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Information, issues, and supporters: The application of online persuasion in the 2015 General Election

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Abstract

This paper explores how political parties use their websites to persuade visitors during the 2015 UK General Election campaign. The home pages of forty one party websites were assessed. The findings suggest that parties view visitors as rationally assessing material, not emotionally, thus the content provides information and seeks to mobilise support and generate resources. However, application of Nielsen's F-pattern finds that these are precisely the areas within a website most likely to be placed beyond where visitors will look. Simple changes in design structure, the use of emotional messages and short cuts should make party websites more persuasive.

Key words: political persuasion, F-pattern, UK General Elections, online persuasion, party websites, 2015 UK General Election.

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Information, issues and supporters: the application of online persuasion in the 2015 General Election⁽¹⁾

Introduction

The Internet has been used in election campaigns since the 1992 US Presidential election, and was first used in the UK for the 1997 General Election (Ward and Gibson 1998). The research on the use of websites in UK elections (Ward and Gibson 1998; Coleman 2001; Coleman and Ward 2005; Jackson 2006; Pack 2010; Lilleker and Jackson 2011) has focused on the provision of information and the level of interaction. This literature reflects an orthodoxy that stresses why and how political actors have and use a website. An alternative interpretation is that political parties view their websites not just to provide information, but also as persuasive tools. This paper seeks to assess whether political parties used their websites as persuasive tools during the 2015 UK General Election campaign.

Persuasion theory

While there is no single agreed definition of persuasion (Stiff and Mongeau 2003), we can suggest that it is a process by which someone (a persuader) seeks to change the behaviour of another person (the persuadee) via some form of communication. It is a reasonable proposition to suggest that persuasion is central to the political process. Persuasion has been applied to the political process in a number of contexts. Consistent with traditional political science is a study by Goot and Scalmer (2013) who assessed the role of persuasion in the Australian 1951 Referendum to ban communism, which the No campaign won. They ascribe this

success to the fact that the No campaign mobilised their core Labor voters, and attracted some Liberals. They argued that this was achieved by targeting public meetings in key geographic areas, and using effective rhetoric. A more media-effects approach was taken by Enikolopv, Petrova and Zhuravskaya (2011), who found that access to independent, as opposed to only government controlled, television impacted on voting behaviour. Where an alternative source of television existed then overall turnout for the 1999 Russian parliamentary elections decreased by 3.8%, and at the same time increased the vote for the major opposition parties by 6.3%. This therefore codified the effects of one media in Russia during these elections, and if television has such persuasive effects other media such as web technologies may also.

A number of studies have more overtly applied persuasion theory to politics. Thus Chebat, Filiatrault and Perrien (1990) used a study of 381 respondents in Canada to suggest that source credibility was important irrespective of whether the individual had high or low involvement in an issue. This is clearly consistent with Aristotle's writings on rhetoric when he suggested that probably the most important factor of rhetoric (persuasion) is *ethos*, the credibility of the message sender. Dewan, Humphreys and Rubenson (2014) tested *ethos* but also Aristotle's two other factors *logos* (the message) and *pathos* (the audience), using data from the British Columbians for Single Transferable Vote to test the effect of three factors: different messages; different campaigners; and endorsement by public figures. They found that being canvassed did persuade voters, and that they responded to arguments and endorsements, but that the characteristics of the persuaders (the canvassers) had little impact.

Thaler and Sunstein (2009) suggest that in making everyday decisions most of us are like the cartoon character *Homer Simpson*, prone to spontaneity and influenced by emotion, with only a few like Star Trek's *Mr Spock* making rational well-considered decisions. This analogy may have a clear application to politics, whether emotion or rational cognitive thought shapes voting decisions. At the end of the 2014 Scottish Referendum campaign arguably for the voters of the Yes campaign their heart (emotion) played a greater role, and for the No campaign the head (rational) was dominant. American psychologist Drew Westen writing in the *Political Brain* (2007) found that when reason and emotion collide in politics, emotion invariably wins. This would suggest that emotive messages rather than rational messages could be more likely to be effective in affecting voter's behaviour.

