different names. And I suppose that it is the same person that is sending opinions one after the other, for the quickness of it, particularly when there are five opinions and all the five opinions have been made in less than half an hour. I'm sure it is the same person that is doing that.

P1: Yes, exactly, talking, as you were saying about young people that go on the Internet to make *propaganda*, I had heard something about some Internet news page: they had to give a warning to some (political) parties telling them "hey, your people should stay more quiet", because they were receiving too many opinions of...and it was clear that it was campaign, that...

P6: Yes, in an article of *El País*<sup>13</sup>, at noon there were three opinions, at 2 p.m. there were seven hundred and all very strongly against the article of *El País*... (P3: against the article...) Thus there was somebody that mobilized this; they can not give so many opinions... (P8: Of course...) (P5: Of course...)

[...] P1: Well, we can also say that maybe information on the Internet can be more subject to manipulation...don't you think? I don't know... (he laughs ironically).

P2: I think so. Actually is totally subject to manipulation, because you can go online with a hidden identity and you can say that you are a right voter, while you are of extreme left...or you can, well...the problem or inconvenient that I think that the Internet has is that I think that...if you don't want to show who you are, you don't do it..., and you can do it, uh... then there is also the advantage that as you don't show your identity you can say what your real opinion is.

---

<sup>13</sup> National newspaper. Centre-left oriented.

(G1 – Young, line 234-270)

P3: So, there is no communication, I mean, these are not communication media. What I am saying is that they are information media. They try to use them as communication media because they ask you to vote. So, in this way, there is a feedback from the receiver to the sender, but there is no real communication, today. The only thing that exists is one-way information.

(G2 – Older, line 2031-2037)

Also, both groups still gave great importance to real world and to non-virtual contacts with groups of pairs. They, however, had different views on the future of democracy, because young people were far more optimistic than adults, by betting for a more deliberative and participatory horizon. At present, however, they still had some doubt on the modality with which to spread the participatory culture in the population.

P6: citizens have simply to take up those public Websites because they need to. For instance, a medical appointment, or taking an appointment for making a residence certificate, etc. So the State should force people to take some appointments or use some services through the Internet, it should be mandatory, and precisely this would make people taking up the Internet or the system...those systems...and only in this way we can begin to advance. Once people are used to this, the rest will follow...But for this reason at the same time the State should make a policy for spreading the Internet to every house. And this is not too complicated in Europe...

[...] P8: I don't like the verb 'to force'

[...] P8: But I think there is more, I mean...we must think who the people not very familiar with the Internet are. The majority of people now need it at work; not to mention young people because they all use it very well. The main focus should be on older people and on people with specific conditions that do not easily have access to the Internet, for money problem for instance. ( P1: or rural area where there is no ADSL yet) Also. So the thing to do is simply to make Internet access easier, because then friends, family, etc. ...are those who really tells you “hey, I went online the other day and I bought tickets on the Internet and it is much more handy”, at that point you also try to do it. The only thing that the State can do is to make access easier, through what she was saying, wi-fi and similar, and then, it’s you and inertia of your environment that will make you go online...

(G1 – Young, line 1168-1250)

### *Left and Right Voters*

In the dimension of ideology we wanted to see whether differences existed between right wing voters (the opposition party) and left wing voters (the government party). First of all, groups selected on this dimension appeared to be more techno-savvy than groups based on age. Party voters seemed to display a higher degree of critics, involvement and political knowledge. The complexity of narratives entailed more specific perceptions of the limited uses of the enormous opportunities that ICT allow. We can also notice that the ideological cleavage between right and left voters blurred as their electoral use of ICT – quite limited – increased.

Secondly, voters of both ideologies agreed on the reasons that led parties to develop their cyberstrategies. Participants shared the view that there has been an evolution both in tools and organization dynamics in 2008 compared to the peculiar 2004 campaign. There was a change in

tools from SMS to *Facebook* and another change in mobilization dynamics from grass-root to a more predictable party-control.

