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Online Mobilization and Offline Participation in European Elections

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CONSTANTIN MANUEL BOSANCIANU

Die Möglichkeit von Online-Appellen zur Wählermobilisierung hat im Verlauf der letzten 10 Jahre exponentielle Nutzung erfahren. Alle großen Wahlkampagnen auf lokaler, nationaler und europäischer Ebene wurden sowohl offline als auch online betrieben. Trotz dessen, fangen Wissenschaftler gerade erst an zu verstehen ob und in welchem Ausmaß Online-Appelle tatsächlich ihre intendierte Wirkung erbringen. Diese Arbeit untersucht die Auswirkung von Online-Appellen auf die Wahlbeteiligung auf der Basis von Wahlinformationen der Wahlen zum Europäischen Parlament 2009 aus 15 EU-Ländern. Eine Innovation ist dabei die Möglichkeit zur Kontrolle von Offline-Mobilisierungsappellen, die die Wähler während der Kampagne erhalten haben. Anhand der Verwendung eines "Kausalitätstrichters" und einer Reihe von Strukturgleichungsmodellen kann aufgezeigt werden, dass Online-Appelle, wenn überhaupt, einen sehr begrenzten Effekt (auf die Wahlbeteiligung) haben. Unter Berücksichtigung der Politikinteressen der Befragten, sowie der Anzahl ihrer individuellen Kontaktierungen durch Parteimitglieder über Telefon, Mail, oder auch an der Türschwelle, kann kaum ein zusätzlicher Effekt von Online-Appellen festgestellt werden. Dies unterstreicht die Bedeutung der Kommunikationsform wie auch die Nutzung von Online-Nachrichten in Kampagnen, nämlich hauptsächlich zur Kontakthaltung mit dem jeweiligen eigenen Kern an Unterstützern. Die Analyse schließt mit der Herausstellung des Bedarfs weiterer Untersuchungen zu dem Thema, besonders im Zuge einer zunehmenden Weiterentwicklung von Möglichkeiten der Online-Kontaktierung. Zudem wird festgehalten, dass für den Wahlzyklus 2009 traditionelle Mobilisierungsmethoden effektiver waren als die Methode der Online-Mobilisierung.

Stichworte: Wahlen, Mobilisierung, online, offline, Wahlen zum Europäischen Parlament, Strukturgleichungsmodelle

The use of online mobilization appeals has grown exponentially in the past decade, with all major campaigns at the local, national and European levels being fought both online and offline. For all their use, scholars are just in the incipient phases of truly understanding whether and to what extent these appeals have their intended effect. This analysis puts to the test the ability of online campaign appeals to increase a voter's involvement in the election, by relying on information collected during the 2009 European Parliament elections in 15 EU countries. The novel aspect of the study represents the ability to control for offline mobilization attempts which voters might have received during the campaign. By making use of a "funnel of causality" design, and a series of structural equation models, the results presented here suggest that online mobilization messages have a very limited, if any, effect. When taking into account a respondent's interest in politics, as well as the extent to which they have been personally contacted by a party worker through the phone, mail, or even at the doorstep, there is little added effect which online messages bring. This highlights both a characteristic of the medium of communication, as well as the use of online messages by the campaigns: primarily to maintain contact with their core supporters. The analysis concludes by pointing toward the need for further investigations, needed as online messages become more sophisticated, and by noting that for the 2009 election cycle traditional channels of mobilization proved more effective than online ones.

Keywords: mobilization, online, offline, European Parliament elections, structural equation modeling

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1. Introduction

While other changes may have held center stage, a momentous shift has taken place in the political arena of advanced industrial democracies in Europe. Masked by accession rounds to the European Union, expansion of the Schengen area and the Euro zone, or the global financial crisis, not to speak of the challenges posed by immigration, global terrorism, or climate change, politics has slowly gone online.¹ The shock has not been as brutal as it could have been, given that European countries could benefit from the experience of the United States, generally ahead of the pack in what concerns innovations in online campaigning. Even so, what the element of surprise couldn't provide, breadth of changes more than compensated for. All actors in the immense ecosystem that hosts political action have, to an extent or another, moved online. Individuals are receiving more of their news by means of online channels, either from specialized news outlets, or blogs that cover a specific area of political life. Political parties have adopted online tools in an attempt to maintain a closer connection with an activist core of the constituency, as well as to tap into a source of finances which might prove to be more bountiful considering the cumbersome procedures that need to be followed when donating money offline. Media outlets have sensed the immense revenues that are to be obtained from advertising by establishing a powerful online presence and a stable core of subscribers.

The changes I will document here largely follow the narrative set by other authors discussing the topic of changes in campaign styles and political participation patterns across advanced industrial democracies. Starting with the 70s, it had become apparent that politics was getting more individualized (Dalton 2004), both in terms of political participation and campaigning styles. Party membership had started going into a slow yet steady decline starting with the 60s (Mair/van Biezen 2001), while alternative single-issue movements (some of which eventually matured into green parties) were

¹ Political actors have ventured into this new environment because this is where potential voters started spending a considerable amount of time. A Pew Research Center for The People & The Press (2010, pp. 1–2) report highlights that between 2002 and 2010, the proportion of Americans who report having gone online in the past day for news increased from 24 per cent to 34 per cent, while the average time daily spent online with news increased from about 1 minute in 1998 to 13 minutes in 2010. Candidates responded to this trend by increasing their presence: about 75 per cent of US Senate candidates had a campaign website in the 2000 elections, up from about 50 per cent in 1996 (for the House, the numbers are 55 per cent in 2000, and 16 per cent in 1996) (Bimber & Davis, 2003). When paired with the ability to make campaign donations easily and securely, the effects of this online presence were quickly noticeable: much of the 54 million \$ raised by Howard Dean in the primary campaign of 2004 was from online donations, while John Kerry managed to amass 26 million \$ from online sources in just two months (Herrnson, Stokes-Brown, & Hindman, 2007). This culminated in 2008 with the Obama campaign raising over the course of 21 months (primary and general elections) approximately 500 million \$ in online donations (Vargas, 2008).

attracting more supporters, as evidenced by an increasing frequency of protest activities in the 80s and 90s (Inglehart/Catterberg 2002; Kriesi/Koopmans/Dyvendak/Giugni 2002: 113–117). Unions, the traditional source of support for parties on the Left, were being proven ineffective by the challenges of globalization, which resulted in declining membership rates (Ebbinghaus/Visser 1999; Visser 2006). Organized politics was losing its appeal for a vast share of the electorate in Western Europe, and being replaced by an alternative model, which gave priority to mass appeals through television and campaign PR, directed at a largely apathetic citizenry (Blumler/Kavanagh 2001; Negrine/Lilleker 2002).

This dissertation mainly focuses on the first category of political actors: individuals. Parties and media will naturally come into the spotlight, as the focus will sometimes change from the individual to the political environment that surrounds him. Even so, the interest lies in the individual, and the manner in which she understands to relate to the political environment around him. Seen from the perspective of citizens, the appearance of the new information and communication technologies has heralded conflicting images regarding the future of democratic politics. On one side of the debate have been the technology apologists (Grossman 1995; NegroPonte 1995; Rheingold 1993; Stanyer 2005), with claims of democratic rejuvenation, increased popular participation, improved ability to hold governments accountable, and intensified contact with public officials. The new communication platform would transcend gaps in participation and political influence based on income or information, and lead to a reinvigorated democratic public sphere. The technology skeptics (Best/Krueger 2005; Margolis/Resnick 2000; Norris 2000; Yzer/Southwell 2008), on the other hand, have argued for a continuity of democratic practice, largely based on the potency of factors over which the Internet has little effect: interest, income, education, cognitive resources, or trust. Even if the share of Internet users would ultimately grow, how people would use the 'tool' still depended on pre-existing predispositions, thus maintaining the gaps between 'gladiators', 'spectators', and 'apathetics' (Newton/Van Deth 2010: 185–186). While the debate could not definitively settle these issues, it did manage to offer a multitude of perspectives from which to tackle the issues found at the confluence of technology and politics.

The topic of this thesis sits squarely at the junction of these debates, by inquiring whether some of the new online methods of voter mobilization employed by parties

(e.g., emails, Facebook messages, and Twitter feeds) might actually boost political engagement and increase political information at the individual level. Although these new methods might not be as effective as face-to-face contact (which largely compensates for their relative low-cost nature, compared to flyers, direct mail, phone banks or neighborhood canvassing), their utility lies in another characteristic: they are able to reach potential voters where other mobilization methods fail. Given the high geographical mobility of young citizens, their still inchoate system of partisan beliefs, and a tendency to prefer mobile phones to fixed landlines, online mobilization appeals might be one of the few methods which reach them. In order to examine the effectiveness of these online mobilization appeals, I will conduct a quantitative analysis of data collected during the 2009 European Parliament (EP) election by the European Elections Study (EES) for 15 countries across the EU.² Even though the types of online mobilization which the EES covers are limited, relying on this dataset allows stringent controls for the effects of more traditional types of mobilization (flyers, direct mail etc.), as well as the ability to include a wide range of political contexts throughout the EU.

My goal here is to present a different image of online activity than what is most commonly encountered in anecdotal media reports. Certainly, the World Wide Web is filled with entertainment that can range from the comical to the illicit, and which takes a heavy toll on an inexperienced user's time and attention span. At the same time, it is also a vast source of useful information, and a platform that can strengthen the bonds between individuals and the groups they belong to. Throughout the following chapters, I intend to show that the extent to which individuals' experiences online predominantly emphasize one of the two extremes just mentioned depends not only on their preferences, but also on efforts made to capture their attention. Organized political movements have the ability to reach out to online users with political appeals, and the results presented here suggest that they do manage to stimulate political engagement and counterbalance apathy.

Neither should the impact of the findings presented here be solely judged on the basis of the sample of countries on which they were obtained. Ultimately, these findings do

² Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, and Sweden. The precise method through which these countries were selected from the 27 covered by the study will be detailed in the Methodology chapter.

not speak exclusively about the present of Western Europe, but also about the potential future of Eastern Europe, and perhaps beyond. While the latter regions may lag behind in Internet access or party system institutionalization and extent of campaign professionalization, recent trends certainly suggest that the lag is gradually losing magnitude. Seen through this perspective, the results presented here might offer a glimpse into the transformations eventually occurring throughout Europe, even if their extent might vary depending on national context. The comparative price advantage of Internet communications over TV and print advertising, combined with a superior ability to target supporters have ensured that information and communication technologies (ICTs) will be a staple of all future electoral campaigns (as long as the Internet user segment is large enough).

The context of European Parliament elections seems particularly appropriate for a study focusing on online campaigns and their effects on offline engagement and participation in the citizenry. Given their status as “second-order” elections (Reif/Schmitt 1980), parties may respond to the larger pool of “floating voters” by attempting novel ways of reaching them (Lusoli/Ward 2005). Secondly, as a result of larger parties tending to suffer losses at the hands of smaller ones (de Vreese 2004), less organized parties might be motivated to increase their campaigning efforts and attempt lower-cost mobilization strategies (e-mailing, viral campaigning). A third reason originates from past empirical investigations of the effects of party mobilization in US elections, which have highlighted that party mobilization seems to display a stronger effect on turnout in second-order elections (Goldstein/Ridout 2002; Wielhouwer/Lockerbie 1994); if the same applies to the European context, then investigating Internet mobilization in European Parliament elections presents the highest likelihood of discovering a weak effect. Finally, the significant variation in national contexts (in terms of media consumption patterns, party systems, media coverage of the election, Internet penetration rates³, computer skills etc.) can be said to provide the most stringent of tests for any effects that are discovered, or can offer clues regarding contextual factors which moderate the intensity of effects.

³ According to EUROSTAT figures, in 2010 53 per cent of individuals aged 16 to 74 accessed the Internet every day, or almost every day, in European Union countries. This aggregate number hides important regional variations: in Bulgaria the share is 33 per cent, in Ireland it is 47 per cent, while in Finland it is 72 per cent, and in Sweden 76 per cent.

By now, it has become clear that I consider political participation to be a very important feature of representative democracy, and a phenomenon where inequalities are particularly damaging for the quality of democracy. The easiest defense can be mounted in support of voting, where unequal turnout rates can result in systematic biases in favor of certain parties, as well as policy outputs that are skewed toward the most participatory social groups (Lijphart 1997: 4–5). However, even other types of participation (signing petitions, attending rallies) can have a direct influence on the quality of representation. As these channels of participation manage to convey public opinion regarding major issues of the day to the political class, in between election periods their significance can be substantial (particularly if interpreted as an omen of future election results). An example can be the April 2009 London protests largely targeting the financial establishment's role in the global crisis of 2008 (Adam Smith 2009), while a more recent one concerns the anti-nuclear protests in Germany, which ultimately led to the decision to phase out nuclear power in Germany by 2022, even if the government had promised not to take this route only a few months before (Associated Press 2011; Smee 2010).

The worrying, albeit natural finding here is that more resource-intensive types of participation (attending rallies, distributing flyers, regularly volunteering for an NGO) are the ones which display the highest degree of inequality in terms of participants (Lijphart 1997: 1). A counter-argument to this might be that in this "third age" of political communications (Blumler/Kavanagh 2001), opinion polls communicated to political leaders have largely made irrelevant the need to communicate the public's "will" by means of mass rallies or constituency meetings with representatives, and therefore removed the negative effects of inequality. While there certainly is some truth to this line of reasoning, it can still be argued that what matters for a politician is not the opinion of the nation, but rather the opinion of those who vote for him/her. It is this nucleus of activists that politicians are primarily beholden to, and acts of participation are a sure way to transmit it without interference from intermediaries (such as the media).⁴

⁴ There are other reasons for which participation is important (see Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001, pp. 22–25): at the community level it fosters trust, tolerance, and generates norms of reciprocity, while at the individual level it develops civic skills and heightens awareness of the opinions and needs of others.

Appeals from political parties, however, come in a variety of forms: information about campaign events, requests for donations, and even disparaging remarks about the opposing candidate. Some are meant to stimulate participation in campaign events, while others are simply designed to maintain the cohesion and drive of strong partisans. Nevertheless, even the latter play a very important role in the course of a campaign, and should not be discounted. Pennings and Hazan (Pennings/Hazan 2001: 268) suggest that strengthening the sense of involvement of their supporters is one of the ways in which parties can boost turnout in their favor at election time. With this in mind, I hypothesize that online mobilization impacts two connected phenomena: it facilitates action by reducing the costs of acquiring information, and provides motivation to bear the full costs of this information (i.e. boosting engagement).⁵ These two effects (see Illustration 1) will be the focus of my efforts throughout this research—just one of the attempts that have been made so far to disentangle the impact of communication via the Internet on levels of political activity during election periods.

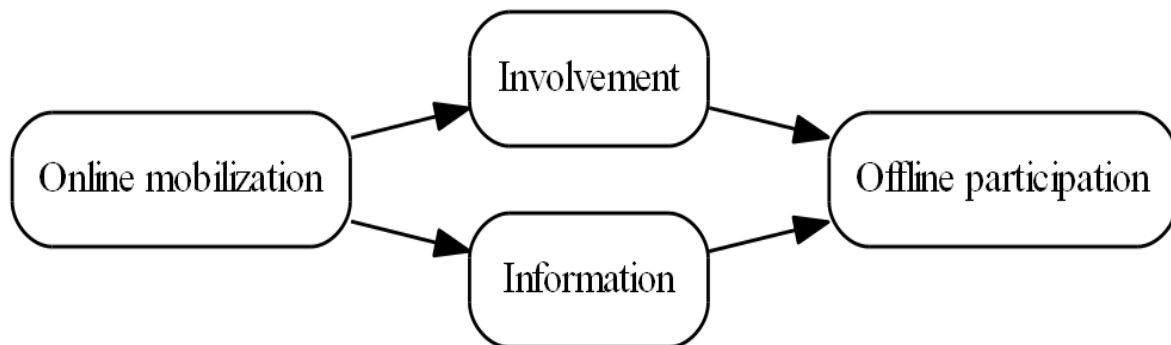


Illustration 1: Connections between online mobilization and offline participation

The following chapter will present some of the existing connections which have been established by existing studies; their results have represented the first inroads made into the black box of “Internet effects”, and it is those paths which this study tries to advance further into the ‘darkness’. They suggest that even two decades after the Internet has entered mainstream use in advanced industrial democracies, there is still

⁵ These effects represent, to a certain extent, ‘established’ knowledge in the case of offline mobilization (Marcus, 2002, pp. 89–93; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993, pp. 25–30). The effects of mobilization on participation are hypothesized to be indirect ones, transmitted through political information and engagement.

considerable disagreement over its effects on levels of political information, engagement and participation. The most that can be said at this point is that any effects seem to be contingent on both individual abilities and predispositions (political interest, computer literacy, patterns of media use), as well as on the manner in which political actors use the technology for political communication. Furthermore, effects appear to be period- and technology-contingent; as Internet penetration rates increase, and new forms of online interaction spread (social networks, individual broadcasting services such as Twitter), effects are likely to change.

Following this, the hypotheses on which this study is based will be clearly stated, followed by a methodology section. The latter will present the dataset on which the research is based (the 2009 European Elections Voter Study), along with the way in which the variables of interest (online mobilization, political engagement) have been constructed. The second half of the study will present the results obtained from testing the connections between online mobilization and engagement/participation. Finally, a discussion of these findings and how they influence the current debate about Internet effects will be carried out in the concluding part.

2. Literature Review

Political participation, as a voluntary human activity carried out in a democratic political system for the purpose of influencing (directly or indirectly) the distribution of public goods, has undergone considerable transformations over the past century. These have naturally changed our understanding of how to provide inputs into the political system, as well as spurred a thriving academic debate over what a definition of participation should include or purposefully exclude (Conge 1988). Changes have occurred at all levels of the political system: citizens' value systems have shifted toward a more individualistic outlook on societal interactions, interest and single-issue groups have multiplied to fill a growing representational void between citizens and parties, while political parties have shifted their campaign practices toward a higher degree of professionalization and a lower reliance on activists. These inter-connected, silent, and yet momentous shifts in the political landscape have gradually altered the way in which citizens and parties interact in the political arena. The following paragraphs will briefly present some of these changes, with the intent of placing Internet participation in a wider framework of political transformations.