Conceptual Framework

This research project seeks to assess how political parties used their websites as persuasive tools during the 2015 UK General Election campaign. To triangulate data we shall operationalise a conceptual framework based on three different approaches. Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a widely applied traditional persuasion theory, whereas gamification and the F-pattern have been developed to explain how persuasion operates within websites. It was decided to test three as this should provide a depth of analysis for what is a small sample. While other models could have been used ELM was chosen because it is one of the most cited models used within persuasion research. Gamification has become a buzz word in recent years and most comment on its political application has been by journalists, so this opened up a possible new seam of material. The F-pattern was chosen because it

offered a scientific approach not yet tested in the political sphere. There has been limited or no testing of these models using content analysis with the context of elections.

ELM (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) is one of the most popular persuasion theories. It suggests that whether a message is persuasive is dependent upon the likelihood the receiver will think about (elaborate) the information received. The degree of elaboration is shaped by two factors:

- The receiver's motivation for engaging with the message. This is based on two possible receiver characteristics. First, the personal relevance of the topic, so someone not normally interested in politics might take little notice, conversely someone very interested in politics will seek out information on that topic. However, interest alone is unlikely to be enough, the need for cognition is also important. Some people have a higher cognition need, and enjoy thinking and so are more likely to take in the detail of messages.
- The second factor is the message receiver's ability to engage with the message. Two characteristics affect their ability to receive a message, distraction and prior knowledge. So are they concentrating on the message, and do they have some understanding of it?

ELM focuses on how receivers process a message. During an election campaign the motivation of party website visitors may be different from between campaigns.

In terms of how a political actor will seek to persuade, ELM identifies two different approaches depending on the receiver's motivation and ability to process the

information. The first path is the central route which is aimed at those with high involvement in a message or topic. During an election campaign this would be those citizens who are interested in politics, elections, parties or their local candidates. Because they are interested, high involvers are more likely to invest thought in the features and consequences of the message. Thus, the sender of the message should provide information on the product, such as party policies. Quantitative and/or qualitative supporting data is likely to be offered as to why to adopt the product/policy/party. We assume that the central route implies a rational (head) approach, noted earlier.

The other approach, the peripheral route, is for those with a lower involvement (interest) in the topic or product. There is less elaboration and product related thoughts are much shallower. As a consequence, the message sender is more likely to focus on non-product information such as whether we like someone, so they may stress attractive personal traits about themselves, or they are a celebrity. In terms of the communication tool used to deliver the message it could be that a pleasing design is used. In other words, the peripheral route requires cues outside of the product/policy/party to attract attention. This implies a link to the emotional (heart) approach.

In the political sphere, Capelos (2010) adapts these two routes by referring to sophisticates who know a lot about politics and novices who know little, with the former requiring the central route and the latter the peripheral. Kinder (1986) suggests that it is easier to remember the personality than the political programme. If so, this suggests that for the novices, during an election campaign Chaiken's

(1982) heuristics is applicable. Chaiken suggests that we are information misers, making decisions that require little or no information processing. Therefore, the emphasis is not on the message itself, but peripheral cues such as the source credibility, likeability and whether there is a consensus of what to think/do. Heuristics are simple rules that enable voters to evaluate a message, i.e. who to vote for, without having to scrutinise them.

The first specifically internet based part of our framework, the F-pattern, explains how we read a website. Eye tracking research suggests that a web page is read through an F-shape (Nielsen 2006) which means that only certain parts of the page is noticed by the visitor. Nielsen's data was visualised through a heat map, where the areas the retina in the eye focuses on most are coloured red or orange, with blue being where there is limited focus and grey none. The idea is that only that part of the website which is coloured red or orange/yellow is persuasive. The F-pattern is suggested as a fairly consistent way in which visitors look at websites. The first movement is horizontal, usually across the upper part of the content, this is the F's top bar. Then users move down a bit and read a second, smaller, horizontal indent. Finally, visitors look at the left hand of the page in a vertical movement to create the F's stem. There are clearly limitations with this approach, for example, it does not take into account what people take in through peripheral vision, but it does provide a means for understanding how a visitor reads a web page.