Third, they all agreed on evaluations of which party cyberstrategy was more successful and which was not very appropriate (e.g. avatar of Llamazares on *Second Life* was a flop). They also coincided on evaluating the functions that ICT had in campaign (e.g. introducing new topics in electoral agendas) by distinguishing between several models: from the more classical, characterized by a higher control of parties and of conventional media, to a more Net-centred model.

Fourth, an optimistic pro-democracy tone crossed the ideological dimension and it belonged both to left and right voters. Occasionally, voters and sympathizers of PP made more utopian discourses than left voters, while left voters dealt with the opportunity offered by the Net to people that are not used to express their opinion in public because of the relatively recent dictatorship repression.

P5: The democratic experience of France or US has nothing to do with our experience. Our democratic culture is much more recent in this aspect. It's like if we were the II Republic and then now.

[...] P1: We had a dictatorship of forty years...

P8: This is what I was going to say now.

P1: ...and we have a culture very...

P2: It's an educational question.

P8: Well, ok, it's educational; so what I think is that new technologies, a little bit because they don't see your face, make it easier for you to dare a little bit more.

Maybe they could help...

(G4 – Left, line 1136-1170)

P8: Well, yes, new technologies could impact on something: I don't know if they already did it. Before elections, you should be able to give your opinion about the things you thought are important. I don't know, surely if you know about these things...

[...] P5: ...yes, but I also tell you that probably politicians do not pay too much attention to it. Because once discussions are made...

P1: Of course [...] they do not read it, they won't read it, at the end you are left with that feeling. Well, you are participating; you put your proposal and you ask yourself "and who is going to read this?".

P5: Well, yes, they can read it. I think that they do read them, the problem is that once this thing has been done...

(G4 - Left, line 1305-1350)

Participants of this group were also able to elaborate typologies of Net users and activists, which resulted very similar to the typologies outlined by young citizens. In this elaboration right voters seemed to be better expert and have more advanced knowledge of Internet uses. This was also confirmed by the fact that right voters expressed more intense criticism toward not very legitimate uses or not very positive effects of ICT.

Finally, voters of both ideologies were sophisticated in their evaluations; they combined a double discourse, positive and negative, for the effects that ICT had during the 2008 campaign but also for the future of democracy.

P2: But it is very fake, really, I participated in many digital meetings and they did not publish any of my questions, I mean I don't know to whom they publish it, if I had very bad luck, or I am a very bad interviewer, or..., or I have no idea, but this what's happening, if they filter questions, for instance, you are less motivated to..., then on the one hand is obvious, they can not publish all questions, but, this make it less spontaneous, I mean, I think that is fake, it is a good idea, but...

P6: I think that digital meetings usually work in this way...that you send questions and the politician chooses which he wants to answer to.

P7: Damn. I think that the TV programme "*Tengo una pregunta para Usted*"<sup>14</sup> was very good, because questions that people were going to make were not known before [...], so this was very, I mean, that people can make a question and the guy answers, I mean, that they can not filter nor..., as on the Internet.

(G3 – Right, 1473-88)

P5: Well, yes, there you could make questions; me, for instance, in the case of *El Mundo*<sup>15</sup>, I know that in a certain moment there were certain people of one party and certain people of others. They were making questions, and then they ....it was "*live chat at 13*". So they (politicians) were going to answer to these questions. And in this way there is a direct access, citizen with a candidate, that in other forms we know it's impossible.

P4: And for this reason that possibility opened up.

---

<sup>14</sup> "I have a question for you". Spanish TV program broadcasted on *La 1* (national TV channel), in which one hundred ordinary citizens were making live questions to politicians invited to the program.

<sup>15</sup> National newspaper. Centre-right oriented.

P5: And that possibility has been new and obviously, well, about what they answer...well, they are politicians and they answer what they want. Or even you tell them that milk price has risen and they give you macroeconomic data or something like that. It's obvious, but well, the channel for me is good, it is something new that you can talk directly to a candidate and he can answer.