Before proceeding to the empirical findings in the literature, a brief theoretical detour must be made. Without intending to dwell too much on these aspects, I find it necessary to first define the main concepts with which I operate: political mobilization and participation. Concerning the former, the difficulty of finding an appropriate definition is compounded by the long tradition it has, first in sociology, and subsequently in political science. It first appears in studies of totalitarianism, and then is employed in some of the first studies from political sociology that deal with the links between political parties and society (see Rokkan 1966; Rokkan/Valen 1962). In these studies, the term has a rather clear historical frame of reference, pointing to the first efforts made by nascent parties to attract newly enfranchised groups into the political process, at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th.⁶ The sociological 'pedigree' is visible even in more recent analyses, where political mobilization is conceptualized as "[...] actors' efforts to influence the existing distribution of power [...]" (Nedelmann 1987: 190).

There are clear benefits associated with relying on such a broad definition: the danger of excluding certain acts of political elites as not targeting mobilization *ex ante*, the inclusion of both conventional and unconventional or illegal methods, keeping the issue of directionality open (both vertical, i.e. from elites to individuals, and horizontal, i.e. a grass-roots movement, are included). However, framing mobilization in this manner risks obscuring the fact that during election campaigns, the focus of this study, the predominant form of contact tends to be unidirectional (from parties to voters, in a vertical manner). Furthermore, it could be argued that the distinction between vertical and horizontal mobilization is largely a matter of perspective. Even when referring to a community grass-roots effort, those engaging in the initial organizational effort are likely local opinion-leaders and, therefore, "elites".⁷ Given the need for a more targeted definition, that specifically covers the predominant type of mobilization occurring during election times, I have chosen to rely on one proposed by (Leighley 2001: 7), who defines it as being "the explicit or implicit solicitation of individuals' engagement in political activity by elites, who provide an information subsidy (i.e., regarding where to

⁶ "The first political mobilization was the process by which former subject individuals were initially recruited as active participants in forms of nationwide organizational and electoral activities for the purpose of influencing political decision making [...]" (Bartolini, 2000, p. 12 emphasis in original).

⁷ One considerable advantage of the definition proposed by Birgitta Nedelmann is the ability to differentiate between different dimensions of mobilization: cognitive (interest formation), affective (production of emotions), and instrumental (mechanisms of mobilization).

vote, or how to become registered, or when the meeting is scheduled) to individuals". It cannot be claimed that the conceptualization is flawless (for one, it ignores the fact that emotional appeals, or disparaging information about the opposition's candidate, can also be transmitted as part of an appeal for participation). However, it does capture the essence of the relationship between political elites and individuals during electoral periods: inciting action on the basis of new information received.⁸

This brings me to the desired effect of political mobilization, and the second concept that is missing an appropriate framework: political participation. Defined by Verba and Nie (Verba/Nie 1987: 2) as actions "directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take", the definition has taken on given its parsimony.⁹ Behind it, however, lie hidden a considerable number of choices that the authors have made concerning what to consider as "participation": action that is simply aimed at showing support for a regime (e.g. mass rallies) is excluded, as are aggressive forms of citizen participation, or activity in non-governmental spheres (e.g. in the workplace, or in the school) (p. 3). For the purposes of this study the definition is adequate, although it is important to highlight that I find the term "directly" to be too restrictive. A variety of behaviors during or between campaigns could presumably manage to influence the "selection of governmental personnel" or their actions, without having expressly this purpose. Forwarding a political e-mail that contains information about a candidate or a set of policies, engaging in political discussions with members of one's social network are not activities performed by an individual with a conscious intent of influencing an electoral outcome. Yet, as some of the earliest voting studies (Berelson/Lazarsfeld/McPhee 1954; MCPhee/Smith/Ferguson 1963) have argued, the proper way of understanding how political preferences are formed, maintained or changed is to view them in their social structures, as being "inherently dynamic and responsive to social influence" (Huckfeldt/Sprague 1987: 1199). More recent studies have been able to establish a link between political discussion in a social

8 A very similar definition is offered by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993): "the process by which candidates, parties, and groups induce other people to participate" (p. 25) so as to "win elections, to pass bills, to modify rulings, to influence policies" (p. 30).

9 On other occasions, though, a definition is not even offered, having been replaced by an enumeration of the behaviors that are covered by the concept (see Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). Other ways of defining political participation are relatively more inclusive: "all voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to influence either directly or indirectly political choices at various levels of the political system" (Kaase & Marsh, 1979, p. 42); "action by private citizens intended to influence the actions or the composition of national or local governments" (Nelson, 1979, p. 8); "behavior influencing or attempting to influence the distribution of public goods" (Booth & Seligson, 1978, p. 6); or, " [...] any dimensions of activity that are either designed directly to influence government agencies and the policy process, or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behavior"—Pippa Norris, cited in van Deth (2001, p. 5).

network and changes in the strength of political beliefs at the individual level or in the extent of political participation (Mutz 1992, 2002; Nir 2005); some have even linked these with changes in the likelihood of voting for one's preferred candidate (Beck 2002; Beck/Dalton/Greene/Huckfeldt 2002). Seen from this perspective, even declaring one's preference for a candidate via an e-mail or debate within a close circle of friends can still lead to slight changes in aggregate support for a party or candidate. This is why I subsume these types of behaviors (one might call them "expressive"¹⁰) under what I consider political participation.

2.1 Partisanship transformed

The aggregate changes in partisanship and patterns of political participation have received too much academic coverage to warrant a detailed discussion in this section (Barnes/Kaase 1979; Dalton 2000, 2008; Dalton/Flanagan/Beck 1984; Koopmans 1996; Putnam 2001; Rosenstone/Hansen 1993; Wattenberg 1981, 2002; Zukin/Keeter/Andolina/Jenkins/Delli Carpini 2006). The spectrum of changes in participatory behavior can be summed up by two trends: (1) a decline in voting turnout throughout the advanced democracies of the Western world (Wattenberg 2000: 71), and (2) a considerable increase in non-voting forms of political participation (Topf 1995). The second can be further refined by pointing to the stagnating trend in elite-guided activities (attending rallies, working for a campaign organization), in stark contrast to the rise in alternative channels of participation (protests, supporting smaller interest groups, signing petitions) (Inglehart/Catterberg 2002; Rempel/Clark 1997; Stolle/Hooghe/Micheletti 2005).

The causes for these shifts can be found at all levels of the political environment. When focusing on individuals, the cognitive mobilization thesis (Dalton et al. 1984), holds that rising enrollment rates at the secondary and tertiary educational levels, throughout the Western democracies between 1950 and 1970, combined with a considerable expansion in information sources (particularly TV), have increased the political sophistication of electorates in these countries. With better quality information to help them arrive at an electoral choice, voters have come to gradually rely less on

¹⁰ This is akin to the concept of "expressive political action" (Barnes & Kaase, 1979), which refers, however, to disruptive acts of political participation that are not motivated by a clear goal, and are done rather to signal allegiance to a political movement. Although in my understanding, these actions have a similar purpose, even if sometimes not entirely grasped by the individuals themselves, I cannot define them as disruptive.

parties for voting cues and political information.¹¹ A competing perspective, the value change thesis (Inglehart 1990), suggests that newer generations of voters, socialized in the period of relative economic security of the 1950s and 60s, have come to embrace a different set of values than their predecessors. Concerns of job security, steady income, and material wealth were gradually, yet not completely, replaced by those for job fulfillment, the environment, freedom of self-expression, human rights. A variant of this (Flanagan 1982a, 1982b) holds that the major change in values can be found in a stronger emphasis on self-assertiveness, nonconformity, and an acceptance of alternative life-styles, as well as a gradual rejection of hierarchy, conformity, or religiosity (Dalton et al. 1984: 20). Voters from these cohorts would be less likely to engage in the type of structured campaign activities (rallies, volunteering for a campaign organization) that had been predominant before, and would tend to prefer a variety of “elite-challenging” activities: protests, signing of petitions, boycotts (Inglehart/Catterberg 2002; Stolle et al. 2005).¹² Finally, two other perspectives join those discussed so far in offering a full picture of the individual-level transformations that have taken place over the past five decades: the social mobility thesis and the mass society thesis. The first points to the increasing social and occupational mobility experienced after the Second World War which disrupted the continuity of partisan allegiances transmitted up to that point through socialization in the family. With class barriers becoming increasingly permeable, traditional class alignments weakened, further loosening the pool of committed activists on whom parties could rely during election times. The second perspective largely strengthens the effects of the first; industrialization led to a considerable atomization of society, which made traditional groups and networks less important for the individual (e.g. churches, unions). Given that a considerable number of these groups acted as intermediaries between parties and voters, their reduced influence exacerbated the inability of parties to mobilize voters. Indeed, taking a longitudinal perspective, Dalton (Dalton 2004: 32) finds evidence of partisan dealignment in 17 of the 19 countries examined.

¹¹ The importance of these cues should not be underestimated, especially when considering their importance in facilitating national elections. At this level, most of the electorate could not know a candidate personally, so party labeling becomes crucial in allowing voters to make sense of a competition (Epstein, 1967).

¹² In six of seven European nations examined, Dalton (2000) finds that the growth in non-partisanship had been largely concentrated among the more educated individuals.

At the 'meso' level, the expansion of media outlets and news coverage has largely obviated the role of parties as political information providers (Dalton/Wattenberg 2000: 12). Conversely, parties have taken advantage of this by increasingly relying on media during election times. With campaigns transformed from a "labor intensive" (neighborhood canvassing done by activists, rallies, distribution of flyers) to a "capital intensive" activity (media consultants, political advertising, public opinion polling), the importance of party membership has decreased. As these new institutionalized and professionalized parties (Katz/Mair 1995) began placing less emphasis on traditional mobilization, voters themselves found fewer incentives to engage in more conventional, structured types of political participation. A second transformation can be observed in the rise of single-issue and special interest groups. These swiftly occupied the void created by the inability of parties to quickly adapt their political platforms to the rise of these new political issues (e.g. the anti-nuclear movement, ecology, global warming, animal rights, or homosexuality).¹³ Their ability to press for a cause without the need for compromise (as any party with multiple governing goals would be forced to) certainly appealed to their supporters, while their existence allowed individuals to pursue opportunities for participation outside of the confines of the existing party system.

At the 'macro' level, the value of participation as a mechanism for conveying the demands of citizens to the party, and from it to government, was largely diminished by the advent of public opinion polls, which were able to offer a high degree of precision without the need for organizing meetings of local party branches or rallies. A second phenomenon relates to a wider observed "crisis of democracy" (Crozier/Huntington/Watanuki 1975) in the Western world. The extensive demands that are placed on modern democracies in a time of deeper economic and (geo)political inter-penetration have impacted on their ability to deliver proper policy outputs to the citizenry. Although, to some extent, this has been the case in all previous eras, the particular nature of the citizenry in modern times has made this problematic: "increasing levels of education, information, and political sophistication are resulting in a dramatic shift in the basis of support from diffuse to specific criteria" (Sänkiaho

13 To be completely accurate, it must be acknowledged that these issues largely cut across existing partisan cleavages, which prevented their swift incorporation. Any party that considered this had to take into consideration that a clear stance on one of these issues might split their electorate. For an in-depth analysis of the major movements in West Germany spanning roughly three decades (1960s to 1980s), see Koopmans (1995, pp. 157–227).

1984: 73). Given their association with the governing structures, all but the smallest fringe parties have been tainted in the process, making political action outside of the party system appealing.¹⁴

2.2 The Internet – transformation redux?

The influence of the Internet, seen as a new tool for news consumption and communication is harder to place in this wave of transformations. On the one hand, it could be considered a new stage toward a more individualized style of interaction with the political system. It has certainly represented another refuge from the hierarchical participatory avenues promoted by parties¹⁵, and a convenient platform for communication and the coordination of smaller grassroots activist groups that attempt to press for changes from outside of the party system. Furthermore, it has allowed those who are uninterested in political issues to bypass them entirely and tailor the type of news they receive according to their existing preferences (Prior 2005). On the other hand, there is also disparate evidence that the new ICTs can help in maintaining voter engagement over the course of a campaign (through the regular use of e-mail listservs or forums) and can even help attract new groups into the political arena, traditionally underrepresented in offline participatory channels (such as women or youth). In this section, I would like to briefly present the ways in which voters and parties have embraced the Internet for the purposes of news gathering and political communication. However, the reader is advised to constantly keep in mind that any attempt to describe this will certainly be incomplete and resemble “shooting at a moving target” (Jennings/Zeitner 2003: 311), given the rapid rate of transformation in the use of Internet channels for political communication.¹⁶

At the party level, ICTs hold the promise, even if this has not always come to fruition just yet, of transforming a host of party attributes. Particularly in the case of smaller parties, ICTs can mediate a more intensive contact with supporters, which would

14 Whiteley (2011) finds no connection between an individual's likelihood of being a party member, or being active in a party, and his preference for alternative channels of political participation (boycotts or “buycotts”, Internet participation, or donating money). However, these findings are based on a cross-sectional sample from the ISSP Citizenship survey in 2004, whereas the links discussed here are best examined by means of a panel study.

15 John Perry Barlow's “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” prominently states that “We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear.” (Barlow, 1996)

16 Merely three years after its birth in 2004, Facebook had already become an important tool in Sen. Obama's bid for the Democratic Party's nomination for the Presidency.

otherwise be tremendously difficult given the financial limitations and media coverage deficiency these organizations normally face. Even for larger parties, the Internet can facilitate greater engagement by making communication between party and voters, or between voters themselves, much faster (e-mail lists, forums, chat rooms) (Römmele 2003: 9–10). Depending on whether one focuses on the effects on the citizens or the party organization of this intensified informational exchange, ICTs can be presumed to impact opinion formation or interest articulation, respectively. The benefits, though, do not seem to be distributed equally: in the case of the Japanese party system, it would appear that smaller parties have been able to benefit more from the reduced costs of communication brought about by the Internet (Tkach-Kawasaki 2003).¹⁷ Increasingly, I would argue, the Internet has also become a valuable tool for mobilization at election times (both for larger and smaller parties), although this sometimes happens with the ex post acquiescence of the parties themselves.

It suffices to remember the 2006 Virginia Senate race, where incumbent and predicted winner George Allen (R.) managed to lose the race to Jim Webb (D.) over the use, during a campaign rally, of a racial slur against a Webb staffer of Indian descent (Craig/Shear 2006). The video of the incident was soon uploaded to YouTube, which allowed journalists, commentators and bloggers to constantly refer to the short film in the coverage of the election and have solid evidence regarding the impropriety.¹⁸ In a subsequent election cycle, in the US, YouTube launched a specialized channel for election information (YouChoose '08) where the campaigns could upload videos of the candidates, campaign appearances, policy stances etc (see Towner/Dulio 2011). For the same election, CNN and YouTube partnered to allow ordinary citizens to submit questions under the form of short videos to the candidates for the Democratic Party's nomination for the Presidency during the South Carolina debate in 2007 (Smith-Spark 2007).¹⁹ A few months after this, ABC News and Facebook partnered to create a

17 Small (2008) also includes Italy and Cambodia as being similar to Japan in this respect, but argues that in the Canadian case, larger parties made better use of the Internet. Even there, however, she highlights that smaller parties seemed to emphasize to a larger degree than others the interactive functions of their websites. In the UK, Ward, Gibson, and Lusoli (2003) confirm this finding: the Liberal Democrats were the most enthusiastic adopters of the new communication technologies for keeping in contact with supporters.

18 The comments were made on August 11, while the video was uploaded on August 14 on the Webb campaign official YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/WebbCampaign#p/u/20/9G7gq7GQ71c>). By July 2nd, 2011, it had been watched 386.810 times, although it is very likely that most of these views happened in the immediate aftermath of the controversy, in 2006.

19 In September 2011 this format is used again by YouTube, in partnership with Fox News, to allow ordinary citizens to submit video-questions to Republican candidates in their party's primary election (<http://www.youtube.com/foxnews>).

stronger connection between supporters and the campaigns and provide a forum for online debate on the social networking platform. ABC reporters following the campaigns could post updates and incorporate issues which the ongoing debates found relevant into their coverage; supporters, in turn, could get relevant updates about the campaigns from objective sources and potentially introduce new issues into the discussions (American Broadcasting Corporation 2007; Goldman 2007). Across the Atlantic, the innovative streak has been more restrained, although by no means absent. In the UK, a non-partisan and Facebook-hosted initiative, Democracy UK, offered individuals the ability to pose questions to the candidates during the televised debates that took place in April 2010, as well as functioned as a general hub for information about the election.²⁰ In Germany, the 2009 election cycle saw a mushrooming of social technologies employed for campaigning purposes, possibly spurred by the election calendar. This included elections in the länder of Hessen and Nordrhein-Westfalen, as well as at the federal level (in what has been termed the Superwahljahr). During this time, all major campaign organizations had websites which were regularly updated with videos of campaign appearances, documents, news about upcoming events²¹; these were also linked to Twitter channels and Facebook profiles of candidates.

At the individual level as well, ICTs have held great promise for a much more informed and engaged electorate, although the empirical results obtained so far do not justify unrestrained optimism. The first observable change brought about by the Internet has been an increase in the diversity and quantity of information about politics and current events available to the electorate. Within a few years of the technology having gone mainstream, political information had become cheaper to acquire and more widespread than ever before. Newspaper and TV broadcast sites, web portals, blogs, search engines which could be used to track down relevant information about a topic, RSS aggregators (Google Reader) and blog aggregators (Technorati)—all represented a powerful armory in the fight against the dismal levels of political information in the

20 The profile page also included two vote advice applications (VoteMatch and My Vote Advisor) that allowed users to determine which party might be closest to them based on a series of policy preferences.