The last part of the conceptual framework is gamification, which seeks to apply features from online games to a website to enhance the relationship between host and visitor. One of the most popular definitions of gamification is provided by

Deterding, Nixon, Khaled and Nacke (2011, p10) “Gamification is the use of game design elements in non-game contexts.” Therefore, Seaborn and Fels (2015) suggest that it provides web visitors a ‘gameful experience.’ Marketers are interested in gamification because it is considered a means of enhancing user engagement and retention (Hamari, Koivisto and Pakkanen 2014; Deterding *et al* 2011). Gamification is about motivation, why visit and stay on a website, it is reward-based and so an extrinsic not intrinsic form of motivation. Although Nicholson (2012) complains of ‘pointification’, we can identify common approaches to the design of such websites. Assessing twenty four empirical studies of gamification Hamari *et al* (2014) found the three most popular elements within such websites were points, leader boards and badges. The user either gets a direct reward such as a badge or seeks to either compete against others and/or progress (flow) upwards within the site. While most of the research focuses on education and health, Mahnic (2014) suggests that gamification can encourage political participation by rewarding users’ contributions.

Method

This project addressed how political parties used their websites to persuade visitors to change their behaviour (voting). The objectives are:

- To assess whether party websites use the central or peripheral route of persuasion;
- To assess if political party websites use features of games;
- To assess whether political parties design their website using an F-pattern.

The General Election campaign started on Tuesday 31st March, finishing on Thursday 7th May 2015. Data was collected from 16th April until 23rd April, this time period was chosen because it enabled each party to have set up its website, but was far enough away from any possible changes for getting-out-the-vote on Election Day.

The sample was chosen from those parties which would have at the very least some basic structure, and were not the pet projects of one individual, or a small geographical area as might happen with a residents based party. According to the website Your Next MP.com (2015) forty one parties (see Appendix A) fielded at least 3 or more candidates in Great Britain during the 2015 UK General Election campaign. The websites of the eighty parties contesting only one or two seats were omitted. These are likely to be very small parochial parties, probably local pressure groups or with very limited organisation. Due to the unique nature of electoral politics in Northern Ireland the parties from this part of the UK were also omitted from the project.

Two variables were tested, the type (size) of party and ideology. Type of party was divided into three, with major being the three largest parliamentary parties, minor were all the other parties with parliamentary representation⁽²⁾, and fringe being all the other parties with no parliamentary representation. There were 3 major, 5 minor and 33 fringe parties. Jackson (2006) identified fringe parties as those with representation in government outside of parliament, who usually had a structure similar in nature to that of parliamentary parties. He also identified hopeful parties who tended to be based around one person or a very local campaign. The

requirement for fighting at least 3 seats omitted these parties as they would have skewed the results.

While it has been noted that the far right have been quick to adopt the web (Copsey 2003), two studies suggest that it has been the left-wing parties who have made most progress with the Internet. Looking at four European countries Sudulich (2009) found that left-wing parties were more likely to be interactive. Assessing the 2007 French Presidential election, (Lilleker and Malagon 2010) found that the left-wing Segolene Royal offered more than the right wing Nicholas Sarkozy. Ideology is the party's position on a left-right continuum on the socio-economic axis according to EUprofiler (www.euprofiler.eu/). Ideology was divided into far right, right, centre, left, and far left and unclear (with 2 parties classified as unclear). This will allow us to identify whether not just left or right is more likely to use their website as a persuasive tool, but also to differentiate between those that are in the centre, right, centre and left, and those at the extremes the far right and far left.

Two different methods were utilised. A coding sheet operationalised the testing of ELM and Gamification (see Appendix B). Because there were only forty one sites a single coder was used. The content analysis was of only each website's Home Page, as this is where a party should be expected to put its most persuasive messages and features.

The second method was to test whether applying the F-pattern explains the impact of the design of party websites in maximising their persuasive effect. A screenshot of each party's Home Page on the 23rd April 2015 was taken, and first the key

messages in the whole of the page were identified. Then an F-pattern template was placed over the screenshot to identify which messages were covered only within this space. This would identify whether the party's had designed their website in the form of an F-pattern, or key messages were in the bottom right of the page and probably being ignored by visitors.