(G4 – Left, line1410-1430)

Since the mix between positive and negative evaluations was quite balanced in both groups, it was not completely clear to state which ideological pole appeared more critical and which more utopian. It seemed that ICT evaluations were quite similar among voters of different parties, but that right voters were slightly more critical about it. Given the nature of the data used this impression is not generalizable, and even if proven in a quantitative analysis, it should be further investigated whether this is mostly due to ideology or to the fact that the party they supported was at the opposition at the time.

### *Conventional and non conventional political action*

In the dimension of activism we wanted to investigate whether differences in uses and meaning attributions of party activists and activists of non conventional politics existed. Their self-reflexive and reciprocal views on political activists were particularly interesting compared to other groups.

First of all, traditional differences among these two groups seems to have blurred because in both cases participants were critical of electoral bureaucracies and of conventional media. Contrarily to what one would expect, *partisan cybervolunteers* did not seem particularly less critical than *social cyberactivists* in their narratives, and within the group it was not possible to

identify clear ideological bias. In the two groups, there was a predominant belief that techno-politics had been excessively exploited in order to obtain votes (electioneering) as well as excessively staged and turned into a show. Sometimes techno-politics was even considered too virtual and merely symbolic.

P8: I believe that the use that parties make of the Internet and I don't know if it is the only use that they can make, is to use it as a showcase. I mean, to really generate political debate within the ideology of a party, inside of...to face any posture, of any opinion, this appears to me totally impossible through the Internet. Impossible simply because the same party would not allow it. They can not allow internal voices that can go against the discourse imposed in a top-down way. Obviously I talk most of all of big parties, I mean, there is a structure and you accept it or not...So, the Internet for them is no more than a showcase in which they try, as we are saying, in a very clumsy way in the majority of cases, to show you their product and see whether you buy it or not, they see if you enter. And also, if you use big media and high budgets they give you a very elaborated aesthetics, and so it seems very nice, but then you look at contents, you use a little bit of interactivity and it is what we are saying. I mean, it's absolutely exasperating...well, you think: what am I doing here losing my time? I visited one of these parties' Webs very occasionally and really, well...I mean you can find documents, but beside those documents that could exist over the history of a party, I don't trust absolutely anything of what I find. And I imagine that they know it,...I don't know...It's because the structure of parties that we have, it has been created and thought when there where no communication media, but, today in some ways, they don't...party structures don't

fit these communication media. I don't think they do. I don't even see an alternative, of course, eh...I have the feeling that everything is quite forced. The political presence on the Internet, so to make...I think you said it before. It is like copying what TV is doing and putting it on the Internet. Just few things more than that... (G6 - Social Cyberactivist, 699-675)

Second, both groups seemed to acknowledge their different functions and their mutual legitimacies within the socio-political context. Yet, some *partisan cybervolunteers* doubted of the independence of *social cyberactivists* from political parties when organizing single-issue campaigns, while, *social cyberactivists* criticized the scant margin of manoeuvre that parties left to *partisan cybervolunteers*.

Third, *social cyberactivists* particularly pointed out the evolution in electoral campaign from bottom-up initiatives of 2004 to parties' top-down strategies of 2008. These activists were self-critical with social uses of the Net: besides identifying "the rewards of cyberactivism" they also remarked its shortcomings, such as misuse, intense emotionality or excessive implication, and gaps in electoral uses of the Internet originated by scant technological literacy together with social stratification.

Fourth, both groups shared negative evaluations of institutional uses of ICT. In their narratives they used terms such as "old", "top-down", "electoral market oriented" and so on. They also agreed on criticizing the opportunistic uses of ICT made by institutions, that happened in three ways: a) the institutional use was limited to electoral periods; b) top-down strategies demobilized people despite of what institutions claimed to do (and this happened most of all compared to the 2004 election determined by bottom-up citizens initiatives); c) Internet contents

and uses were still highly dependent on traditional media events (e.g. TV debate) and limited to drama and spectacularization.