21 E.g., <http://www.webcamp09.de>, <http://www.team09.de>. A vote advice application, the Wahl-O-Mat (run by the apolitical Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung) also functioned during this time.

electorate (Converse 1964, 1975; Delli Carpini/Keeter 1996).²² In the US. Smith (2008) finds that about 24 per cent of adults report that they read blogs (33 per cent of Internet users), and that about 8 per cent of all adults read blogs on a daily basis (these numbers include blogs of all types). When looking specifically at political blogs, The Huffington Post seems to be accessed by about 46.4 million persons per month (56.5 million if we also count visitors from outside of the US)²³, while Daily Kos receives about 1.1 million visitors monthly (1.3 million if we include those from outside the US).²⁴ The corresponding figures for Drudge Report, Breitbart, or Michelle Malkin (prominent conservative blogs), are 12.6, 1.5 and 0.47 million US monthly visitors, respectively.²⁵ As more newspapers begin to add pay-walls in front of their online editions (recent examples being the Financial Times and the New York Times), it is to be expected that blog readership will increase even further.

A second promise that the new technologies offered was for a more frequent communication between voters and parties, and even voters themselves. Party newsletters, regularly updated websites, Facebook profiles and Twitter streams all allow involved party supporters to maintain contact with the party organization. The prominent examples of the Howard Dean campaign in 2004 and the Barack Obama one in 2008 suggest that the potential benefits have not been disregarded by the parties. To use just one example, in the 21 months in which he was campaigning, Obama raised 500 million USD in online contributions, from approximately 6.5 million donations made by 3 million individuals (Vargas 2008). Independent efforts, such as the "One million strong for Obama" Facebook group (created in January 2007) swiftly achieved a size that dwarfed any mailing list built by one of the campaigns (Sanson 2008). Furthermore, as Meetup.com amply demonstrated in the 2008 US election cycle, a technology can support grassroots efforts by offering citizens the opportunity

22 Kenski and Stroud (2006, p. 174) report that in the 2004 presidential campaign 29 per cent of Americans reported using the Internet to gather political news. By 2008 this had increased to 55 per cent of American adults (Aaron Smith, 2009, p. 3), while for the 2010 midterm election, the share was 54 per cent (a record given the lower salience of this contest) (Aaron Smith, 2011, p. 2). In the UK, in 2009, 75 per cent of adults reported using the Internet for news (Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009, p. 20).

23 Information obtained from <http://www.quantcast.com/huffingtonpost.com#traffic> [accessed July 4, 2011]. The Huffington Post attracts a considerably larger audience than other blogs by also hosting sections on business, entertainment, or lifestyle.

24 Information obtained from <http://www.quantcast.com/dailynos.com> [accessed July 4, 2011]. In April 2005, Drezner and Farrell (2007, p. 5) report that Daily Kos was receiving 212.000 visitors per month; in about six years, the site quintupled its readership.

25 Information obtained from <http://www.quantcast.com/drudgereport.com>, <http://www.quantcast.com/breitbart.com>, and <http://www.quantcast.com/michellemalkin.com> [accessed July 4, 2011].

to discover fellow partisans in their neighborhood and coordinate efforts during election time.

A third and final major use for the new technologies in the political sphere has been a closer communication between citizens and government, whether it is at the local (online elections, e-government) or national level (e-government, online referenda). A few countries which saw a critical mass of Internet users emerge (United States, the United Kingdom, Estonia, and Switzerland) embraced the turn toward online services, both out of consideration for citizen satisfaction and as a solution to budget constraints. Some have ventured even further, attempting to offer online voting in elections and referendums in parallel to more conventional voting methods, as a palliative to decreasing turnout rates. In September 2004, the Swiss canton of Geneva allowed 20.000 citizens to vote through the Internet in a referendum, as a complementary measure to voting at the ballot box, and through postal mail. In October 2005 Estonia organized the first local elections which allowed voting via the Internet, followed in February 2007 by online voting in national parliamentary elections (Charles 2009). The precursor to these efforts has, yet again, been the United States, albeit at a more limited scale: the 1996 Reform Party primary, and the 2000 Democratic primary in Arizona allowed for online voting. The latter was met with a resounding positive reaction: 46 per cent of valid ballots in that particular election were submitted via the Internet, while the increase in the absolute number of cast ballots between the 1996 and 2000 primaries was 579 per cent (Solop 2001: 290). The verdict regarding the full effects of these alternatives has yet to be passed, with some scholars arguing that they exacerbate inequality by facilitating involvement in a campaign for those already more likely to be privileged (the wealthier, more educated, and politically interested) (see Alvarez/Nagler 2009).

The possibilities outlined above depict the manner in which the Internet can be said to have furthered the transformations originating with the 60s, in the way citizens interact with the political system. On the one hand, there are more possibilities for an individualized contact with the system. Channels of communication allow parties and candidates to target voters with a customized message, as well as permitting citizens to contact elected representatives by means of e-mail or online petitions. Single-issue

organizations have been able to rely on ICTs as a cheap platform for communication with supporters and coordination for civic action (see Pickerill 2004).²⁶ Communities, of course, have also seen a rebirth, although not in their traditional guise; in most instances, these are not the broad, encompassing movements of the past, but rather communities based on a single topic, that transcend local borders and have a transient existence. Forums, chat-rooms, and social networks have made it easier to “reach out” and connect with a diversity of voices, although it remains to be investigated whether we take advantage of this diversity or still prefer to coalesce with those that are similar to us. It could very well be that, in the end, the Internet actually does not rebuild or definitely tear down representative political organizations, but simply accelerates tendencies that have been manifest since the 60s, leading to “a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence” (Bimber 1998: 133).²⁷

It is with reference to this wave of transformations that I will be examining the particular effects of ICTs on the level of political engagement during campaigns. The red line that runs throughout this presentation is the similarly mixed reaction to an increasing reliance of the Internet in political life in general, and campaigns in particular: hope and apprehension, enthusiasm and skepticism, oscillation between seeing the Internet as the “tool of the Devil” or “the New Jerusalem” (Uslaner 2000).

2.3 Internet mobilization

Nowhere is this mix of expectations more evident than in the case of the presumed effects of the new communication channels on political participation and engagement during election time. Some authors (Pettingill 2008; Shah/Schmierbach/Hawkins/Espino/Donavan 2002; Stanyer 2005; Tolbert/McNeal 2003; Vromen/Gelber 2005) have seen vast possibilities open up as a result of the technology’s diffusion, particularly in terms of the ability to mobilize new groups into the political sphere and promote novel forms of civic activism. The mechanism through which this civic rejuvenation would happen seemed deceptively self-evident — the Internet reduces the costs of most political activities that normally take place during a

²⁶ Even here, it would appear that loosely connected social movements have been able to harness the power of the Internet to a greater extent than their more hierarchical and institutionalized peers.

²⁷ The opinion is largely shared by Ward and Gibson (2009), who perceive current changes as a continuation of pre-Internet trends, such as “individualization and disaggregation” (p. 25).

campaign. Information gathering becomes more convenient and cheap, political discussion (even if of a “thin” nature) can take place over social networks, forum groups, or instant messaging services, opinion transmission from party supporters to the activists can take place in a virtual setting, without the need to attend prolonged party precinct meetings. When costs are reduced, reasoned the proponents of this view, political campaigns manage to reach a wider share of the population than would have been possible exclusively through offline means.

Others have rather focused on the perils brought about by the tendency of the Internet to exacerbate existing inequalities in political participation and engagement, based on socio-economic status, cognitive resources etc (Graber 2004; Livingstone/Helsper 2007; Norris 2000, 2001; Prior 2007; Yzer/Southwell 2008).²⁸ The latter group reasoned that a variety of causes (originating both from constraints placed on the daily operations of campaigns, and from psychological factors residing with the voters) would only ensure the persistence of inequality. Under tight budget constraints, campaigns tend to contact those who are most likely to come out in support of the candidate or party: the politically interested and somewhat engaged, which only need a nudge to turn out to vote in the election. On the voter side, being contacted via e-mail or newsletter implies a previous willingness to subject oneself to such contact, by signing up on a party website for an e-newsletter or volunteering one’s e-mail address at a campaign event. Given that these are signs of an underlying political interest, opined proponents of this view, there is little that online political mobilization can accomplish in terms of changing behavior.²⁹

Sadly, there has been a lack of empirical investigation to address these competing viewpoints when referring specifically to online mobilization (e-mails, e-newsletters, messages sent through social networking services such as Facebook, MySpace, or Orkut). Numerous studies have tried to piece together various parts of the puzzle of Internet use and politics (particularly the connections between online news exposure, social capital, and civic and political engagement), although they only offer loosely

28 Being, in the words of Tyler (2002, p. 195), “a new way of doing old things”.

29 A third perspective has recently surfaced (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, & de Ridder, 2011), according to which the proponents of the two scenarios might have little reason to disagree. The authors claim that whereas advocates of mobilization rely on studies of particular uses of the Internet at specific times (e.g. Facebook in the 2008 elections, Twitter in the Arab Spring revolutions), those of normalization focus on general patterns of Internet use. In this sense, they could comfortably coexist in the same scholarly space without significant contradictions.

circumstantial conclusions about what the effects of online mobilization might be on the political involvement of an individual.

One pathway through which online contacts originating with political organizations might impact an individual's political interest or extent of political participation is by lowering the cost of acquiring political information. If such e-mails manage to relieve the citizen from the burden of consistently following the news for political events, then they might facilitate a decision to get involved for groups of citizens which otherwise would have found the electoral landscape too confusing. In one of the earliest studies of the political effects of Internet use, Bimber (2001) finds limited impact of obtaining campaign information online on donating money to a candidate during an election, and no effect on the likelihood of casting a vote. Tolbert and McNeal (2001), however, find that respondents with Internet access and who had used the Internet for receiving news about the campaign were significantly more likely to turn out to vote in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections in the US, even after introducing appropriate statistical controls for socio-economic factors, gender, age, partisanship, race/ethnicity. In a subsequent study, the authors expand the findings to also include effects of Internet news consumption on the extent of an individual's political participation in the course of the 2000 US presidential election (Tolbert/McNeal 2003).³⁰ Recently, studies using an experimental design have also managed to show that Internet news are able to improve the store of knowledge respondents hold about an issue, along with how salient the individuals perceive the issue to be (see Hooghe/Vissers/Stolle/Mahéo 2010). Although not discussing e-mails received from campaign organizations, these findings do speak about the potential for a link between online mobilization and political engagement, transmitted through political information.

Other studies have refined the initial conclusions, by introducing additional mediating factors, such as social capital (Shah/Kwak/Holbert 2001), political discussion (Nisbet/Scheufele 2004; Shah/Cho/Eveland/Jr./Kwak 2005), or the particular manner (news consumption vs. entertainment) in which the World Wide Web is used (Prior

30 Bachmann, Kaufhold, Lewis, and Gil de Zúñiga (2010) corroborate the impact of online media on offline (as well as online) political participation, relying on a different dataset; Kenski and Stroud (2006) find similar effects, relying on Annenberg data from the same election cycle. Jennings and Zeitner (2003), however, find an effect of Internet use for news only on the extent of volunteering activities; their study is notable for the ability to estimate Internet effects on civic engagement while controlling for previous levels of civic engagement, by means of a longitudinal research design. Tellingly, a recent review (Boulianne, 2009) finds that a definite verdict is out of reach: in different contexts Internet use seems to either depress or boost offline political participation (somewhat larger effects can be found when examining online news consumption, although they do not constitute irrefutable evidence).

2005; Shah et al. 2001). In addition, they have also challenged the optimistic view that effects of Internet use could penetrate as deep into our behavioral selves as to be able to influence turnout in elections. Most investigations manage to find a statistically significant effect of online news consumption only on online political participation (Gil de Zúñiga/Puig-i-Abril/Rojas 2009; Puig-i-Abril/Rojas 2007; Vissers/Hooghe/Stolle/Mahéo forthcoming), civic volunteerism (Shah et al. 2002), political interest (Golde/Nie 2010), or offline political participation (Quintelier/Vissers 2008; Rojas/Puig-i-Abril 2009; Weber/Loumakis/Bergman 2003), but not also on the likelihood of turning out to vote in an election. Xenos and Moy (2007) provide a suitable conclusion to this strand of research:

With respect to somewhat more demanding and purposeful acts, such as joining a group, volunteering for a campaign organization, or engaging in political discussions, it appears that associations with Web use are indeed stronger for those who may already be predisposed to engage in these behaviors. (p. 714)

None of the authors reviewed so far have specifically targeted e-mail mobilization during the course of a campaign, and only a few have examined the effects of such online stimuli in the course of "normal" democratic life. Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward (2005) find an effect of receiving a petition via e-mail, or an e-bulletin, albeit only on the likelihood of contacting a politician online (no offline participatory impact could be documented). A more recent study (Rojas/Puig-i-Abril 2009) does find evidence in the Colombian context of the impact of e-mails and messages through social networks on offline participatory behavior, although these originate with friends and acquaintances of respondents, rather than a campaign organization.³¹

The analyses reviewed do not conclusively establish whether e-mail does indeed impact political interest or offline political participation, or whether the opposite phenomenon is at play: the likelihood of being contacted online by a campaign organization is influenced by one's antecedent level of political interest and engagement. Krueger (2006) suggests that the likelihood of being contacted online or offline by a campaign organization are both impacted by similar factors: socio-

³¹ Messages from friends are likely to have a stronger mobilizational effect than those from professional phone bank operators, or automatic messages (phone texting or impersonal e-mails).

economic status, civic skills, political interest. Considering this, he concludes, the connection between political interest and online mobilization is likely based on the former influencing the latter. In an attempt to address the methodological deficiencies of survey-based investigations, Nickerson (2007a, 2007b) uses very large-scale experiments³² to verify whether emailing can result in higher rates of turnout. In neither of the two studies does e-mail manage to boost turnout; in fact, a later study suggests that relying on online methods for voting registration might result in decreasing rates of participation compared to traditional methods (Bennion/Nickerson 2011).

These results should not, however, lead one to hastily conclude that e-mails and other recent campaigning techniques are entirely without impact. Gibson and McAllister (2011) manage to convincingly show that use of Web 2.0 tools (social networking profiles, YouTube campaign channels, personal blogs) has managed to produce electoral support for smaller parties (the Greens) in the context of the 2007 Australian federal election. The impact of tools such as these could be varied: the ability to reach potential supporters that are harder to contact via traditional methods³³; increased public interest in the campaign (as a result of the novel and cognitively less demanding nature of a campaign video, compared to a traditional flyer or letter); higher levels of political information among supporters; an increase in the donations a party manages to collect from supporters etc. The absence of a clear effect in terms of turnout rates should not be equated with the absence of any effect on voters. Ultimately, a sign of the fact that these tools do impact voters (at an attitudinal, if not behavioral level) is their continued use by political campaigns.³⁴

It is in this sparsely examined area that this study attempts to bring a contribution, spurred by two factors. The first is the worrying discrepancy between the growing importance of these mobilization tools in recent electoral campaigns, and the relative paucity of studies that focus on their effects on political interest, political knowledge, or civic/political participation. The second is based on the inconclusive nature of the

32 One of the studies reports results from 13 field experiments, with a pooled sample size of 232.716 participants.

33 Given the mobility typical of young people, these are harder to reach with phone appeals, direct mail, or neighborhood canvassing. The Obama campaign of 2008 offers ample anecdotal evidence as to the considerable impact of Facebook and other online tools in maintaining contact throughout the campaign season with the 18-24 demographic (Sanson, 2008).

34 Williams and Trammell (2005) find that in the final stages of the campaign emailing actually increases in frequency, in an attempt to rally support for the candidates.

evidence against the effectiveness of online mobilization tools that has emerged from the experimental studies cited earlier. They have certainly constituted an improvement over survey-based studies, in terms of establishing causal links and bypassing the issue of self-selection.³⁵ At the same time, however, flaws persist in their design: the ones reported here (e.g., Hooghe et al. 2010; Nickerson 2007b; Vissers et al. forthcoming) predominantly rely on samples of college students, a very particular population in terms of political interest, turnout rates, level of Internet skills, and political knowledge. These characteristics likely influence the magnitude of any effects found, or, indeed, the likelihood of finding any effect. A further omission which this study tries to correct for is the quasi-exclusive focus of existing online mobilization research on changes in turnout, while ignoring additional aspects – impact on campaign donations, involvement in campaign activities, or simply an increased tendency of talking about politics with neighbors. The latter constitute equally important barometers of democratic vitality; if an effect of online mobilization would be observed on any of these factors, perhaps there is a well-deserved place for the new electronic tools of mobilization in the current campaigning space.

3. Hypotheses and methodology

The ‘testing ground’ for the hypotheses mentioned above is the 2009 European Parliament elections, one of the most recent cases where online tools (campaign websites, e-mails, Facebook profiles for candidates, even Twitter) were selectively used to maintain contact with supporters throughout the campaign. Although variations exist in the extent to which the parties in each country relied on these tools, the 2009 election represents the first instance where, at a minimum, e-mails and websites were widespread throughout the EU. The data used throughout the paper is supplied by the 2009 European Election Study (European Election Study 2009), which collected information about how representative samples of citizens in each of the 27 countries of the EU experienced the campaign. The EES also has a longitudinal component, where a core set of questions has been fielded in every European

³⁵ A survey will always be confronted by the fact that a relevant characteristic, such as political interest, might make the respondents more susceptible to being reached by online partisan appeals (e.g. volunteering one’s e-mail address in order to receive newsletters from a party organization). If this is indeed the case, it becomes very difficult to establish the independent effect of partisan appeals on political interest. Experiments avoid this by randomly selecting participants who are then subjected to the treatment (receiving an e-mail or a newsletter).

Parliament election since 1979.³⁶ However, pre-2009 elections will not constitute the focus here, as more detailed items about online and offline mobilization was only included in the 2009 study.

The data collection took place simultaneously in all 27 countries, starting with the 8th of June; the preferred method was CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing), while the desired sample size was 1.000 respondents from each country. In some countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) representative phone sampling was not possible; here, 30 per cent of the respondents were reached via telephone, while the remaining 70 per cent were subjected to a face-to-face interview (van Egmond/Sapir/van der Brug/Hobolt/Franklin 2010: 5). The sample sizes for each country ranged from 1.000 (among others, Denmark, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Malta, Portugal) to a maximum of 1.020 (the Czech Republic). In order to correct for sampling disparities (based on age, gender, education and region), as well as non-response bias, weights were incorporated into the analyses presented throughout the following sections.