Findings and analysis

There is more evidence for parties using the central route of persuasion than the peripheral when constructing the content of their websites. Table 1 identifies that the most popular features are being issues-based, this focus on information is consistent with existing research on how parties use their websites (Coleman and Ward 2005; Stanyer 2005; Lilleker and Jackson 2011). However, parties are less clear when using some of the means of creating a persuasive argument. Providing quantitative data in the form of statistics to support rational argument, or more qualitative case studies to provide 'flavour' are less overtly used. Table 2 shows that, with the exception of video/music, parties are far less likely to attempt to use the peripheral route as a means of influencing their audience. Overall, parties do not stress their credibility in the form of what they have previously done, nor stress the capabilities of their leading politicians. Parties appear to assume that visitors to their website are Capelos's sophisticates rather than novices, with the stress on rational than emotive argument.

Insert table 1 here please

Insert table 2 here please

Looking at our two variables, type of party and ideology, we see that size has some impact. In terms of the central route size seems to matter. Major parties record 100% for each of the five features, except for case studies where only one of the three does. The fringe parties are much less likely to use a rational central based approach, recording 94% for being issue-based, 18% for offering quantitative data, 21% for case studies, and in the low sixties for both more information being available and offering a clear message. Fringe parties are much less likely to seek to use the central route than minor and major parties. This finding that size matters is very consistent with the orthodox view of 'normalisation', that the greater resources of larger parties mean they can better use the technology.

The impact of ideology on the use of the central route is less clear, indeed only two features seem to have some impact. Those most likely to use quantitative data are in the middle of the spectrum, so 20% of the right, 30% of the centre and 38% of the left as opposed to 0% of the far right and 14% of the far left. However, with the use of case studies, parties on the right are more likely to use these than the centre or left. Thus 50% of the far right and 40% of the right parties use this approach whereas 30% of the centre, 23% of the left and 14% of the far left do. Overall, the figures are skewed a little by the fact that the 2 unclear parties, also probably the smallest, are least likely to offer any of these approaches. We do not find that one ideology is inherently more likely to use the central route than another.

There is very limited evidence that size influences the use of the peripheral route to persuasion. Major parties are the most likely to offer all the features, except for personal attributes and humour. Minor parties are most likely to refer to personal attributes and fringe parties are the least likely to offer three of the features, and are the only ones who may use humour. Equally, ideology appears to have very little influence as the only pattern is for credibility that the middle parties are more likely to use than the extreme. Thus, we find 20% of the right, 30% of the centre and 31% of the left and none at all for the far right or far left. The nature of the parties seems to have limited influence on the use of the peripheral route.

The evidence in table 3 suggests that parties did not use their websites to create gameful experiences. There is one single exception to this, the Conservative Party. The Conservatives approach was to target their own supporter's by creating competitions, league tables and offered prizes. They operated a points scheme, Share the Facts (www.conservatives.com/ShareTheFacts), designed to encourage interaction and amplification of their online campaign. Those who signed up would get points, for example, for sharing posts or when others responded to them. Every fortnight the top twenty point scorers on the leader board won a prize. This 'game' encouraged supporters to disseminate online the Party's key messages. This was using persuasion not as a vote winner, but as a mobilising tool.

Insert table 3 here please

As there is only one party, the Conservatives, which offers a gameful experience, neither size of party nor its ideology has any impact on the use of this approach. Rather the Conservatives are an outlier.

Applying the F-pattern

We must assume that for each party the information, images, videos and messages they place on their home page are the key points they wish to get across. Looking at the home pages we identify certain classifications which parties wish to stress. These were grouped into five different categories: branding; information; images; people; and calls to action. Branding is the use of colour, the party logo and strapline. Information includes policy documents, manifestos and campaigns. Images are the pictures and videos either of themselves in action, or people supporting them. People is their activists, leading politicians and during the context of an election their Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs). The calls to action are to get someone to do something, these have included making a pledge to vote for the party (UKIP), answering a survey question whether they will be voting (Labour) through to donating money, volunteering to help or subscribing to emails.