P1: The article that was two days ago in *Periodista Digital*<sup>16</sup> called my attention. It described the panorama, referring strictly to the Internet and its ramifications, claiming that it was a field after the battle, that is, there had been a bombing and a participation, and an incentive to... enormous, but after the day “D” at the hour “H” everybody had left the field and had left it as it was, and this could lead us to think that media are used just for opportunistic purposes, that means, when there is something going on there could be interest because it leads to something, but the phenomenon of using and being involved on the Internet, I don’t see it anywhere.

(G5 - Partisan cybervolunteer, line 339-351)

*Social cyberactivists* showed a slightly stronger critical tone than *partisan cybervolunteers* in this respect and used attributes such as “boring”, “obsolete” and “trivial”, referring to party campaign. As one might expect, due to the progressive bias of this group, these terms were used particularly when referring to the use of ICT mainly made by the PP, but they were also critical with the PSOE.

Fifth, *social cyberactivists* made clear evaluations of party-electoral fields while *partisan cybervolunteers* showed well developed critical abilities when talking about their own organizations because of different expectations. Before to join the campaign (a) they wanted to have more information and knowledge in the campaign, but they only received guidelines and orders; (b) they wanted to widen their participation, but what was mainly asked to them was to

---

<sup>16</sup> Online national newspaper

manipulate online surveys; (c) they wanted to spread the campaign within society but they assisted to a process of professionalization.

P8 : At least within the two main parties yes, obviously, those that signed up for the Popular cybervolunteers and those that signed up for the Progressive cybervolunteers did not sign up to be used [...], I mean, they signed up because they were hoping that parties could tell them more things, I mean, they thought they would receive messages, and they would feel part of the campaign by activating campaign in society.

P2: Exactly, after each TV debate there was this “go online at *Cuatro* and do that”, or “ at *Sexta*<sup>17</sup>, or I don’t know”, something like this, of course, just to express your opinion on who won the debate, Zapatero, or Rajoy or something like this, it’s true that there has been some top-down direction here [...]

(G5 - Partisan cybervolunteers, line 2178-97)

Finally, *social cyberactivists* had clear views of the progress made by the ‘new right’, engaged in a permanent ‘social campaign’ since 2004, trying to imitate the experience of the ‘alternative left’. This view was partially shared by left *partisan cybervolunteers*. Yet, *social cyberactivists* also highlighted the fact that the ‘new right’ was seen at the same time as controlled or manoeuvred from the top and as partially independent from political elites, sometimes even with different goals and interpretations of reality. It would have been interesting to investigate more in depth this point, by taking into account self-reflective views of conservative *social cyberactivists* linked to the ‘new right’ in order to understand if party

---

<sup>17</sup> *Cuatro* and *Sexta* are two national TV channels

connections existed between the PP and these types of movements, quite new to the Spanish political environment. Unfortunately, this analysis could not be done in the current study because in the research design of discussion groups we did not take into account this typology of actors.

### General Conclusions

In this paper through the analysis of six discussion groups with different typologies of citizens in society, we addressed three main questions related to the last Spanish electoral campaign: the generational digital divide, the differences in discourses between right wing voters, and left wing voters, and the differences between NSM and political parties' online activists.

In order to put our qualitative data into perspective, we report here few findings of the quantitative part of this study, based on a national survey with Internet users. In line with similar studies in Western countries mentioned above, it is only a minority, but a very active one that consumes electoral information and participates politically online. Ordinary citizens use several media sources to get electoral information online, but give priority to traditional offline sources, while the political uses of the Internet do not increase with the number of tools offered. Finally, with the increasing penetration of ICT there has not been the feared decline in offline personal interactions.