3.1 Hypotheses

While one has to acknowledge the exploratory nature of this analysis, largely motivated by the lack of investigations into how online mobilization is used, and what it's effects are, I have also tried to put forth a set of hypotheses which will be tested.

H1: Online mobilization exerts a positive impact on an individual's level of engagement in the 2009 European Parliament campaign, independent from that of more traditional types of mobilization.

My first hypothesis tests whether an individual's level of engagement in the 2009 race can be directly linked to them having received during the election campaign period online messages from a campaign organization. To the extent that these messages contain information about prominent issues which come into focus during the campaign, or rather try to stimulate an emotional response from the recipient, they could lead to a higher level of involvement.

36 In 1984 a set of questions was simply appended to the Eurobarometer (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm), and made available as part of that dataset. In all other years, the research project has been completely separate from the Eurobarometer.

H2: A respondent's level of political interest will have a positive impact on the likelihood of being contacted through both online and offline channels.

Past investigations (e.g. Karp/Banducci/Bowler 2008) have shown that parties tend to contact those who already are more politically active, and have displayed signs of this in the past (either through campaign contributions, or as registered members of a party). I assume here that a similar dynamic takes place in the context of European Parliament elections (given that I have no information on past campaign contribution, I use political interest as a proxy measure for political activity). Furthermore, this second hypothesis assumes that in this aspect there is little difference between online and offline mobilization – parties will tend to use a similar logic of contact (mobilizing, as opposed to 'chasing'³⁷) when engaging in online mobilization efforts.

3.2 Variables

The dependent variable used in this analysis, political engagement, is an index constructed from items found in the EES questionnaire. It was operationalized as the extent to which a respondent engaged, during the course of the campaign, in a number of behaviors: watching a TV program about the election, reading about the election in the newspaper, or talking with friends or family about the election. It is assumed that a higher frequency of engaging in such behaviors denotes that a respondent is more psychologically involved in the election campaign (Eulau/Schneider 1956) and cares about its outcome to a greater extent. Although the EES dataset contained one other item related to political engagement³⁸, a factor analysis conducted on the four potential items which could have gone into the scale (the three behaviors listed above, and attending a rally/meeting), revealed that this element does not load particularly well on the factor extracted in any of the 27 countries in the dataset. Taking into account the considerable costs of time and information associated with this type of behavior, it is likely that only a minority of the most politically interested respondents in the sample have ever engaged in such action.³⁹ As a result of this, I

³⁷ See Rohrschneider (2002).

³⁸ "How often did you do any of the following during the four weeks before the European election – attend a public meeting or rally about the election?".

³⁹ Using the example of Belgium, 30 per cent of respondents in our sample often watched a TV program about the election, 23 per cent often read about the election in a newspaper, and 17 per cent often talked with friends/family about the election. Only 4 per cent often attended meetings or rallies connected with the election. Belgium seems to be particularly active in this last regard when compared to the Czech Republic (2 per cent), Germany (1.5 per cent), Spain (0.9 per cent), or Denmark (0.3 per cent). The average for EU27 countries is just below 2 per cent of respondents who often take part in meetings or rallies.

have chosen to exclude attending meetings or rallies from the scale of political engagement, and only rely on the three activities mentioned in the beginning: following election developments on TV or in the print media, and talking with friends or family about the election campaign. The index measures the intensity with which a respondent engaged in these activities, ranging from 3 (none) to 9 (all were pursued often during the campaign).

At first glance, Table 1 suggests that my measure of political engagement does not meet conventional standards of reliability (generally, between .7 and .8). However, it must be kept in mind that Cronbach's α is directly proportional to the number of items in the scale (Cortina 1993); part of the reason for which the values in the table tend to be in the .5-.6 range is the fact that only three items comprise the scale tested. This combined with the fact that reliability measures of .8 are generally only encountered for cognitive tests⁴⁰ should allay serious concerns that my constructed measure of political engagement is inadequate.

| Country | Cronbach's α | Country (cont.) | Cronbach's α |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Austria | .533 | Latvia | .687 |
| Belgium | .693 | Lithuania | .710 |
| Bulgaria | .639 | Luxembourg | .522 |
| Cyprus | .663 | Malta | .620 |
| Czech Republic | .679 | Netherlands | .598 |
| Denmark | .494 | Poland | .681 |
| Estonia | .619 | Portugal | .718 |
| Finland | .686 | Romania | .652 |
| France | .495 | Slovakia | .691 |
| Germany | .540 | Slovenia | .508 |
| Greece | .551 | Spain | .586 |
| Hungary | .675 | Sweden | .535 |
| Ireland | .672 | United Kingdom | .575 |

40 Kline (2000) suggests that most ability tests generally have reliability scores of about .7, while psychological constructs can have scores below .7, depending on their complexity (Field, 2009, p. 675).

Italy .699

Table 1: Scale reliability measures (Cronbach's α) for the political engagement scale.

My main independent variable measures the extent to which a respondent has been subjected to online mobilization appeals, under the form of political e-mails or campaign messages transmitted through social networks (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn). The Voter Survey asks respondents whether, during the campaign, they received these two types of messages; the final measure is an additive index, which ranges from 0 (respondent did not receive any of these two types of messages) to 2 (respondent received both kinds of messages during the campaign).⁴¹

In order to assess the real impact of my main independent variable on the dependent one, a series of controls have been introduced in the analysis. Age of the respondent, as well as educational achievement have been included as important individual-level predictors; they have been shown to directly impact a person's ability to properly evaluate the importance of politics, and of the outcomes of their participation (Solt 2008: 52). Age was measured in years, whereas education was recorded on a country-specific scale.⁴² Gender has also been included, as a dichotomous variable; past investigations have shown that women tend to be slightly less politically engaged than men (Burns/Schlozman/Verba 2001: 64–68). Religious attendance also represents a potential predictor of political engagement⁴³, albeit possibly more so in the US and European Protestant context; being active in a religious congregation might strengthen social bonds with other members in the community, and expose the individual to political cues. In the EES Voter Survey, religious attendance was measured on a 6-point scale, from 1 ("never") to 6 ("several times a week"). Finally, union membership could also have a significant impact on engagement; unions regularly attempt to mobilize their members (Radcliff/Davis 2000), which could lead to a heightened perception of the election as important. In the survey, union membership is recorded

41 The respondents were only required to report whether or not they had been contacted in this manner, not the intensity with which such contacts occurred. I consider it plausible, however, that the diversity of sources from which campaign messages would be sent is correlated with the number of messages received during the campaign period.

42 The respondents were asked to name the highest educational level they had completed. The scales used range from 8-point (Malta) and 9-point (Germany, Latvia, Slovenia) ones, to 18-point (Spain) and 20-point (Luxembourg) ones. Given the differences in scales, the coefficients for education should not be compared between countries.

43 See Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, pp. 320–325), although they tend to refer to political engagement as synonymous with participation.

on a 4-point scale: 1, if no one in the respondent's household is a union member; 2, if someone in the household (not the respondent) is a member; 3, if the respondent him/herself is a member; 4, if both the respondent and someone else in the household are union members.

In distinction to the socio-demographic ones mentioned so far, the following two predictors refer to psychological constructs. A respondent's external political efficacy (Abramson/Aldrich 1982; Easton/Dennis 1967; Finkel 1985; Pollock III 1983) was included in the model, to control for the fact that individuals who believe that the political system (in this case, the EU Parliament) is more responsive to their input are also more likely to be interested in the result of an electoral campaign. In this analysis, external political efficacy was operationalized as the extent to which the respondent agrees that the "EU Parliament considers [the] concerns of EU citizens", and measured on a 5-point scale – from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). A second predictor in this category is interest in politics (Brady/Verba/Schlozman/ 1995; Verba/Nie 1987); respondents who report a greater interest in political affairs might naturally be expected to display this interest by keeping up with political developments, or talking with friends or relatives about the campaign. Interest in politics was originally measured on a 4-point scale, from 1 ("very interested") to 4 ("not at all"); this scale was reversed and then recoded into a dichotomous one. On the new scale 0 denotes a low level of interest ("not at all" or "a little" on the original scale), while 1 denotes a high level of interest ("somewhat" or "very" on the original scale). Throughout the analysis I will consider political interest as a determinant of the likelihood of an individual being contacted by a party (particularly online), and not as an effect of the act of being contacted. Recent analyses (Prior 2010) suggest that political interest is an extremely stable attitude throughout the course of one's life; barring exogenous shocks (a political crisis, transition periods, a particularly salient election campaign), an individual's level of political interest is largely impervious to change. Given evidence of this stability, the natural causal connection between interest and being mobilized seems to run from the former to the latter.

A final set of predictors attempt to control for traditional mobilization attempts made by parties during the campaign. In this analysis, I make a distinction between personal, face-to-face attempts (at the doorstep of one's house, in the street, or in other circumstances) and impersonal ones (via phone, direct mail, or flyer through the

post). The final measures of personal and impersonal 'offline' mobilization were simply additive indexes of the respective sets of behaviors, where higher values indicate that a respondent had been approached in more circumstances, or contacted through multiple methods.⁴⁴ Each index ranges from 0 (no contact) to 3 (contacted through all three channels).

The choice of a path model was motivated by the multitude of connections between my chosen independent variables. Although age influences political interest, it might also independently influence the likelihood that an individual is comfortable with using the Internet, and perhaps even receiving information from online sources. Political interest might have an independent effect on engagement with a specific electoral campaign, while at the same time having an effect on the likelihood that a respondent receives a campaign message or appeal, by online or offline channels. In addition to these considerations, it becomes evident that not all predictors occupy the same temporal space or exhibit the same underlying stability: whereas gender or religious attendance are very stable characteristics, and political interest is seen here as a deep attitude which a respondent develops in their formative years, other factors exhibit more fluctuation. The latter category includes precisely our variables of interest: online and offline political mobilization, which are highly dependent on external factors (closeness of the campaign, type of mobilization etc). Given this, a funnel of causality design was preferred (Campbell/Converse/Miller/Stokes 1960; Miller/Shanks 1996; Shanks/Miller 1990). The first block of predictors constitutes socio-demographic factors, which are largely stable throughout a campaign context. These, in turn, represent predictors of deep attitudinal traits, such as political interest, or political efficacy. These attitudes are largely impervious to short-term campaign influence, but rather modulate the influence which campaign cues have on the individual. Finally, a combination of these long-term attitudes and short-term, campaign-specific, factors influence my dependent variable, campaign engagement (for a schematic presentation of the basic model tested here, please consult Illustration 13 on page 72).

3.3 Country selection

44 Similar to online mobilization, respondents were not asked the frequency with which they were contacted, but simply whether or not they had been contacted in a specific manner. This does not distinguish between two hypothetical individuals who might have been contacted only via telephone, but one had received 10 calls, while the other one had only received one call.

Testing the model on all 27 EU countries did not seem feasible, given that my main interest lies in online mobilization, where not all countries exhibited a similar intensity of effort. It seems likely that the smaller the share of the population that was reached by online channels, the higher the likelihood that this is a group particularly uncharacteristic of the population at large in terms of political interest and information. In an attempt to provide for as stringent of a test as possible, I have reduced the sample of countries to those where at least 5 per cent of the population was reached by either a political e-mail or a social network message during the campaign. It is likely that in these contexts the influence of political interest on the likelihood of being contacted through online channels during the campaign is minimized, thus allowing for the greatest likelihood of discovering an independent effect of mobilization on engagement. If even in this environment such an effect is lacking, there is considerable doubt that it could be found for the countries excluded.

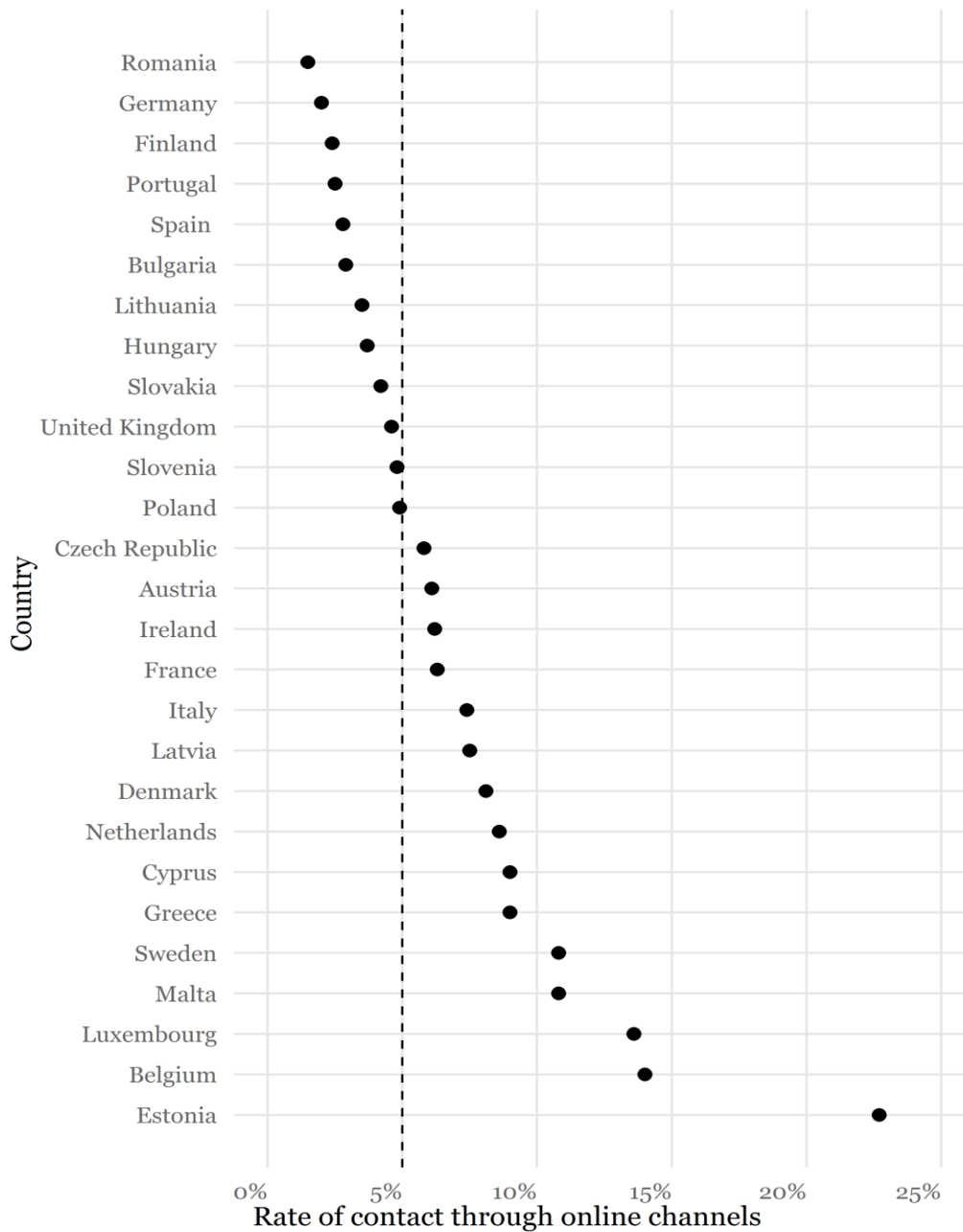


Illustration 2: Rates of online contact (email or social network message combined) for all EU 27 countries.

Illustration 2 shows that for a considerable number of countries in which a European Parliament election campaign was carried out in 2009, fewer than 5 per cent of respondents received either an e-mail or a social network message from a campaign

organization.⁴⁵ To a considerable extent, the cleavage between countries can also be depicted as one based on democratic experience (overlapping with income, or accession rounds to the EU): generally, we see that countries from the Eastern Bloc, as well as Southern European ones can be found below the 5 per cent contact threshold. However, this is not entirely an adequate explanation, as Germany and Finland can also be found under the threshold, whereas countries such as Latvia or the Czech Republic exceed these rates of contact. The final sample on which I will test my path model consists of (in ascending order of online contact rates during the campaign): the Czech Republic, Austria, Ireland, France, Italy, Latvia, Denmark, Netherlands, Cyprus, Greece, Sweden, Malta, Luxembourg, Belgium, and Estonia.

4. Analysis and results

In the following pages I will focus on a few of the connections which can be observed between the main variables of interest: political interest, age, online and offline mobilization. The differences observed particularly between online and offline mobilization, as they relate to political interest and age, suggest that the former have yet to democratize the political space, as some of their more enthusiastic supporters have claimed.

The first finding I would like to point to concerns the way in which political parties rely on online mobilization – largely as a complement to more traditional types of voter contact. Table 2 presents the extent to which the two groups are separate from each other, or largely overlap. The first column presents the share of those contacted through traditional channels, out of those contacted through online channels; the second column displays the share of those contacted through online channels, out of those contacted through offline channels (the percentages were obtained by using weighted data). What the numbers suggest is that, in most countries analyzed here, those contacted through online channels represent a sub-group of those contacted through traditional channels. Taking the extreme example of Italy, all of those contacted through e-mails and social network message were also contacted through more traditional channels; the group of those reached through online messages represents only 9 per cent of those contacted offline. The variation is certainly not

45 For the purpose of constructing this proportion, respondents who answered "don't know" were considered as having not received an e-mail or a social network message.

insignificant; particularly when considering the examples of Netherlands or Greece, where only 66 per cent or 68 per cent of those reached online were also reached offline. Similarly, in both Denmark and Estonia, close to a fifth of those contacted offline were also reached online. If we leave aside these outliers, the picture which Table 2 paints is one where traditional contacts still dominate the campaign landscape. Online contacts seem to be established either only with those that were first contacted offline and volunteered an e-mail address for purposes of further communication during the campaign, or with those who offered their e-mail as a result of a visit to a party's website (or who 'friended' a candidate on Facebook).

| Country | Share of offline contacts out of online contacts | Share of online contacts out of offline contacts |
|----------------|---|---|
| Austria | 97.8% | 8.1% |
| Belgium | 91.8% | 14.7% |
| Cyprus | 90.3% | 11.0% |
| Czech Republic | 80.0% | 4.8% |
| Denmark | 76.5% | 18.8% |
| Estonia | 80.3% | 19.2% |
| France | 80.6% | 6.6% |
| Greece | 68.6% | 13.2% |
| Ireland | 98.3% | 6.5% |
| Italy | 100% | 9.0% |
| Latvia | 84.9% | 6.6% |
| Luxembourg | 96.3% | 15.9% |
| Malta | 99.0% | 12.9% |
| Netherlands | 66.2% | 13.4% |
| Sweden | 96.4% | 11.9% |

Table 2: Extent of overlap between respondents contacted through traditional methods, and respondents contacted online.