Assuming that Nielsen's (2006) F-pattern is correct for how we read websites, then most political party websites do not apply this. Of the 41 websites studied only in 13 of the sites were the messages highlighted on the whole page all visible when an F-pattern template was added. What we do not know is whether for the 13 this was a happy accident or a deliberate design decision. The remaining 28 parties lost at least one important feature when an F-pattern template was placed over the site. This

suggests that these 28 parties are not fully applying an F-pattern in designing their web pages. Given that their home page is likely to be their most persuasive page, this might suggest that parties are not maximising the persuasive effect of their website.

Assessing the five classifications it is clear that one is the most likely to be placed beyond the F-pattern and so possibly ignored: information. There are twelve instances where information was 'lost' outside of the F-pattern, which included in three websites the manifesto, presumably the most important new policy document a party produces within the context of an election. The next most affected characteristic is the calls to action with seven instances which includes asking people to join the party or donate. Of the remaining three classifications, while the logo of every site is positioned clearly within the F-pattern, six sites do not place the strapline in a highly visible place. With six sites the images also become difficult to see, which includes one Party Election Broadcast video. In only two sites are people, be it PPCs or party leaders, placed outside of the F-pattern. The literature suggests that the main purpose of an election website is to promote information about a party (Ward and Gibson 1998; Coleman 2001; Coleman and Ward 2005; Stanyer 2005), and yet by not following Nielsen's F-pattern over a quarter of our sample have limited the effect of their message. Moreover, if a secondary purpose has been to mobilise support (Jackson 2007; Lilleker and Jackson 2011), at least 7 parties have placed some of their calls to action in parts of their websites likely to be ignored by visitors. Simple design changes could make the websites of the 28 more persuasive.

Discussion and Conclusion

The key limitation to this project has been the size of the sample and that it was a snap shot during a short campaign. A larger sample and a longitudinal study that returns to sites over a longer period of time, and outside of an election, may generate more accurate data. By its very nature this project can only interpret what parties are trying to achieve online, and future research should ask the parties what they are trying to achieve and whether this tallies with what their websites are actually doing. In addition, using eye-tracking technology will triangulate whether visitors are actually looking at what the parties want them to look at.

This paper sought to assess whether political parties were using their websites as persuasive tools. The answer is broadly yes, though with caveats. Of the three models we tested there is most evidence that parties are following the central route of persuasion within ELM. This assumes that web visitors have high involvement/interest in the 2015 General Election, and so stresses the importance of providing information. This is precisely what most of the parties do by offering clear information about themselves, people, campaigns and policies. This is the opposite to what Westen (2007) suggests with his emphasis on emotional appeals. There is very limited evidence that parties use the peripheral route of ELM, they do not appear to assume that web visitors have low involvement/interest in the 2015 General Election. As a result there is very limited use of heuristic short cuts to influence web visitors.

With only the Conservative Party as an outlier there is no evidence of gamification. This raises the question of whether the Conservatives are an early adopter and others will soon follow, or that this was a one-off experiment that the Conservatives will not repeat?

Probably the most interesting and practical findings for the parties themselves are to be found with the application of the F-pattern. We have already noted above that two themes dominate how parties appear to use their websites as persuasive tools: sources of information; and resource mobilisation tools. However, when we apply the F-pattern template we note that over two-thirds of parties do not conform to it, which matters when we look at what is contained in the areas beyond the F. We identified five categories of what each home page contained, and found that the category most likely to be beyond the F, and so not looked at by visitors, was information. The second most likely omission outside the F-pattern are the calls to action, most of which relate to resource generation. Therefore, we see that the two reasons parties primarily use their websites are precisely the two that are most likely to fall outside of the F. This fact should undermine the persuasive impact of these websites, which simple design changes that reflect how visitors read websites should address.

Two variables were assessed, size of party and ideology. The normalisation hypothesis suggests that technologies are more likely to be adopted by those with greatest resources. Our findings generally support this, with the major parties most likely to record more of each feature in the coding sheet, then the minor parties with the fringe normally the least. These findings are especially the case with the central

route to persuasion. Ideology has marginal effect, and there is no consistent pattern of left, right or centre parties being more or less likely to apply persuasion theory.