We can now draw few general conclusions from the analysis of data reported above. First of all, we did not find a clear distinction between technophiles and technophobes. Rather there were interesting combinations of both postures. While on the one side, participants of the six groups subscribed a posture that we could call 'prodemocratic', on the other side they pointed out clear limits of ICT. With 'prodemocratic' we mean that citizens consider that the Net could intensify and generalize - according to someone it already did - citizen's political participation; this could happen in certain processes (e.g. electoral proposals, law initiatives, control of public

policies) or in certain social sectors (e.g. integration, most of all, of the new generations of voters to the campaign and to politics). Yet, the main limitation of the Internet is its truly “virtual” character, since its impact is reduced by several factors. It was widely recognized by participants a poor or unequal penetration. They made allusions to the technological gap, to the fact that certain social sectors or rural area are not reached by the Internet yet, to digital illiteracy of older generations, to the scant interest in ICT of parties and of citizens, and to the poor participatory culture of the Spanish population.

Second, we did not find discourses or views of strictly technological determinism that go beyond the factual ascertainment of the increasing importance of the Net during the last election and among young voters. The majority of groups and participants took the distance from *apriori* pessimism or optimism. According to the use that citizens and parties make of ICT, they give more importance to positive or negative aspects of technopolitics. Among positive features they identified more open and more inclusive political agendas, in terms of issues and of electoral sectors. Among negative features they named the virtuality of ICT – with a merely symbolic and expressive function, without real effects - and, to a lesser extent, the increasing spectacularization and negativism of politics online. However, it is important to highlight that while positive features were ascribed to technological characteristics (e.g. easiness of access, interactivity, instantaneity), the negative characteristics were related to incorrect uses or to the scant political culture of Spain, not very participatory and more inclined to conflict than to agreement.

Third, the more participants had clearly defined ideological tendencies or socio-political activism, the more they were able to make in-depth and detailed analysis of cyberpolitics; as logical, this was the result of a more intense experience with ICT and of higher knowledge of the use their party made of media during campaign. This was somehow predictable. Yet, the acknowledgement of the structure and of the political-informative ecosystem in the age groups

was greater than what we expected: for instance participants recognized the importance of having the support of big corporative media in order for the initiatives, arisen from and on the Internet, to impact the population. They pointed out the hierarchic and bureaucratic obstacles placed by parties to a more in-depth development of ICT and they talked about frauds that anonymity allows (e.g. increase the number of activists by using several nicknames for the same person).

Fourth, all groups were able to formulate quite similar typologies of the most active users of the Net; this supposes a quite high degree of knowledge and level of analysis. As written above, they distinguished profiles of users according to several criteria, such as the autonomy or dependency from parties and conventional media, the expressive or instrumental-strategic goals, the consistency or coherence of their participation, etc., that we classified under the four general dimensions of *NSM politics*, *party politics*, *entertainment* and *self-expression*. Moreover, the resources available to the most active participants on the one side were described as in line with literature on traditional offline participation (e.g. resources of time are very important). On the other, it seems that the level of technical skills required to participate is not too high and it might be less an obstacle to equality than what forecasted from some scholar.

Fifth, we could also find a general evaluation among all groups and participants over the effectiveness and opportunity created by certain electoral strategies employed during the campaign. For instance, almost all groups pointed out the strategic error that supposed using *Second Life* for presenting republican proposal of IU through a virtual world. They also reported the confusion provoked during the last electoral debate by president Zapatero when he went back on the promise of uploading on the Net in less than 24 hours a document<sup>18</sup> supporting the economic data he was showing. Or, finally, there was almost a general agreement on the fact that the Internet had been an advantage for small political parties that were almost about to obtain

---

<sup>18</sup> Zapatero's white book

parliamentary representation for the first time. They also acknowledged, however, that the strength of these parties would have not been enough if they did not count with the support of big media and recognized journalists.

Sixth, in the cyberactivists typologies and the evaluations of their effectiveness, the generational, ideological (left/right) or activist (*social cyberactivism/party cybervolunteers*) dimensions did not seem to have much importance. It is true that among young people, left voters and *social cyberactivists* we found more optimistic, deliberative and participatory views of political uses and models of democracies allowed by ICT. Yet, generations of adults and older people, conservative voters and *party cybervolunteers* also partially shared this view, even though with more caution.