Illustration 3 reveals that, from a cross-national perspective, there is a connection between e-mailing used in campaigns and the use of social networking messages (in the figure dots represent the share of respondents in each country who received, during the campaign, at least one such message). Although there is considerable

variation between the two, countries which have tended to make more use of e-mailing during the campaign also tend to employ social networking profiles and messages as part of their campaign mobilization armory. A complete outlier in terms of e-mailing is Estonia, with a rate of contact (22 per cent) that is twice as large as that of the 'runner up' (Luxembourg, with 10 per cent); even here, however, Luxembourg tended to rely to a slightly greater extent on social networking platforms, as opposed to Estonia. In the aggregate, the ranking for e-mailing and social network message use tends to produce the same countries at the head of the pack, as well as the same group of

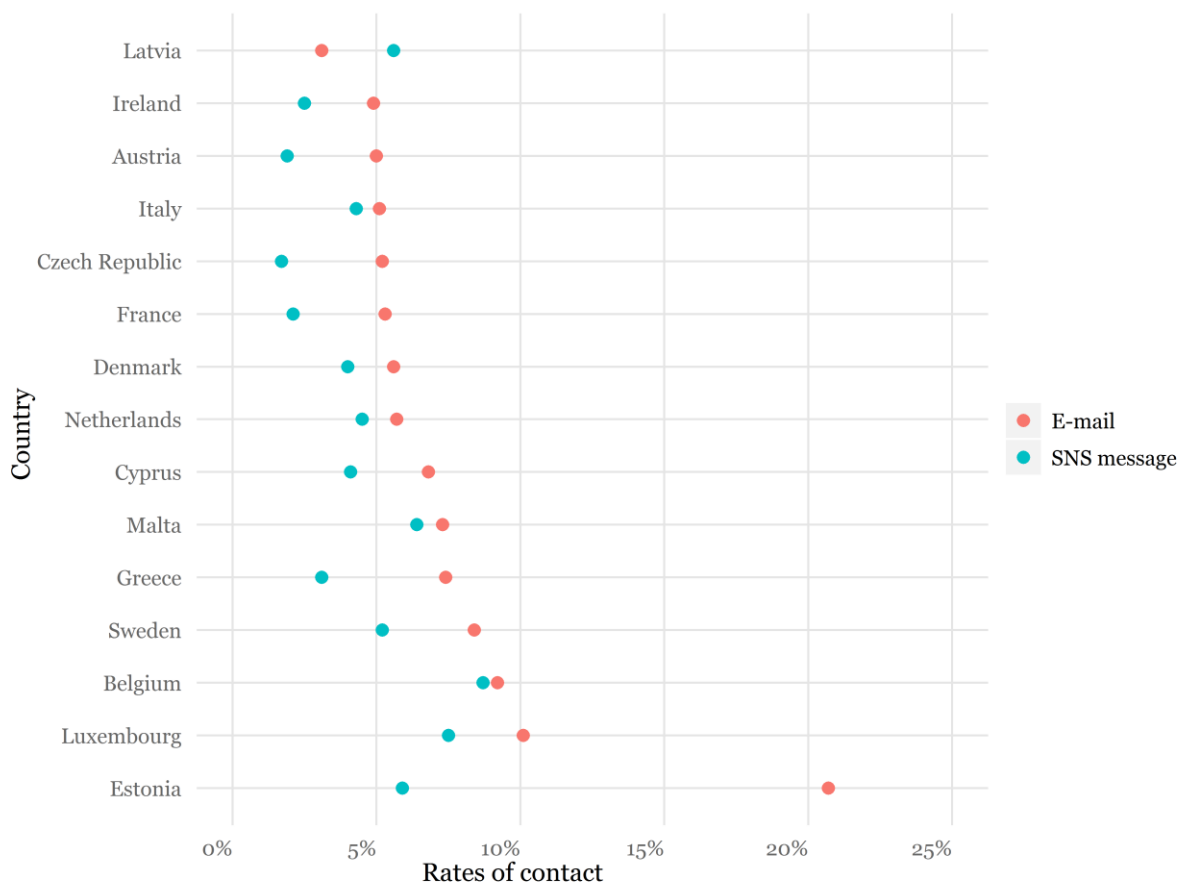


Illustration 3: Rates of contact by means of e-mail and social network messages during the 2009 European Parliament elections

When focusing within each national context we observe that there is, indeed, a connection between political interest and the likelihood of receiving an online message during the context of the 2009 campaign: more politically interested respondents have

a higher likelihood of being contacted in this manner (Table 3). As can be seen, for most countries in the sample, the more politically interested one is, the higher the likelihood that the will be contacted online by a political party during the campaign.⁴⁶ The estimated likelihoods are particularly conservative, given that even if a respondent was contacted both through e-mails and Facebook messages (an occurrence far more likely at high levels of interest) they were coded the same as a respondent who was contacted only through e-mail or social network message.

| | Not at all interested | A little interested | Somewhat interested | Very interested | N |
|----------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------|
| Austria | .01 | .05 | .05 | .11 | 74 7 |
| Belgium | .06 | .14 | .15 | .26 | 85 2 |
| Cyprus | .03 | .08 | .07 | .14 | 10 34 |
| Czech Republic | .06 | .05 | .07 | .02 | 70 8 |
| Denmark | 0 | .05 | .06 | .16 | 63 5 |
| Estonia | .21 | .26 | .19 | .28 | 68 9 |
| France | .04 | .02 | .06 | .16 | 57 3 |
| Greece | .07 | .07 | .10 | .11 | 56 8 |
| Ireland | .01 | .04 | .09 | .08 | 93 8 |
| Italy | .04 | .04 | .11 | .22 | 86 3 |
| Latvia | .03 | .08 | .07 | .12 | 715 |
| Luxembourg | .07 | .09 | .16 | .20 | 78 7 |
| Malta | .12 | .10 | .09 | .13 | 94 |

⁴⁶ For this table, I only distinguished between not having been contacted online and being contacted through such channels (either e-mail, Facebook message, or both).

| | | | | | |
|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|
| | | | | | 5 |
| Netherlands | .18 | .04 | .08 | .21 | 76 |
| | | | | | 3 |
| Sweden | .04 | .10 | .09 | .22 | 76 |
| | | | | | 3 |

Table 3: Likelihood of being contacted through online means for the 15 countries in the sample, broken down according to the level of political interest of the respondent.

Although less consistent, a similar trend can be observed for both personal and impersonal offline mobilization, which suggests that parties may, indeed, target those who are most likely to show up to vote in the course of a second-order election. Going after non-partisans might make little sense for these types of elections, as the likelihood of mobilizing them with issues that don't particularly arouse the interest of the electorate is very small indeed. Age establishes a clearer distinction between online and offline mobilization (see Table 4). Whereas it is clearly associated with the likelihood of being contacted through online means (the correlation coefficient is statistically significant in 10 of the 15 countries in the sample), the association with impersonal and personal offline mobilization is weaker. For impersonal offline mobilization, the coefficient is significant in 6 countries; even where it isn't, the direction of the coefficient tends to also be positive – older respondents are more likely to be reached through a variety of methods (telephone, flyer etc) compared to younger ones. We find little association between age and personal offline mobilization – the coefficients are significant in only 3 countries, and there is no discernible patterns in terms of their direction. The result is plausible considering that party organizations have little control over the types of persons that party workers will try to approach.

An important question is whether online mobilization is used to target a different category of potential voters than offline mobilization, or is rather employed as recurrent stimulus applied to those who have already been 'activated' through other methods. For this, I merged impersonal and personal offline mobilization into a single offline mobilization scale; following this, both online and offline mobilization were recoded into dichotomous variables (whether or not a respondent was reached through one of these types of contact channels). The cross-tabulation of these two variables presents us with the proportion of respondents who were contacted by online means, yet not by offline means as well. This proportion tends to be very small: e.g. in Belgium, only 1 per cent of respondents (entire sample) were contacted exclusively

online. In fact, if one were to summarize the entire sample of countries, the breakdown would be the following: in seven countries the share of respondents contacted through online means only is between 0 and 1 per cent, in five countries it is between 1 and 2 per cent, in two countries between 2 and 3 per cent, while in Estonia it is approximately 4.5 per cent. Naturally, if we were to speak about the populations of these countries, only for Estonia would we have confidence in asserting that such respondents represent a sizable proportion of the entire electorate (they would be between 1.5 and 7.5 per cent of the population).

When we specifically talk about the degree of correspondence between those who were mobilized online and those who were mobilized offline, variation appears. In Italy, all of those who received an online message were also contacted through offline means; on the other hand, only 66 per cent of those reached through online channels had also been contacted through offline ones (for Greece the share is 68 per cent, for the Czech Republic it is 80 per cent, whereas for Malta it is 99 per cent). These differences may suggest important variation in how parties employ online channels of voter mobilization across national contexts, and could signal the potential for reinforcement of differences in political interest or for transcending this barrier.

| | Online mobilization | Impresonal offline mobilization | Personal offline mobilizat ion |
|----------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Austria | -.078* | .004 | -.059 |
| Belgium | -.251* | .123* | -.009 |
| Cyprus | -.149* | .026 | -.011 |
| Czech Republic | -.224 | .090* | .115* |
| Denmark | .027 | .057 | -.007 |
| Estonia | -.309 | -.013 | -.042 |
| France | -.030 | .104* | -.014 |
| Greece | -.250* | .076 | -.085 |
| Ireland | -.064 | .071 | .013 |
| Italy | -.144* | .170* | -.027 |
| Latvia | -.181* | .013 | -.092* |
| Luxembourg | -.154* | -.001 | .016 |

| | | | |
|-------------|--------|-------|--------|
| Malta | -.299* | .146* | .026 |
| Netherlands | -.148* | -.002 | -.015 |
| Sweden | -.079* | -.063 | -.082* |

Table 4: Correlation coefficient (Spearman's ρ) between age and the three types of mobilization: online, impersonal offline, and personal offline (' denotes statistical significance at the .05 level).*

A brief look at the χ^2 measure of association between the two types of mobilization reveals that, indeed, those most likely to be contacted online are also more likely to receive an offline contact (see Table 5). In 13 out of the 15 cases, the association is positive and statistically significant between the two variables (Ireland, one of the cases for which an association could not be found, simply displayed tremendous rates of offline contacting during the campaign, which 'diluted' the share of those who were contacted online). It appears plausible that respondents who had previously had contact with the party either in a traditional setting (such as an event, a rally, a stand at a street corner) or through online means (visiting a party's web page) simply made contact details available so that the party could contact them through an alternative method as well.

| | χ^2 | Sig. | N |
|----------------|----------|------|------|
| Austria | 14.045 | .000 | 745 |
| Belgium | 9.756 | .002 | 848 |
| Cyprus | 13.845 | .000 | 1032 |
| Czech Republic | 19.542 | .000 | 708 |
| Denmark | 48.111 | .000 | 635 |
| Estonia | 87.088 | .000 | 692 |
| France | .306 | .580 | 573 |
| Greece | 10.869 | .001 | 568 |
| Ireland | 2.459 | .117 | 938 |
| Italy | 14.903 | .000 | 868 |
| Latvia | 12.083 | .001 | 714 |
| Luxembourg | 15.278 | .000 | 788 |
| Malta | 18.264 | .000 | 945 |
| Netherlands | 16.828 | .000 | 762 |

| | | | |
|--------|-------|------|-----|
| Sweden | 6.344 | .012 | 766 |
|--------|-------|------|-----|

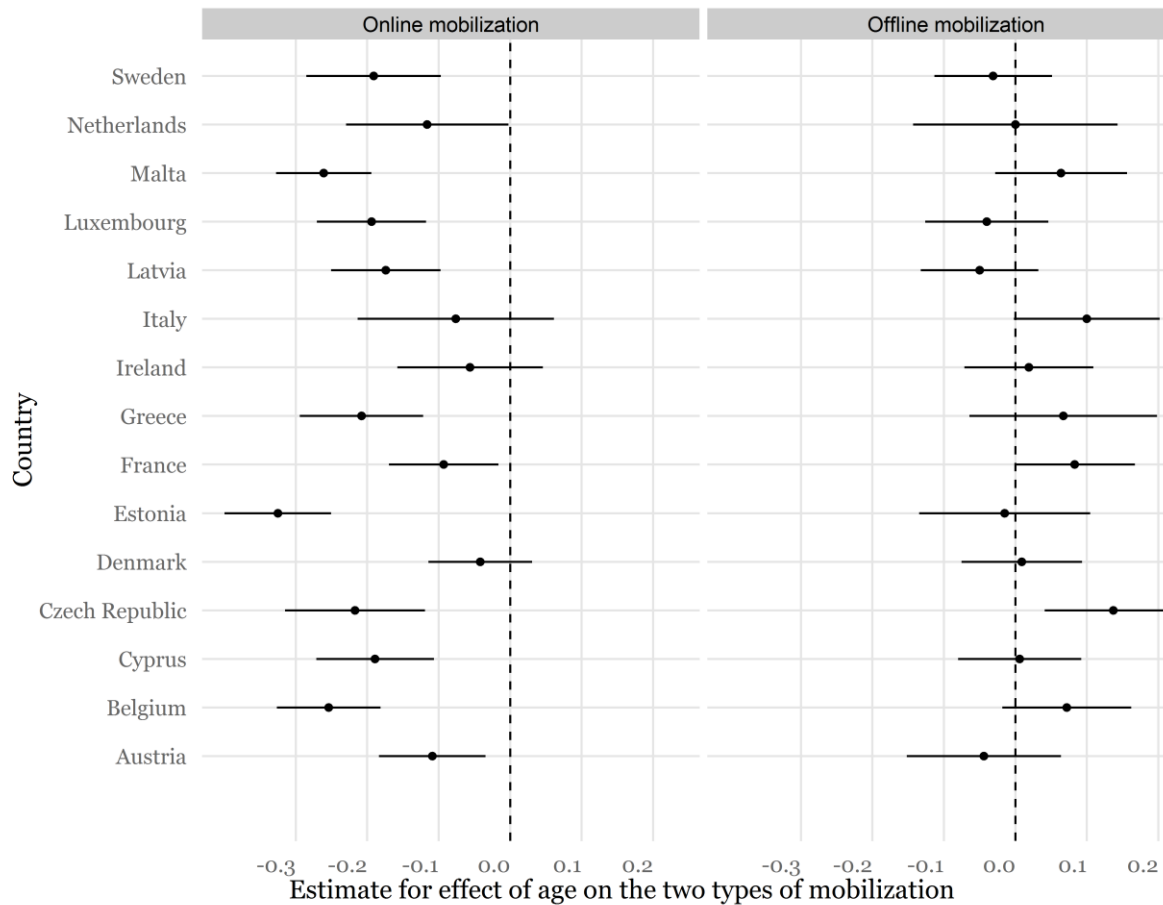
Table 5: Pearson's χ^2 for online and offline mobilization.

The following section will focus precisely on the connections between these variables when accounting for other factors (socio-demographic, as well as attitudinal), but also on their effect on campaign engagement.

4.1 Path models

The first model tested includes political efficacy as an exogenous predictor of political involvement, while online mobilization, offline mobilization and political interest are endogenous predictors (see Annex I at the end of this paper). Given that presenting model coefficients for all 10 variables included in the model (as well as estimates for covariances and means) for all 15 countries included in the sample, I have chosen to report here just standardized coefficients and standard errors for the effect of my two variables of interest, online and offline mobilization, on political engagement⁴⁷. For this, as well as all the other path models tested, I merged personal and impersonal offline mobilization into a single indicator of mobilization (it proved difficult to find literature which makes a distinction between personal and impersonal mobilization, and the determinants for the likelihood of being subjected to each type).

⁴⁷ Complete sets of results can be made available by the author upon request.



ⁱIllustration 4: Standardized coefficients for the impact of age on the likelihood of being reached by a campaign organization through online and offline means, for the 15 countries in the sample.

As Illustration 4 shows, online mobilization exerts an effect on engagement in only two of the 15 countries in the sample: Italy and Sweden. By comparison, offline mobilization is found to boost engagement in 10 out of the 15 countries examined here. Comparing the coefficients between the two columns confirms the assumption that once we factor in existing political interest, offline mobilization exerts a more powerful effect on engagement than online mobilization. Whereas the standardized coefficients for offline mobilization tend to be between 0.1 and 0.2, those for online mobilization manage to pass the 0.1 threshold only twice – again, Italy and Sweden.