Where Capelos (2010) argued voters can be divided into 'sophisticates' and 'novices', we suggest that the view of political parties to their website visitors is different. The key difference appears to be whether parties' visitors voting behaviour is shaped by their head or heart. If we assume that the central route equates to the head, the evidence is that parties consider political persuasion be based on presenting rational argument, and that it is as much about generating resources as it is votes. A more heart (emotional) based approach as implied by the peripheral route, is at best a secondary approach. However, the impact of this approach is undermined by a limited understanding of the F-pattern, and how web visitors view websites. Design changes should enable parties to more effectively reach and mobilise the rational voter. For parties political persuasion is not a function of soft persuasion such as credibility, liking and heuristics, rather it is hard persuasion based on information and ideas. Whereas the most persuasive approach may be to provide websites containing both head (central route) and heart (peripheral route) messages.

It is reasonable to assume that political parties would utilise all the approaches open to them in terms of persuading voters and supporters. However, the evidence of the 2015 UK General Election is that with their websites the parties deliberately narrowed their choices. We suggest that there are three different factors parties needed to consider. The first was the overall message philosophy, would they take a rational or an emotional approach? This would probably shape the second,

namely would the content be information based (hard persuasion), or heuristic (soft persuasion) focused? Lastly, who was the key audience, supporters or voters? A very possible, and probably sensible approach, would be to cover all the bases and seek to achieve all of these. Whereas, rather surprisingly, for the first two factors the parties appear to have plumped for one approach rather than the other, namely rational and providing information. They seem to view their web visitors as *Mr Spock*' looking for detailed information, rather than *Homer Simpson* seeking to limit the cognitive effort of deciding who to vote for (Thaler and Sunstein 2009). It is only with the last factor where they may have sought to reach both audiences, though the emphasis appears to be more on supporters than voters. Online political persuasion during the election campaign was a limited practice centred on policy statements, statistics and visual information. It appeared aimed more at reaching inwards to those who had a prior connection to the party. Political parties did not appear to view their websites as the Holy Grail to win undecided voters.

Footnotes

- 1) Support for this research was provided by an institutional grant
- 2) This classification has a one single MP party. George Galloway was the leader and only MP for the Respect Party.

Appendix A List of Parties

Above and Beyond
Alliance For Green Socialism
Independence from Europe Party
All Peoples Party
Animal Welfare party
British national party
CISTA (Cannabis is Safer than Alcohol)
Christian Party Proclaiming Christ's Lordship Party
Christian Peoples Alliance
Class War
Communist party of Britain
Communities United party
Conservative Party
English Democrats
Green party
Labour party
Left unity
Liberal party
Liberal Democrats
Liberty
Lincolnshire Independents
Mebyon Kernow
National Front
National Health Action Party
North East party
Northern Party
Official Monster Raving Looney Party
Peace party
Plaid Cymru
Pirate party
Reality Party
Respect
Scottish Socialist Party
Socialist Labour Party
Socialist Party of Great Britain
Scottish National Party (SNP)
Trade Union and Socialist Coalition
United Kingdom Independence party (UKIP)
Whigs
Workers Revolutionary Party
Yorkshire First

Appendix B Coding Sheet

Feature	Present (yes/no)
ELM central	
Issue-based	
Use of quantitative data	
Use of case studies	
More information available	
Clear message of why to vote for them	
ELM Peripheral	
Stress credibility	
Use of humour	
Celebrity endorsement	
Personal attributes	
Use of video/music	
Gamification	
Points available	
Badges awarded	
Levels/competition/leaders' board	
Games to play	

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Table 1 ELM central route of persuasion

Feature	Frequency present
Issue-based	39 (95.1%)
Use of quantitative data	13 (31.7%)
Use of case studies	11 (26.8%)
More information available	28 (68.3%)
Clear message of why to vote for them	29 (70.7%)

Table 2 ELM peripheral route of persuasion

Feature	Frequency present
Stress credibility	8 (19.5%)
Use of humour	1 (2.4%)
Celebrity endorsement	3 (7.3%)
Personal attributes	4 (9.8%)
Use of video/music	25 (61%)

Table 3 Gamification

Feature	Frequency present
Points available	1 (2.4%)
Badges awarded	1 (2.4%)
Levels/competition/leaders' board	1 (2.4%)
Games to play	1 (2.4%)