

The Strategic Adaptation of Party Organizations to the New Information and Communication Technologies: A Study of Catalan and Spanish Parties

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Abstract

The impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in political parties' organizations has been studied mainly from two different approaches. The normative cyberoptimistic point of view assumes that political parties would have to embrace all the new possibilities of participation to members and affiliates that new ICTs offer, and they are rated according to their attainment of the ideal maximum. On the other hand, the classical evolutionary approach to political parties' changes assumes that new ICTs will make political parties evolve toward some ideal-type of *cyber-party*, which is only a new step in the way that goes from the cadre-party to the cartel-party, through the mass-party. Against these approaches, I elaborate a transaction costs approach that tries to explain the differential institutionalization of ICTs in political parties as a strategic response to the political context they are facing. That is, although the new technologies are changing the broader society, the specific environment faced by each party (namely, the electoral pressure) and their pre-existing institutional characteristics (their ideology and organization) will affect the degree of formal recognizance and use of the cyber-activism by the different parties.

This paper focuses on the cases of the two major Spanish (PP and PSOE) and Catalan parties (PSC and CDC) in the period just after the Spanish general elections of May 2008, when these parties held their party conferences. In general, three kind of actors can be distinguished: first, cyber-activists that try to get formal recognition of their activity in their parties. Then, party leaders that can try to promote the presence of the party in cyberspace but that can also remain undecided because it is not clear the net electoral impact of the cyber-activism. Finally, some traditional off-line militants are typically reluctant to the recognizance of the cyber-activism because it threatens their expected payoffs within the party. This paper shows how our parties responded to the challenge of cyber-activism and concludes that their electoral situation, mediated by their ideology, organizational structure and type of membership, can help us to understand their differential degree of party organizational institutionalization.

Introduction: Party organizations and the new ICTs

Alan Ware said that, even if it is impossible to imagine that contemporary state politics could exist without parties, it is difficult to say exactly what a political party is (Ware 2004: 25-26). "As many scholars have pointed out, trying to define a 'party' is like trying to define an elephant. Anyone that has seen one knows what it looks like, but it is quite difficult to define it to someone that hasn't ever seen one." According to Ware, the problem to solve is, to identify precisely the links that exist between political parties and other kind of social and political entities. Some pages later, Ware cites an old article written by King criticising the classical tripartite approach to political parties that presumes parties are composed of three elements: the party-in-the-electorate, the party organization and the party-in-government. The notion of the party-in-the-electorate is somewhat strange. "It seems as if, instead of talking of Campbell soup buyers, one was talking of the 'Campbell-soup-company-in-the-market'." (King 1969:114; cited in Ware 2004:33). "Those who buy Campbell's soups don't take part in this company. What this party does through its marketing policies, price fixing, etc. certainly an impact on the behaviour of consumers, especially those of soups. But it is possible to make a clear distinction between the institution (the company) and the behaviour unfolded in the market by those under its sphere of influence." (Ware 2004:33-34)

But now, the impact of new ICTs in the environment is making less clear all these distinctions even in private organizations that normally have been taken as unitary and more or less hierarchical. Managers of big and successful corporations are using the ability of the new ICTs to blur the boundaries and distinctions of roles within organizations and with the external world to produce innovation and to improve their products and services¹. Unsurprisingly, these changes are producing internal resistances and conflicts within corporations, but the bottom line is that they can be used for competitive advantage in the struggle for survival. If this process of transformation of the organization is happening in the private sector, why shouldn't political parties – a peculiar mix of public and private, loosely tied organizations that largely rely on voluntary work – not be affected by NICTs?

¹ See, for instance, Berzgal and Johnson. 2008.08.11. *Financial Times*; or Witzel. 2008.05.06. *Financial Times*.

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This paper consists of two main parts. The first part develops a transaction costs approach to understand the degree of institutionalisation of the new ICTs in the political parties. First, it explains the extra-parliamentary structure of political parties as compensation mechanisms that enhance the credibility of party leaders in their interchange with party members and activists. Then, it focuses in the benefits and costs of ICTs in the contemporary electoral campaign practices to assess the impact of ICTs in three organizational party dimensions: the degree of party openness of the cyber-activists' policy influence, the degree of formal recognition of cyber-activism in party statutes and the degree of tolerance or promotion of leadership visibility through ICTs, taking into account several factors: the ideology and previous organizational structure of the party and its electoral context. Finally, this part concludes with an assessment of the operationalization and measurement of the dependent variable.