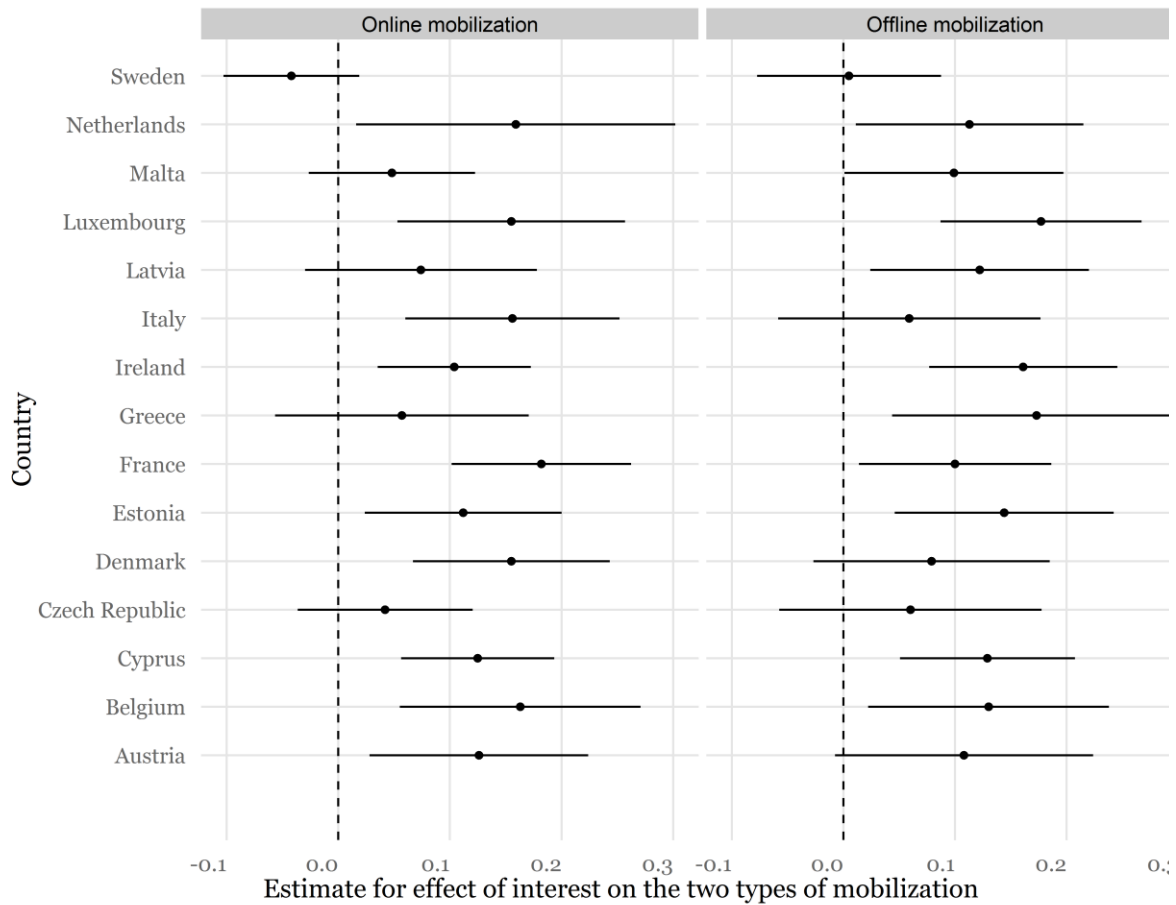


Illustration 6: Standardized coefficients for the impact of political interest on the likelihood of being reached by a campaign organization through online and offline means, for the 15 countries in the sample.

Other stories emerge from the data. Illustration 5 shows that age is a powerful predictor of the likelihood that a respondents will be contacted through online means by a campaign organization; the coefficients are statistically significant for 12 out of the 15 countries analyzed here. In the case of more traditional types of mobilization, however, age plays little role: the effect is statistically significant at the .05 level only in the case of the Czech Republic. The tentative conclusion offered by these results is a positive one: online tools for mobilization do manage to establish a link to a subset of the population (younger citizens) who might otherwise not be contacted given their high residential mobility.

Sadly, the next finding casts doubt on whether online mobilization channels can really be said to bring new groups into the ranks of the engaged electorate (at least in the case of second-order elections, such as the ones for the European Parliament). Illustration 6 shows that in the case of both online and offline mobilization, the likelihood of being reached through one of these channels is heavily influenced by a person's preexisting level of political interest. For 10 out of the 15 countries, political interest influences the extent to which an individual will be reached by online or offline mobilization cues. This represents a worrying findings for who perceive online channels as an "alternative route", through which less interested individuals could be 'nudged' toward becoming more involved at campaign time. Although the results above do suggest that those reached through online means represent a younger sub-group of the potential electorate, the clear impact of pre-existing political interest shows that inequalities persist even when costs of receiving information are lowered.

The results concerning political interest confirm previous findings (e.g. Goldstein/Ridout 2002) – campaigns do indeed tend to focus on reaching presumed supporters rather than non-partisans. It is perhaps even more likely that this strategy would be followed in second-order elections, where parties are reluctant to invest considerable funds in outreach activities and where the potential for persuasion of independents is reduced (given the predominantly low-salience nature of the issues over which the campaign is disputed). The findings in Illustration 6 reveal that in most countries this is, indeed, the strategy which parties have pursued, largely 'giving up' on large sections of the electorate in order to maximize their electoral returns per Euro spent.

There is reason to suspect that the findings concerning the limited independent impact of online mobilization on psychological involvement in the campaign could be due to improper model specification. In an attempt to reduce the possibility that this might influence the results obtained so far, I tested additional specifications. The first, presented in Illustration 7 replaces age with age squared, to correct for the fact that the effect of age on online and offline mobilization might not be linear. The results show that this has little impact on whether online mobilization displays an effect on engagement in the campaign – as before, only in the case of Italy and Sweden does online mobilization have a statistically significant impact on engagement, independent of that of traditional mobilization channels. Offline mobilization has an effect on

engagement in 10 of the 15 countries, as well as showing a greater influence than online channels (as revealed by the larger standardized coefficients). The model fit for this specification, however, is slightly worse compared to my initial model, as revealed by my reported measures of model fit (χ^2 , RMSEA, CFI, and SRMR) (see Table 6 on page 59 through Table 9).⁴⁸

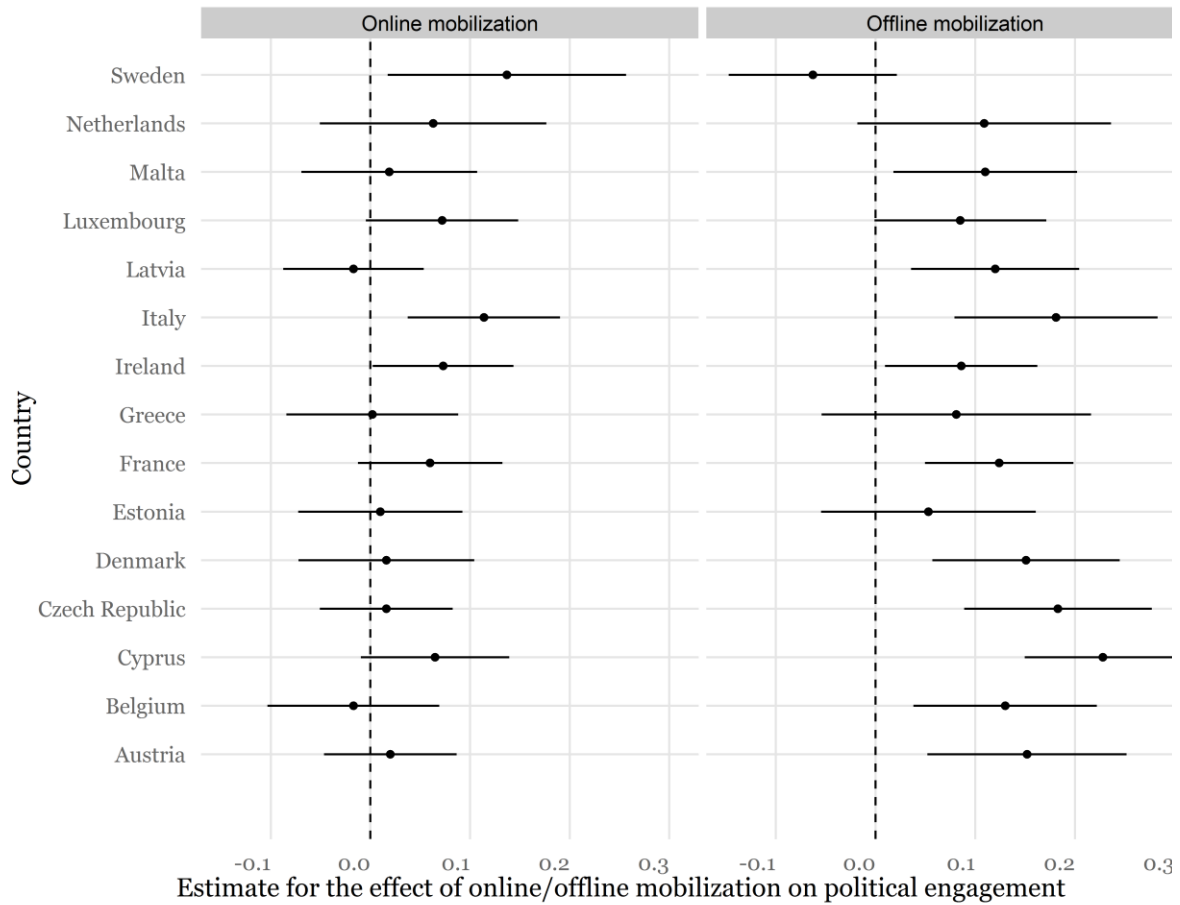


Illustration 7: Standardized coefficients and standard errors for online and offline mobilization for the second path model specification, across all 15 countries.

An additional model specification allowed offline mobilization to be an exogenous variable, by removing the causal links that allowed age and political interest to be

48 For χ^2 , SRMR (standardized root mean square residual), and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation), values which are lower denote better fitting models. For the CFI (comparative fit index), values which are higher denote better fitting models.

predictors of offline mobilization. Although we observe a slight improvement in the χ^2 values compared to the first model specification (see Table 6 on page 59), two other measures of fit (the RMSEA in Table 7 and the CFI in Table 8) largely point to this as being a poorer fitting model compared to that which considered offline mobilization as endogenous. Even here, the coefficients for online mobilization (see Illustration 8) lack statistical significance; Ireland joins Italy and Sweden in displaying a clear effect of online mobilization on political engagement. Compared to this, the effect of offline mobilization on engagement is considerably less ambiguous: in 11 of the 15 countries it exerts a positive and statistically significant independent influence over campaign engagement.

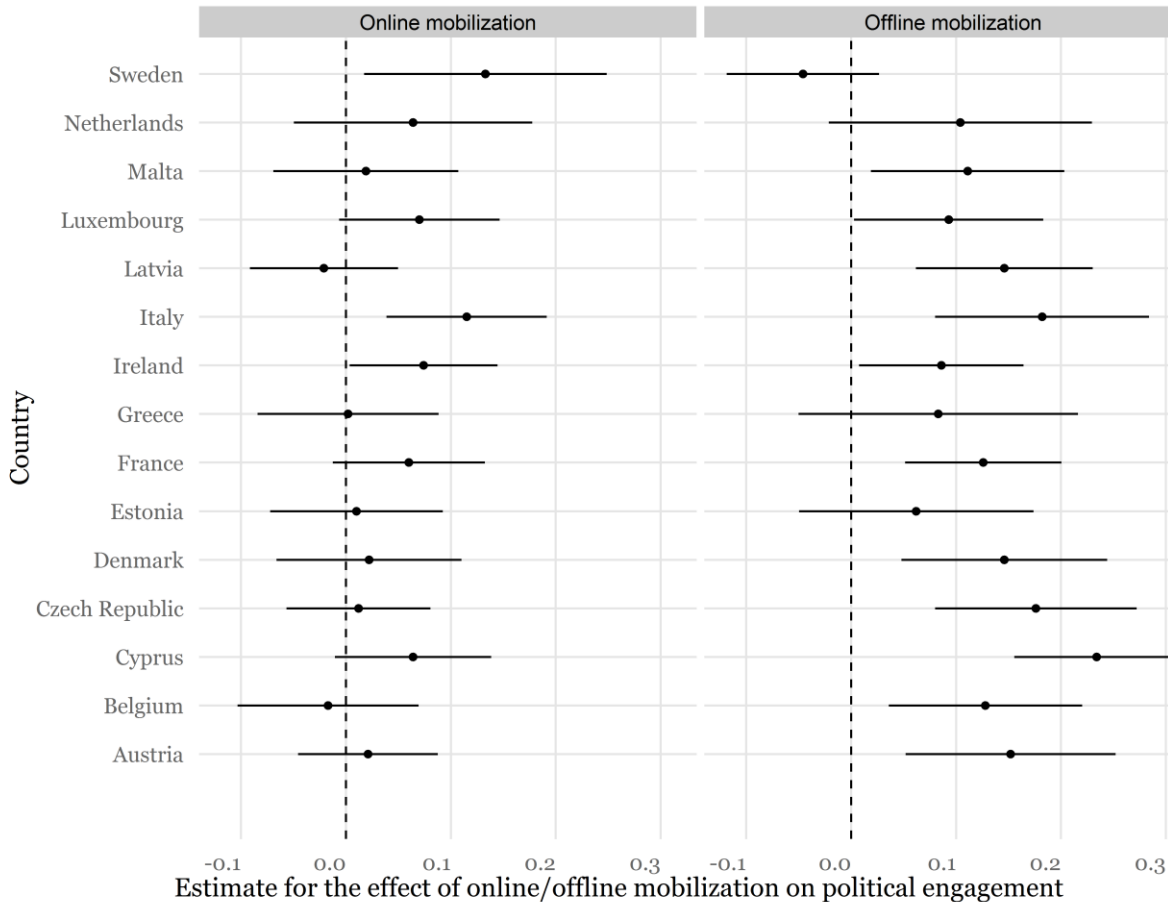


Illustration 8: Standardized coefficients and standard errors for online and offline mobilization for the third path model specification, across all 15 countries.

Given that the previous model specification seemed to yield poorer fitting models, the following model tested considered offline mobilization as endogenous (determined by age and preexisting political interest). In addition to this, the extent of news consumption was considered to be endogenous (as opposed to exogenous, which was the case in the first model tested).⁴⁹ Following Delli Carpini and Keeter (Delli Carpini/Keeter 1996: 144–145), I considered the extent to which a respondent follows the news as being influenced by their age, gender, level of education, as well as preexisting political interest.⁵⁰ The estimates, presented in Illustration 9, suggest that little has changed in terms of the independent effects that online and offline mobilization exert on campaign engagement. Only in the case of three countries could an independent and statistically significant effect of online mobilization on engagement could be found (Italy, Luxembourg and Sweden), whereas a similar effect for offline mobilization could be found in 9 countries. In terms of model fit (Table 6 on page 59 through Table 9), this specification generally represents an improvement over the initial model. This suggests that news consumption is yet another factor which is largely determined by political interest, alongside the likelihood of being mobilized by a party during the campaign. Even so, in 6 countries an independent and statistically significant effect of news consumption could be observed on engagement even after controlling for political interest.⁵¹

49 Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) discover that a causal connection from political interest to news exposure can be traced (as well as a reverse one).

50 The authors use the extent to which a respondent follows the news or discusses politics as indicators of political interest, whereas I am relying on self-reported political interest.

51 The countries are Cyprus (BETA=.1, SE=.049), Denmark (BETA=.193, SE=.033), Ireland (BETA=.247, SE=.041), Italy (BETA=.063, SE=.020), Luxembourg (BETA=.167, SE=.038), and Malta (BETA=.175, SE=.044).

Focusing on the effects of age and political interest on campaign engagement (see Illustration 10 on page 56 for the effect of age, and Illustration 11 on page 57 for the

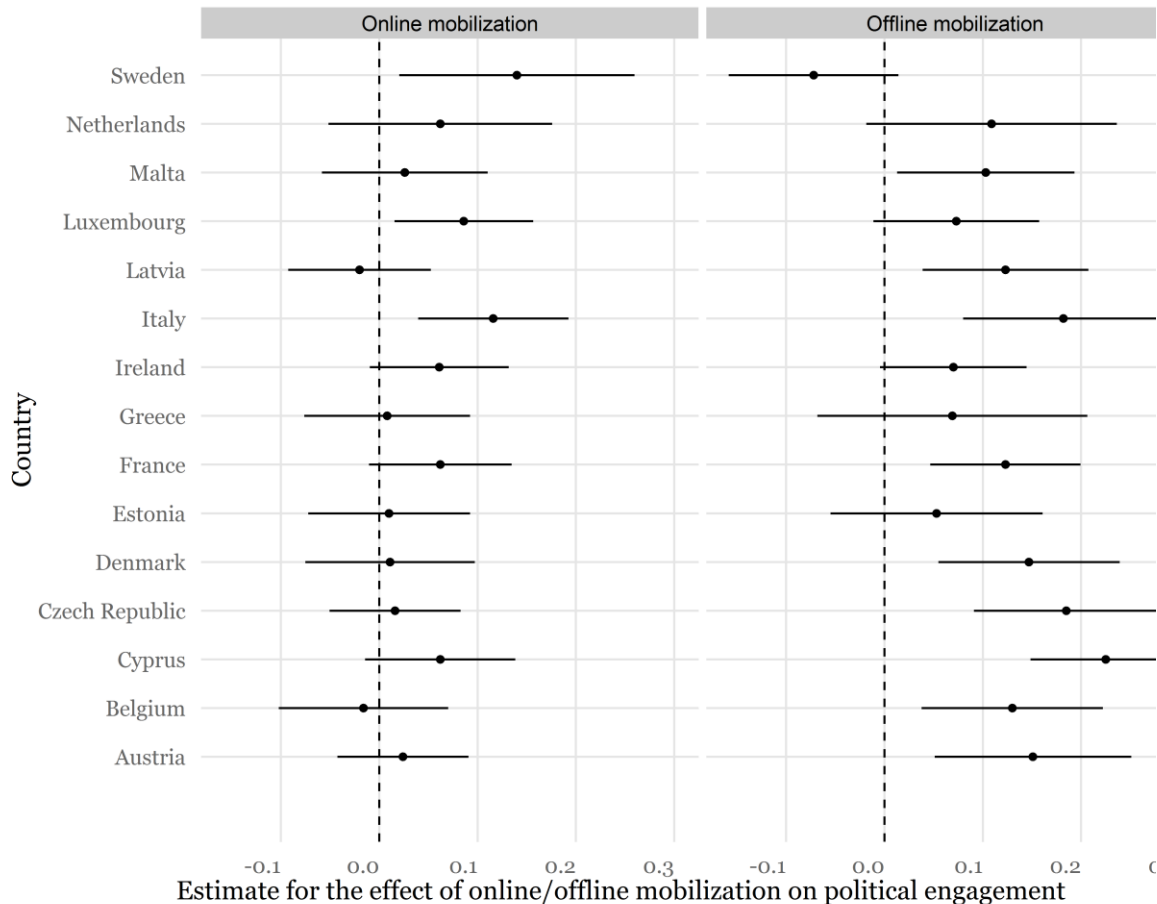


Illustration 9: Standardized coefficients and standard errors for online and offline mobilization for the fourth path model specification, across all 15 countries.

effect of political interest) we discover that despite the improvement in model fit, little has changed regarding the impact of the two variables. Age still plays an important role in influencing the likelihood that a respondent will be reached by an e-mail or social network message from a campaign organization, but it largely seems to be unimportant in terms of influencing the likelihood that one would be subjected to more traditional means of voter contact. Political interest as well exhibits a similar pattern: both types of contact are influenced by an individual’s preexisting level of political interest.