Seventh and very important point, the ‘prodemocratic’ evaluation that citizens made of ICT went together with a critical positioning of the bureaucratic incorporation and party uses of the Net. The tone and forcefulness of the critics increased as a consequence of more knowledge and techno-political use. One of the most interesting things we could find in the discussions of groups was the agreement of complaints made by *partisan cybervolunteers* over the passive subordinate and even fraudulent role that was made of their participation in the campaign. They denounced that their participation has been limited to the electoral time and it was aimed, for the most, at manipulating online vote for deciding the winner of TV debates. In this respect the difference between the *cybervolunteers* of PSOE/IU and PP were almost negligible. This would imply the existence of shared autonomous and critical judgments toward the electoral bureaucracies, regardless of political affiliation. The agreement emerged mostly from similar experiences and to more intense uses of the Internet. On the same line, *party cybervolunteers* and *social cyberactivists* agreed on many aspects. Besides the mutual recognition of the legitimacy of their electoral contribution, they both pointed out the limitations imposed by party organizations to

citizens participation, the poor use they made of the potentialities of ICT and the virtuality - once more, the merely symbolic level - of many initiatives.

In short, we can say that participants of the six groups viewed the Internet as part of the world, not as a separate world. Citizens seemed to ascribe a revitalizer or 'prodemocratic' effect directly to ICT. Yet the *technological determinism* did not seem anything more than the recognition of the unquestionable potentials that increased transparency and more intense electoral participation would provoke. This is so because the Spanish people we analyzed thought that cyberdemocracy is not - and should not be - a separate world, with its own rules, autonomous dynamics and pre-fixed meanings and effects. Uses and limitations of the Net, as well as horizons of its democratic contribution must also be considered in a country with a traditionally poor political culture and a specific political-informative system.

Participants acknowledged that techno-political applications are ultimately modeled both by party bureaucracies and by voters, but the former have a quite higher power in this respect. This seemed to be the general conclusion of the majority of participants in all groups, aware as they were of their minor margin of maneuver and of the subordinate character of the role assigned to them. The best example of this were the guidelines given by parties to *cybervolunteers* in order to manipulate online voting for choosing the winner of TV debates. Groups identified three characteristics concerning (online) voting,,: virtuality (merely symbolic), fraudulence (multiple suffrage of one person, hidden by anonymity) and no guarantee of validity. The perception of this basic tool for participatory expression highlighted up to what point the possibilities for a cyberdemocracy are distorted

The concluding remark is that, although differences among groups in society still exist, it appears that the Internet is slowly merging differences and blurring traditional barriers among groups in the dimension of age, ideology and activism. These results are further confirmed from

the quantitative findings of this research (presented elsewhere), but are able to give us more insights and in-depth views of different groups' narratives and meaning attribution of the political uses of the Internet in the Spanish election of 2008. Further studies should repeat this kind of research in other Southern European countries in order to see whether major differences exist in pace and effects of ICT use on comparable media -political contexts.

## References

Bannon, D. (2004). Relationship marketing and the political process. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 4(2/3), 85-102.

Bennett, W. L. (2003). New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism. In N. Couldry, & J. Curran (Eds.), *Contesting Media Power* (pp.17-37). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bimber, B. & Davis, R. (2003). *Campaigning on line: the Internet in the US elections*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cappella, J. N. & Jamieson, K. H. (1997). *Spiral of cynicism. The press and the public good*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chadwick, A. (2006). *Internet politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cunha, C., Martin, I., Newell J. & Ramiro, L. (2003). Southern European parties and party systems, and the new ICTs. In: R. Gibson, P. Nixon, & S. Ward (Eds.), *Political parties and the Internet: net gain?* (pp 70-97). London and New York: Routledge,.

