

# We may see a real internet campaign in the lead up to the AV referendum, as long as both sides have a credible online presence and avoid cyber 'window-dressing'

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/02/10/social-media-campaigns-av-referendum/?pfstyle=wp>

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*With campaigning for the Alternative Vote (AV) referendum underway, **Rachel Gibson** looks at how the online battlefield is shaping up and what we can expect in the blogosphere and beyond in the coming months.*

The May 2010 UK general election generated widespread expectations that we would finally see the birth of 'the internet election'. The Conservative, Liberal Democrat, and Labour parties all launched special e-activist resource sites ([MyConservatives.com](#), [LibDemAct](#) and [Membersnet](#), respectively)- and their leaders and candidates made considerable efforts to occupy the new world of social media through Facebook profiles, Youtube uploads and of course twitter feeds. The unexpected resurgence of the power of television following the [leader debates](#), however, combined with the rather public 'backfiring' of viral initiatives such as the Tories' [Cash Gordon](#) campaign and Labour's [crowdsourcing](#) poster efforts, turned the online battle into something of a damp squib. Iain Dale, a prominent right-wing blogger captured the disappointment well in the dying days of the campaign with his Telegraph [headline](#) 'This was meant to be the internet election. So what happened?'

The national AV campaign, however, has the potential to break the cycle of hope, hype and disillusionment for several reasons. Firstly, we must remember that the expectations for the 2010 general election campaign were fostered in large part by the recent and very vivid memories of Barack Obama's highly successful digital campaign in 2008 and the sense that, as with other innovations such as 'voter-vaults' of electorate data and direct mailing initiatives, that [where the U.S. leads](#), the UK will shortly follow. But as there is no recent precedent of the internet being used to dramatic effect in a single issue campaign among our close political neighbours, expectations remain low.

In addition, a single-issue campaign is clearly a different proposition to one that is based around the election of an entire government. The consequences, while potentially very profound for our system of governance, are not quite as immediate and intense, at least for the two major parties. Paradoxically, this may actually help to make the online campaign a more interesting and free-flowing spectacle. While party whips were in full force during the passage of the legislation authorising the referendum, the autonomy granted to MPs in the campaign itself may translate into a vibrant debate. Politicians who feel strongly about AV may well turn to the more personalised communication tools of twitter and blogs to make their case.

For the Liberal Democrats and the smaller parties, the stakes are arguably higher than in the general election itself. AV would bring the country one step closer to proportional representation and those treasured seats in the House of Commons. With everything to play for, but lacking the resources necessary to mount a concerted 'yes' or 'no' national campaign, the lure of social media may prove irresistible.

In terms of the technology itself, while Facebook and YouTube will undoubtedly have

their moments in the campaign, we can expect the blogosphere to come into its own as the debate heats up. The general election saw something of a quietude descend on UK blogs, particularly those on the right, as the Conservatives' opportunity to grasp the reins of power moved within reach. Now, after a year of coalition government, the forces of criticism have had time to sharpen their arguments. The blogosphere, with its culture of position taking and adversarial debate, provides the perfect setting for the type of 'yes/no' politics we are about to witness.

One final issue to bear in mind of course as we assess the prospects for an online referendum campaign is what, if anything, will be effect on voters of all this digital talk. While it may throw up a few instances of viral humour and possibly a few memorable gaffes or 'mistweets', will it actually help to sway the hearts and minds of voters? The evidence to date would suggest a mixed verdict. Even in the US observers were reluctant to attribute Obama's victory to his skilful new media campaign. And these days, it's not enough just simply to be online; political parties and politicians need to authentically occupy the new campaign space and have a credible presence. The internet natives can sniff out cyber window dressing within one mouse click.

However, we know from a recent [Hansard report](#) that more people than ever paid attention to the campaign online in 2010. Further evidence from a Reuters Institute survey, reported in Nic Newman's excellent account of the '[e-election](#)' noted a surge of interest among young people in political parties' online material. Furthermore, there is arguably more scope for online information to be influential during this kind of single issue campaign, given the reduced pull of party attachments that shape people's voting behaviour in national elections. With numbers of visitors to the online versions of several major UK national newspapers estimated to be around [30 million per month](#), some exposure to the digital messages of the two camps seems unavoidable. Two groups, '[Yes to fairer votes](#)' campaign and the '[NO to AV](#)' have explicitly highlighted online activism as a central part of their campaigning strategy. Whether online tactics will prove decisive in winning votes to either side, however, is yet to be seen.