For online mobilization the explanation is likely that parties are reluctant to send unsolicited appeals to individuals, fearing that the backlash against this perceived

invasion of privacy would outweigh any gains made as a result of the contact attempt (Reilly/Deutsch 1999: 29). This simple cost/benefit analysis probably induces parties to target with electronic messages those individuals who have already manifested a willingness to be contacted in this manner: by leaving their e-mail address on the web page of a political party or at a campaign event/rally they attended, or subscribing to a e-newsletter. Since these are activities that require a certain degree of interest in political events, the causal connection starts from political interest to being reached by a party through online communication. The case of offline mobilization is harder to explain, although it is very likely that in order to maximize their returns for the campaign funds spent during a second-order election parties turned to their core groups of supporters and targeted only those neighborhoods which previously showed strong turnout in favor of the respective parties.

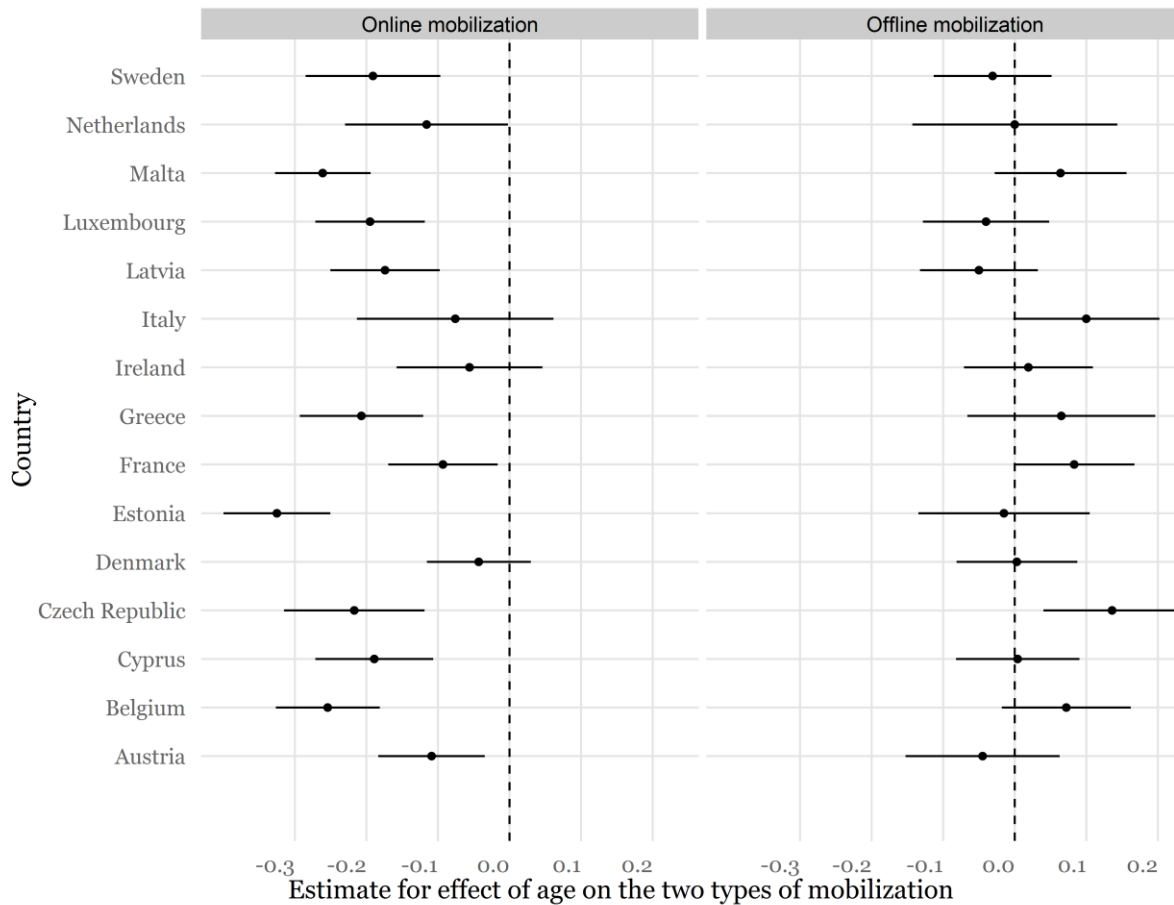


Illustration 10: Standardized coefficients and standard errors for the impact of age on the likelihood of being reached by a campaign organization through online and offline means, for the 15 countries in the sample.

As a further check on the reliability of the findings presented so far I tested two additional models. The first replaces my dependent variable (a constructed measure of psychological engagement in the campaign) with what could be considered a proxy for it: a respondent’s self-declared interest in the 2009 European Parliament election campaign.⁵² Even by relying on this measure, however, we find little change in our results (see Illustration 12). Online mobilization still doesn’t discernibly impact interest

⁵² The correlation between the two variables range from -0.381 in Austria, to -0.644 in the Czech Republic (interest in the campaign was coded on an inverse scale). Most correlations are in the -0.6 to -0.5 range.

in the 2009 campaign, whereas the effects of offline mobilization are considerably more consistent (in 9 out of 15 cases they achieve statistical significance, but only in 8 of these are they in the expected direction).

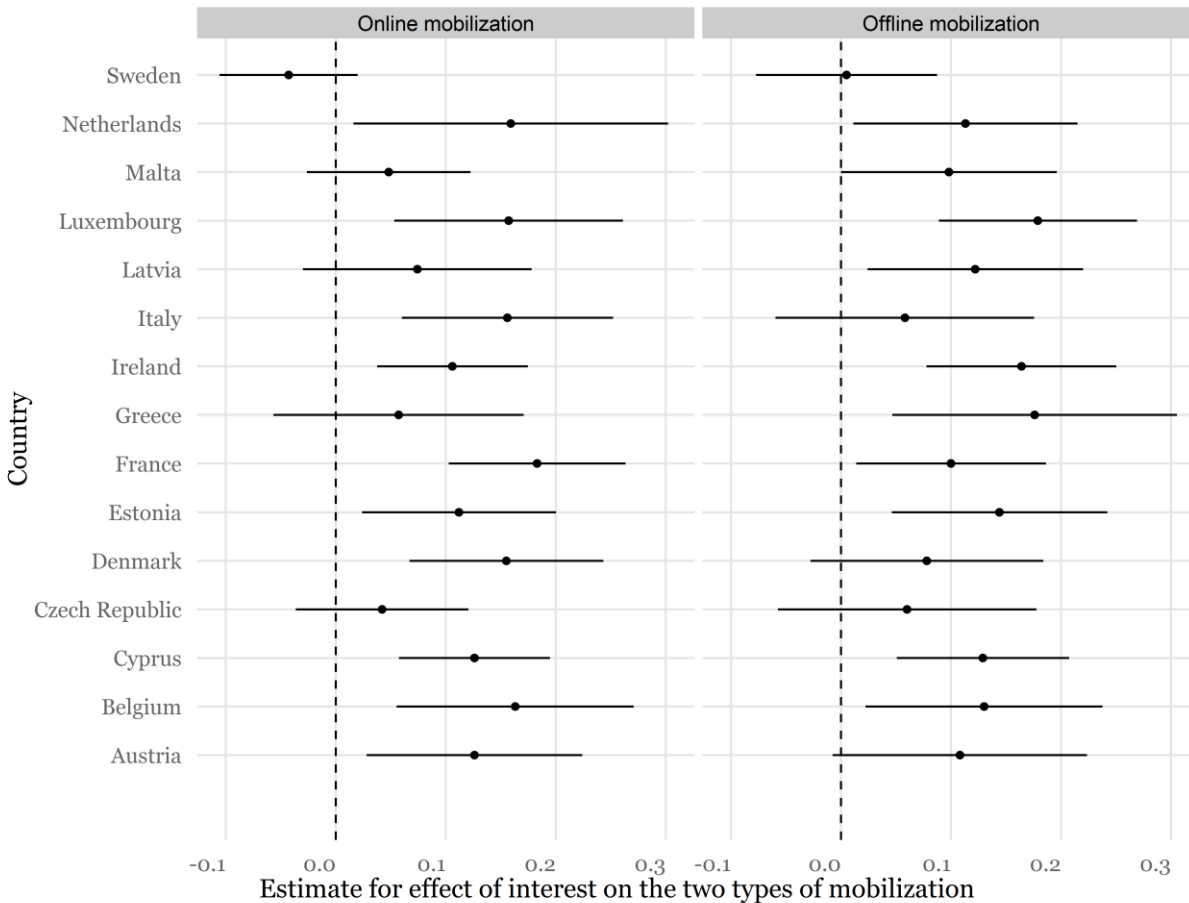


Illustration 11: Standardized coefficients and standard errors for the impact of political interest on the likelihood of being reached by a campaign organization through online and offline means, for the 15 countries in the sample.

The second model tested simply pooled all observations and ran the best fitting model (my fourth specification) on the combined sample of 14,854 respondents, grouped in 15 countries (the results are shown in Illustration 13 on page 72, at the end of this paper – the coefficients are standardized). Before running the model, all variables were centered for each national context, with the exception of gender and union membership; given the generally good fit which my fourth model specification showed,

I used this model in the analysis. Naturally, because of the huge sample on which it was tested, almost all predictors come out highly significant. What is of crucial concern here is the interplay between age, political interest, the two types of campaign mobilization on which we focus, and campaign engagement.

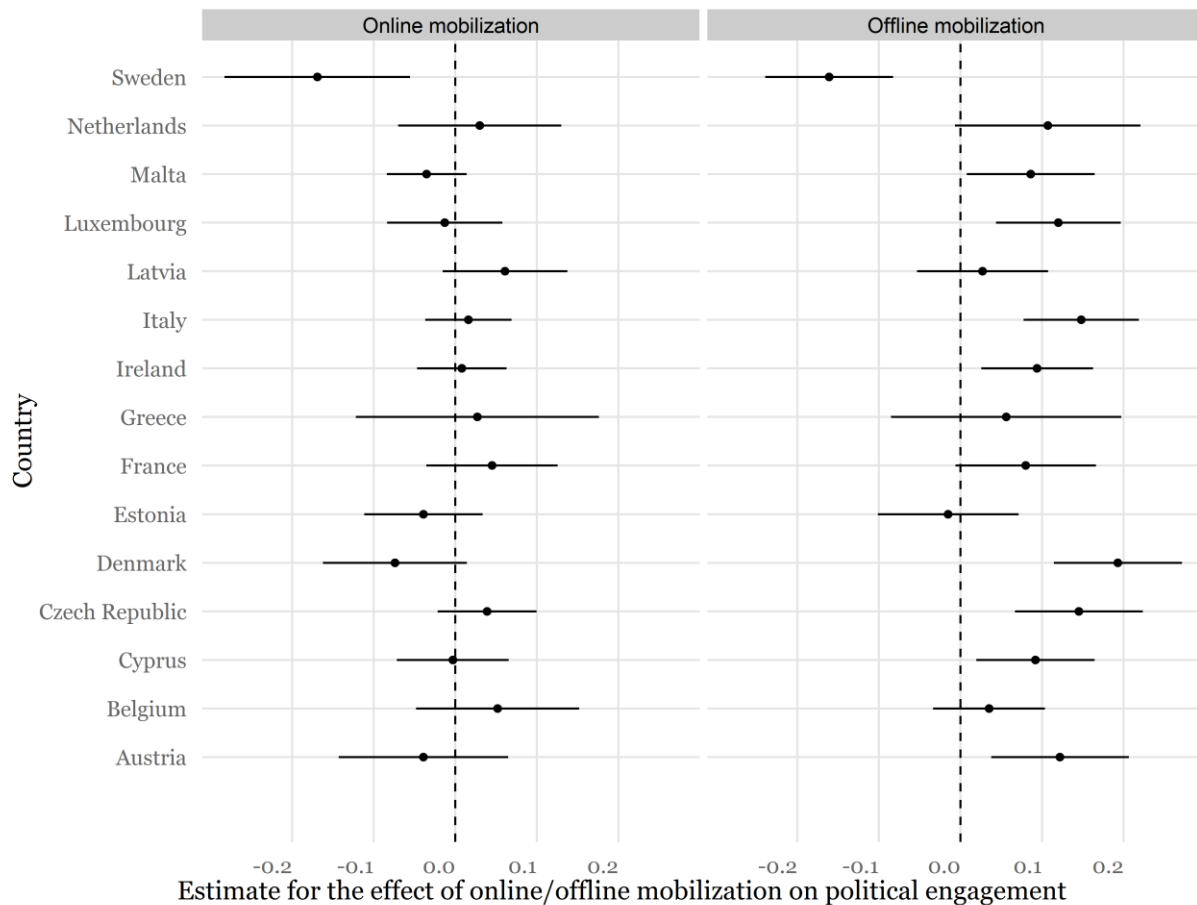


Illustration 12: Standardized coefficients and standard errors for online and offline mobilization for the fifth path model specification, across all 15 countries.

The findings of the previous models hold up even for the aggregate sample: (a) those more likely to be mobilized by online means tend to be younger than the average individual, while the same is not valid for offline mobilization, (b) pre-existing political interest has a positive and statistically significant influence on the likelihood of being reached by a campaign organization both through online and offline channels, and (c) political interest is a strong determinant of the extent to which a respondent follows

the news, which in turn independently influences campaign engagement. The surprising result concerns precisely online mobilization, which in this case has a positive and statistically significant influence on campaign engagement. Even so, the magnitude of the coefficient suggests that we are dealing with a small effect, which could only come out significant if tested on an extremely large sample: the magnitude is similar to what we found for the national samples, and its influence is about a third of that of offline mobilization.

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | N |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------|
| Austria | 140.9 | 149.8 | 131.5 | 139.8 | 140.8 | 992 |
| Belgium | 142.4 | 162.9 | 127.5 | 133.9 | 120.7 | 966 |
| Cyprus | 230.2 | 254.3 | 212.8 | 373.2 | 353.5 | 991 |
| Czech Republic | 100.3 | 103.3 | 91.4 | 113.1 | 107.0 | 1001 |
| Denmark | 379.0 | 415.0 | 361.5 | 245.4 | 250.9 | 998 |
| Estonia | 191.6 | 217.0 | 182.2 | 195.7 | 186.5 | 1002 |
| France | 132.8 | 148.2 | 128.8 | 143.3 | 135.0 | 985 |
| Greece | 262.5 | 251.9 | 259.8 | 264.1 | 259.8 | 985 |
| Ireland | 305.1 | 302.2 | 295.0 | 172.9 | 189.8 | 977 |
| Italy | 165.4 | 170.1 | 178.3 | 144.6 | 133.5 | 962 |
| Latvia | 126.3 | 129.9 | 100.3 | 129.6 | 119.3 | 998 |
| Luxembourg | 202.7 | 206.5 | 200.9 | 144.3 | 146.8 | 995 |
| Malta | 382.7 | 386.8 | 387.9 | 376.5 | 395.1 | 990 |
| Netherlands | 148.5 | 160.3 | 146.8 | 166.6 | 166.1 | 997 |
| Sweden | 355.0 | 287.3 | 315.6 | 383.4 | 527.8 | 1001 |

Table 6: Model fit statistics for the five model specifications tested: χ^2 .

Finally, three additional models were tested to verify whether an effect of online mobilization or offline mobilization on engagement is modulated by the level of political interest an individual has – in other words, whether e-mails, Facebook messages, flyers, phone calls etc. have a stronger effect at high or, more plausibly, low levels of political interest. To reduce the danger of multicollinearity arising from inserting the original variables into my model together with the constructed interaction term, I centered the measure of political interest. While the first two models test only interactions between online mobilization and interest, and offline mobilization and

interest, respectively, the final one includes interactions between interest and both types of mobilization.⁵³

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | N |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------|
| Austria | .061 | .063 | .062 | .061 | .061 | 992 |
| Belgium | .062 | .068 | .062 | .060 | .056 | 966 |
| Cyprus | .082 | .087 | .083 | .107 | .103 | 991 |
| Czech Republic | .048 | .049 | .049 | .053 | .051 | 1001 |
| Denmark | .108 | .113 | .111 | .085 | .086 | 998 |
| Estonia | .073 | .079 | .076 | .074 | .072 | 1002 |
| France | .059 | .063 | .062 | .062 | .060 | 985 |
| Greece | .089 | .087 | .094 | .089 | .088 | 985 |
| Ireland | .097 | .096 | .101 | .070 | .074 | 977 |
| Italy | .069 | .070 | .076 | .063 | .060 | 962 |
| Latvia | .057 | .058 | .052 | .058 | .055 | 998 |
| Luxembourg | .076 | .077 | .080 | .062 | .063 | 995 |
| Malta | .109 | .110 | .116 | .108 | .111 | 990 |
| Netherlands | .063 | .066 | .067 | .068 | .067 | 997 |
| Sweden | .104 | .093 | .103 | .108 | .129 | 1001 |

Table 7: Model fit statistics for the five model specifications tested: RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation).