Curtice, J. & Norris, P. (2004). E-politics? The impact of the Internet in political trust and participation. In: A. Park, J. Curtice, et al. (Eds.), *British social attitudes. The 21<sup>st</sup> report* (pp. 99-118). London: Sage.

Dahlgreen, P. (2003). Reconfiguring civic culture in the new media milieu. In: J. Corner, & D. Pels (Eds.), *Media and the restyling of politics: consumers, celebrity and cynicism* (pp 151-170). London: Sage.

Morgan, D. L. & Krueger, R. A. (1993). *When to use focus groups and why. Successful focus groups: advancing the state of the art*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Norris, P. (2000). A Virtuous Circle? The impact of Party Organization and the News media on Civic Engagement in Post-Modern Campaigns. Proceedings of the ECPR Joint Workshops on 'Do Campaigns Matter?'; 14-18th April 2000; Copenhagen, Denmark.

Norris, P. (2005). The impact of the Internet on political activism: evidence from Europe. *International Journal of Electronic Government Research*, 1(1), 20-39.

Norris, P., Walgrave, S., & Van Aelst, P. (2005). Who demonstrates? Anti-State Rebels, Conventional Participants, or Everyone? *Comparative Politics*, 37(2), 189-205.

Norris, P., & Curtice, J. (2008). Getting the message out: A two-step model of the role of the Internet in Campaign Communication Flows During the 2005 British General Election. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 4(4), 3-13.

Patterson, T. E. (2002). *The vanishing voter. Public involvement in an age of uncertainty*. New York: Vintage Books.

Putnam, R. ( 2000). *'Bowling alone': The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Sampedro, V., & Seoane, F. (2008). The 2008 Spanish general elections: the campaign in the media. *International Journal of Press/Politics*.

Stromer-Galley, J. (2000). On-line interaction and why candidates avoid it. *Journal of Communication*, 50(4): 111–132.

Ward, S., Gibson, R., & Nixon, P. (2003). Parties and the Internet: An Overview. In: R. Gibson, P. Nixon, & S. Ward (Eds.), *Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?* (pp. 11–38). London, New York: Routledge.

Ward, S., & Vedel, T. (2006). Introduction: the potential of the Internet revisited. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59(2): 210–225.

## Author Note

Víctor Sampedro

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

Víctor Sampedro is Associate Professor at the Rey Juan Carlos University of Madrid. He received his PhD from the Complutense University of Madrid, a master's degree in Mass Communications from Northwestern University, and a master's degree in Social Sciences from the March Institute of Madrid. His research interests include (new) media and social movements, political communication and electoral processes, mediated collective identities and memories. Contact: [victor.sampedro@urjc.es](mailto:victor.sampedro@urjc.es); [www.victorsampedro.net](http://www.victorsampedro.net)

Monica Poletti

Università degli Studi di Milano

Monica Poletti is a Phd Candidate at the Graduate School in Social, Economics and Political Sciences of the University of Milan, and is collaborating at the Rey Juan Carlos University of Madrid. She holds a Research Master degree in Political Communication from ASCoR (Amsterdam School of Communications Research). Her research interests include (new) media and political participation, social movements, political communication and electoral processes. Contact: [monica.poletti@unimi.it](mailto:monica.poletti@unimi.it)

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Víctor Sampedro. URJC. Camino del Molino s/n. E28943 Fuenlabrada. Madrid, Spain. Email: [victor.sampedro@urjc.es](mailto:victor.sampedro@urjc.es)

## Tables

Table 1  
*Composition of discussion groups*

Dimension	Group	Name of group	Composition	Political affinities
Age	G1	Young	18-40 y.	Right and left wing
	G2	Older	more than 40 y.	Right and left wing
Ideology	G3	Right Voters	Opposition party (PP)	Right wing
	G4	Left Voters	Government party (PSOE-IU)	Left wing
Activism	G5	Partisan Cybervolunteers	Conventional politics (Parties)	Right and left wing
	G6	Social Cyberactivists	Non conventional politics (NSM)	NSMs

Notes: all discussion groups were carried out on March 2008