The results suggest little in the way of a varying effect of online mobilization on engagement, depending on political interest. Out of the 15 countries on which the model was tested, the interaction effect was significant only for Latvia ($\beta=-.08$, $p=0.028$), in the expected direction: online mobilization displays a larger effect on political engagement at lower levels of political interest. A similar conclusion can be reached for offline mobilization's impact on engagement. Here, two countries displayed statistically significant results, although in opposite directions: in Denmark offline contacts seem to have a higher impact on engagement for more politically interested individuals ($\beta=.09$, $p=0.049$), while in Netherlands the impact is stronger for the less

⁵³ Due to constraints of space the model estimates and fit statistics are not presented here, although they can be made available from the author upon request.

politically interested ($\beta=-.15$, $p=0.007$). In the last model, which included both interaction terms, only offline mobilization continued to have an effect on engagement at lower levels of interest ($\beta=-.15$, $p=0.009$). At this point it appears that online mobilization does little to stimulate engagement beyond the effect which offline mobilization exhibits.

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | N |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------|
| Austria | .447 | .413 | .465 | .491 | .526 | 992 |
| Belgium | .492 | .385 | .487 | .529 | .731 | 966 |
| Cyprus | .280 | .181 | .243 | 0 | 0 | 991 |
| Czech Republic | .716 | .696 | .711 | .662 | .769 | 1001 |
| Denmark | .192 | .126 | .198 | .605 | .639 | 998 |
| Estonia | .475 | .377 | .480 | .501 | .587 | 1002 |
| France | .705 | .665 | .690 | .672 | .665 | 985 |
| Greece | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 985 |
| Ireland | .168 | .184 | .118 | .659 | .659 | 977 |
| Italy | .373 | .348 | .352 | .477 | .693 | 962 |
| Latvia | .653 | .650 | .695 | .655 | .668 | 998 |
| Luxembourg | .467 | .462 | .437 | .682 | .721 | 995 |
| Malta | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 990 |
| Netherlands | .413 | .366 | .391 | .362 | .343 | 997 |
| Sweden | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1001 |

Table 8: Model fit statistics for the five model specifications tested: CFI (comparative fit index).

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | N |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------|
| Austria | .063 | .064 | .063 | .061 | .061 | 992 |
| Belgium | .065 | .070 | .062 | .064 | .061 | 966 |
| Cyprus | .088 | .089 | .087 | .082 | .081 | 991 |
| Czech Republic | .058 | .058 | .056 | .057 | .055 | 1001 |
| Denmark | .090 | .092 | .088 | .075 | .075 | 998 |
| Estonia | .066 | .069 | .065 | .065 | .066 | 1002 |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| France | .054 | .057 | .055 | .052 | .052 | 985 |
| Greece | .102 | .102 | .100 | .098 | .099 | 985 |
| Ireland | .084 | .083 | .083 | .068 | .070 | 977 |
| Italy | .076 | .077 | .076 | .075 | .073 | 962 |
| Latvia | .063 | .064 | .056 | .063 | .061 | 998 |
| Luxembourg | .071 | .071 | .073 | .062 | .063 | 995 |
| Malta | .105 | .103 | .104 | .099 | .101 | 990 |
| Netherlands | .069 | .071 | .070 | .069 | .070 | 997 |
| Sweden | .197 | .190 | .212 | .192 | .141 | 1001 |

Table 9: Model fit statistics for the five model specifications tested: SRMR (standardized root mean square residual)

5. Discussion

The results presented here typify the inherent difficulties in trying to place Internet effects on individual political behavior, as well as on the relationship between citizens and the political system, into a neat conceptual box, such as 'transformation' or 'reinforcement'. Unlike radio or television, the Internet is an interactive medium for information and communication; as such, its effects will be dependent on how an individual chooses to use it (e.g. for entertainment or for keeping up with national or international political developments). At the same time, particularly in campaign settings, mobilization efforts are not wholly irrelevant to whether the campaign manages to reach new voters through the use of online channels of communication. Introducing elements of interactivity on the campaign website, providing multiple channels for broadcasting campaign information (Twitter, Facebook, RSS feeds) and even allowing for input from supporters under the form of a forum section is likely to appeal to a group of younger supporters or 'leaners'. This is the group who might not be willing to show up at a rally or commit to being involved in the campaign organization, but might forward friends an e-newsletter or display a support message for one of the candidates on their Facebook profile.

Confirming the results of previous studies (Di Gennaro/Dutton, 2006; Ward/Gibson/Lusoli 2003), age and political uses of the Internet do seem to be solidly connected. Even if referring specifically to campaign mobilization (e.g. Krueger 2006), the same connection exists: the group of individuals who receive campaign appeals

through online channels is disproportionately made up of younger citizens. They are the ones most likely to be comfortable in using computers as well as having the online skills that allow them to navigate the Internet. Taken by itself, this is a welcoming trend given the tendency of traditional campaign mobilization efforts to miss this socio-demographic category (they are least likely to own a land-line, least likely to have developed a partisan affinity toward a party, as well as most likely to have a high degree of residential mobility). At the same time, these online channels do not manage to significantly challenge the inequalities that exist with regard to political interest; this factor is a powerful determinant of the likelihood that an individual is contacted by a campaign organization.⁵⁴ Similarly, confirming the results of past investigations (e.g. Caldeira/Clausen/Patterson 1990), interest is also strongly associated with political participation in the context of a campaign; although the authors mentioned here refer strictly to turnout, the same logic is found to apply to other forms of campaign participation as well.

The fact that age and interest are strong predictors of the likelihood of being contacted online might not be without consequences, as it was found that on a pooled sample online mobilization does display an effect. Yet even if this might not ultimately be the case⁵⁵, effects might nonetheless be more readily visible on levels of political information. While I have not found strong support for the thesis, neither have I been able to conclusively reject it – through their ability to constantly keep in contact with large pools of supporters at minimal costs, and to transmit campaign information without the need to go through traditional media channels, these online methods of contacting voters might bring about a closer connection between individuals and parties. At the same time, the ‘Matthew effect’ (Merton, 1968)⁵⁶, conditions who these individuals are: those who are already more interested in political affairs are more

54 It is interesting to note how, at least in the context of European Parliament elections, more traditional forms of voter mobilization also seem to be influenced by political interest. Here I have speculated that the pattern can be attributed to unwillingness to invest large funds in outreach activities, which therefore made parties target ‘proven’ supporters, although alternative explanations probably exist.

55 A power analysis ought to be the next step, in an attempt to discover whether the lack of a statistically significant effect at the national level can be attributed to the sample size.

56 “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Matthew 25:29, New Revised Standard Edition).

willing to make use of these new channels of party-voter contact, and thus become even more engaged in political life. We have seen that, in a sense, the likelihood of receiving a campaign online message is influenced by age and preexisting political interest. We can also presumably add to this the manner in which parties use the Internet during a campaign (what could be called the 'supply-side' of mobilization). In the context of the European Parliament elections, at least, online mobilization seems to be strongly connected to offline mobilization. This suggests that parties are not truly attempting outreach activities, but rather maintaining the engagement of supporters first reached through offline channels by employing online channels as well. Partly attributed to the strong reaction which 'electronic spam' elicits, parties avoid targeting voters which have not previously consented to receiving online messages. The most likely circumstance where this consent was given is probably a traditional encounter with the party worker, either at the doorstep, on the street, or as a result of a telephone conversation.

The causal complexity revealed by the models tested here offers additional insights. As political interest is shown here to be such a major determinant of the likelihood of being contacted by a party, as well as of being engaged in a particular election campaign, examining its determinants seems worthwhile. Generally, the models confirm our expectations: education is strongly related to political interest (positive association), as is age (older respondents are more interested in politics), and gender (men displays higher levels of interest, *ceteris paribus*, than women). Education allows respondents to better understand the connection between political decisions taken at the national level, and their local circumstances, which results in a higher level of interest in political life. Older respondents tend to be more embedded in their respective community, as well as higher stakes in political decisions, than those younger; together, these might lead to a higher level of attentiveness regarding political events. Finally, the gender disparity can probably be attributed to a host of factors, such as the time constraints women are subjected to or the power of early socialization experiences that promote particular gendered roles. Equally important is the effect of this lower level of political interest in women, which is a lower extent of participation in political life. The status of union membership is more ambiguous: out of the 15 countries examined here, being a member in a union was associated with a higher level of political interest in only six cases (Belgium, Estonia, France, Greece, Italy, and Luxembourg). In 14 out of the 15 countries, however, the estimate of the

effect of union membership was positive. The only country for which a negative effect was observed (not statistically significant) is Sweden, an altogether understandable result when considering that trade union membership in Sweden in 2007 was estimated at 85.1 per cent of the labor force by the ILO. Given such a national context, there is insufficient variation in the sample to meaningfully distinguish between members and non-members. Finally, one we control for the other predictors (particularly interest), political efficacy displays no statistically significant effect on engagement during the campaign: the estimate for its impact was significant in only four of the 15 countries analyzed here, and in only three of these (Estonia, Luxembourg, and Netherlands) was it positive (in Sweden this was negative).

The results presented here suggest a less clear-cut role for news consumption. Age and education are its most consistent predictors: young people and those less educated tend to follow news more sporadically. Older respondents possess civic habits formed in past times, when a higher value was placed on keeping up with national and international current events. A higher level of education also makes it easier to follow current events, as one can better understand the connection between phenomena, actors and actions. The effect of other variables was not as reliable: in four out of the 15 countries gender and political interest had a statistically significant impact on news consumption (men display higher levels, as do those more politically interested). News consumption itself is found to be a statistically significant predictor of political engagement (while controlling for other variables), in six out of the 15 cases.⁵⁷ Those who tend to follow news more often are more engaged in the campaign – a general ‘foundation’ of political facts built up in between electoral cycles facilitates their participation during the campaign.

Coming back to the first hypothesis proposed here, I would have to acknowledge that the evidence has not been particularly kind to it. The effects of online mobilization on engagement are perhaps difficult to interpret, given the differences between the results on the pooled sample, and those presented for each of the countries in the sample. However, at this point, the safest verdict is to conclude that online mobilization does not manage to boost levels of campaign engagement independently

⁵⁷ In 13 out of the 15 cases the estimate of the effect is positive.

of offline mobilization. In terms of traditional mobilization, results here largely conform to the findings of a vast body of literature into the effects of party contacts on political participation (especially turnout).⁵⁸ Although my focus is on political engagement, the causal mechanism linking it to mobilization is most likely similar with that of turnout: party contacts offer information about voting procedures, important dates in the election calendar, policy issues and stances, as well as generally making a potential voter feel like their vote is sought after and their opinion important to the functioning of the political system. Through this mechanism, participation is facilitated as a result of reduced costs of involvement.

In what concerns the second hypothesis, the evidence fully confirms it: political interest displays an effect on both online and offline mobilization during the context of the European Parliament elections of 2009. I have argued that this is possibly due to the unwillingness of parties to invest considerable funds in what many perceive to be a second-order election. Limited funds translate into mobilization appeals being targeted at those who are most likely to turn out to vote (and to help convince others to vote). At the same time, social norms regarding the undesirability of electronic spam most likely leads parties and candidates to only use electronic communication with those who have already accepted it, by signing up on an e-mailing list, or leaving contact details with a party worker. It would be premature to close the book now on the issue of whether electronic communication is limited in reach to the 'gladiators' in the electorate. An e-mail or Facebook message can easily be forwarded within a group of friends, and unless we assume maximum social homophily, one would predict that it would also reach those less politically inclined. Indeed, Vissers (2009) wonders whether, with the use of new electronic communication, we are not witnessing a shift toward "preaching through the converted" – parties using supporters to spread the word to those in their social networks. At this point, however, I lack the data to verify this potential link. A potentially fruitful avenue for future research which could be more readily pursued lies in investigating whether in countries where the 2009 EP election was fought over issues of particular salience to the population (e.g. over immigration

58 See Abramson and Claggett (2001), Karp and Banducci (2004, 2007), Pattie and Johnston (2003), Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), Whiteley and Seyd (1994), Wielhouwer and Lockerbie (1994).

issues) this connection between interest and likelihood of being contacted offline disappears.

The results should be interpreted in light of the flaws they exhibit. The most obvious target is the model fit for particular countries, such as Austria, Netherlands, Malta or Sweden (here I focus mainly on RMSEA and CFI). At this point, it is not entirely clear why these countries perform poorly compared to others in the sample, although the possibility that a 'one size fits all' model might not be the best course for investigating online and offline mobilization should be taken into consideration. The second considerable deficiency refers to the difficulty in properly specifying the causal path between interest and mobilization; although the assumption made here (that interest is a stable trait) seems plausible given the specific electoral context, it rests on questionable foundations. One natural solution is to focus on panel data – in this case, however, I know of no dataset that tracks online and offline mobilization during the course of a campaign. A secondary strategy is to rely on instrumental-variable estimation (e.g. Golde/Nie 2010), by finding a variable that impacts the likelihood of being mobilized online but not interest as well. Given the need to ensure that this variable, together with others, are very powerful predictors of the likelihood of being mobilized online (to ensure a good model fit as a prerequisite for obtaining unbiased first-stage residuals), this is a task which I have not yet been able to complete in a satisfactory manner.

5.1 Outliers

How can one account for the cases of Sweden, Italy, or Ireland, which in most of the models tested so far have revealed that online mobilization can be effective in stimulating engagement in the campaign, even after controlling for offline contact? The tentative conclusions from the last pages largely dismiss the influence of online messages; however, an alternative explanation could be that the type of online campaign waged during the EP elections in these three countries was qualitatively different than in the rest analyzed here.

At least in the case of Sweden, circumstantial evidence (Joensson, 2010) suggests that parties did, indeed, invest heavily in new media efforts. Benefiting from increased budgets compared to the 2004 EP elections, Joensson (Joensson 2010: 173–174) offers an account of the campaign that highlights its personalized nature. Candidates created individual websites for themselves, social network profiles, appeared in videos

distributed over these communication platforms, or engaged in online chat sessions with supporters.⁵⁹ Other factors probably mattered more: the issues over which the campaign was fought and which might have been prominent in the content of the online messages, such as unemployment, the financial crisis, or global warming, resonated with the voters. Similarly, the presence of a new party (The Pirate Party), which relied almost exclusively on online communication, might have been responsible for the heightened sense of engagement. With the risk of making hasty pronouncements which can't be empirically tested, one could at least admit the possibility that it was the content of the online campaign in Sweden which resulted in a visible increase in engagement.

Unfortunately, there is less corroborating evidence for the case of Italy or Ireland (Bressanelli/Calderaro/Piccio/Stamati 2010; Little/Sudulich/Wall 2010). In both cases, the elections were salient, given considerations of immigration (Italy) or how to regulate the financial sector in the wake of the financial crisis (Ireland); despite this, only Ireland exhibited a rather high level of turnout. Ireland presents less of a puzzle, given the highly personalized nature of campaigning which the single transferable vote (STV) engenders. It's possible that this climate spurred a considerable amount of individual campaigning, which given funding restrictions as well as a ban on purchasing advertising on radio or TV, could have turned candidates toward online channels. For Italy, I could find little evidence that similar processes were at play.

These very brief considerations made for Sweden and Ireland point to the need for examining the content of online mobilization messages, in search for a more nuanced explanation of why they seem to be effective only in certain national contexts. They also suggest that there are limits to what mobilization efforts can achieve, if not backed by messages which resonate with voters due to the issues they bring up. Ultimately, mobilization effects are likely a function of both individual-level and party-level factors; seeing past the surface of this phenomenon requires a closer look at how parties/candidates themselves make use of the new channels for online mobilization.

59 The author also highlights the variety of platforms in use at that time, from those promoting less European integration (<http://www.EU-kritik.se>), to those established for information purposes (<http://www.europaportalen.se>), as well as those with a more politically partisan affiliation (<http://www.socialdemokraterna.se/Hem/> or <http://kampanj.moderat.se>).

6. Conclusion

It pays off to constantly keep in mind that discussing Internet effects is an endeavor that resembles “shooting at a moving target” (Jennings/Zeitner 2003: 311); any results found for one time period might be very sensitive to the particular temporal context given the extraordinarily high rate of change which politics carried over the Internet exhibits. At this point in time, and relying on information from an election cycle which doesn’t generally attract a considerable level of attention, I have to conclude that online mobilization is not particularly effective in stimulating an individual’s level of campaign engagement. There is some uncertainty as to whether this should be attributed to the medium itself, or to the way in which parties make use of online methods in a second-order campaign (we have seen a considerable overlap between online and offline mobilization for most countries in the sample). Yet even when taking this into consideration, the results presented here suggest that the Internet does not inherently possess the ability to stimulate engagement in the political process (or maybe even levels of political information); other aspects, such as the campaign context, or party strategy in using these methods, are also important factors in whether ‘clicks’ will be able to (someday) trump ‘shoe leather’.

In one interpretation, there is perhaps reason to be relieved at the fact that online messaging by itself does not seem to stimulate engagement, and that more qualitative aspects (such as political context, content, or strategy of deploying them) are more important. Considering the tendency of those contacted online to be an almost perfectly enclosed sub-group of the wider population of those contacted through more traditional channels, discovering an effect would have had potential negative implications for inequality in participation in these countries. In such an instance, online channels would essentially create a three-tiered division of the electorate – those contacted both online and offline, those contacted only online, and the rest of the population. Out of these three strata, the most engaged would essentially be those contacted through both channels; for these ‘political junkies’ online channels would have simply offered more opportunities to stay in contact with politics, while for the rest they would have mattered very little. In a similar argument to the one made by Prior (2010) in connection with media, more diversification in channels of campaign mobilization could have simply led to further self-selection of the electorate, and to the creation of a wider gap in engagement.

The analysis presented here suggests that even if this were the case, we are still far off from this scenario. Message appears to be more important than medium, and online contacts lead to little added engagement for those who are already fairly engaged in political life. Owing to the tremendous expansion of political use of the Internet by parties, I am almost certain that a multitude of further investigations will continue to examine whether online tools promote further equality or inequality in political participation among groups in the electorate. What this work tries to suggest is that this likely depends on both how individuals rely on these methods to navigate political waters, as well as how parties understand to make use of them.

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