The second part consists in the analysis of the uses of new ICTs by four political parties during the 2008 Spanish general election and its impact in the party conferences held some months later. First it shows the political context of the election and remarks the differences in the ICTs uses among the political parties. Against expectations, it has found some evidences that the conservative Popular Party has had more intensive use of ICTs participative tools than its main rival, the Spanish Socialist Party. In addition, when the ideological profiles of the cyber-activists of the different parties, measured in a post-electoral survey, are compared it results that the degree of discrepancy between the mean of the voters' positions of each party and their cyber-activists is much wider in the left-wing and centre parties than in the conservative party. Finally, the positions of the different actors and the institutional solutions attained the parties' conferences are analyzed and explained using the factors or independent variables suggested in the first

part. The electoral context, i.e. the degree of competition a party is facing, mediated by its ideology and its previous organizational structure, affect the degree of formal acceptance of the different forms of cyber-activism within the parties. The paper concludes with a summary of the main argument, cases and findings.

Part I. Party organization and transaction costs

To understand the impact of the new ICTs on the institutional structure of political parties this paper will follow the transaction costs approach that focuses on the central problem of reputation. This approach presumes that the selection of institutions is a mechanism for producing credible commitments between actors involved in a mutually beneficial relationship which faces the problem of a non-simultaneous interchange. It has been applied to legislative and bureaucratic structures see Weingast and Marshall 1988; Horn and Shepsle 1989; Moe 1989, and it departs from other transaction costs approaches that have been applied to political parties (see Jones and Hudson 1998) or to the impact of ICTs in political participation and politics (see Boncheck 1995 and 1997).

In the words of Williamson (1985:48-49) "transactions that are subject to *ex post* opportunism will benefit if appropriate safeguards can be devised *ex ante*. Rather than reply to opportunism in kind, therefore the wise [bargaining party] is one who seeks both to give and receive 'credible commitments.'" In our case, party leaders, understood as political entrepreneurs, have to solve the problem of how to credibly offer policy or office rewards to party activists in exchange for their voluntary collaboration to win elections, because normally these rewards are only available after victory and then party leaders may have incentives to renege on their commitments (Strom 1990; Strom and Müller 1999). New ICTs make possible new forms of political activism through their potential for interaction and the decentralized production of information. This paper asks how this new situation can affect the institutional choices of political parties. It proposes that the internal characteristics of parties (previous organization and ideology) and their political context (electoral strength, governmental position: government or opposition) can explain their different institutional responses. Finally, it tries to illustrate this development with a case study of some Spanish and Catalan parties.

The extra-parliamentary structure of political parties

According to the rational choice approach to political parties, the leaders of the parties are entrepreneurs of a special kind of business: They help certain groups of citizens solve their collective action problems and they expect to make profit from this. Political parties are just an instrument to develop and offer credible public policies that are attractive to their electorates, to help to structure legislative activity and to supply public policies which are demanded by the electorate. Party leaders that want to occupy public office and/or that want to implement public policies are constrained by the structure of the party and by

the institutional structure of the polity: the decision rules that govern both the electoral game and the acquisition of public office.

Party leaders build organizations to help them in the electoral competition. "The extra-parliamentary party organizations address four needs: 1) informational needs about the electorate and its preferences, (2) campaign mobilization of supporters, (3) party campaign finance, and (4) development and implementation of party policy in various institutions to which it gains access." (Strom and Müller 1999:14-15).²

However, maintaining extra parliamentary structures to win elections and to influence public opinion is costly. As it has been said, party members can be a natural source of financial resources and labour. But this does not come for free. Although activists are cheap in financial terms, the way of 'paying' for the support of party members is through a combination of *policies* and *offices*. According to Strom, the party leaders' ideal activist is one who highly values promises of future public policy. But, for activists performing organizational tasks and professional services, this compensation is not enough and they have to be compensated in part by private benefits in terms of office or positions.

Party leaders' ability to pay for activists' work is in great measure conditional on the fact that they will win elective office, because party organizations face the typical credibility problems of a non-simultaneous exchange. If activists provide their services before they are compensated, leaders have an incentive to renege on their promises. Although party leaders' concern of building a reputation for keeping their promises can mitigate the credibility problem, the reputation solution is not likely to work properly when activists' performance is not observable or verifiable. As a result, leaders and activists have a mutual interest in developing mechanisms that allow the former to make credible compensation commitments to the latter. Following Strom's argument, one way for leaders to make their commitments more credible consists of relinquishing their own control over policy or internal decisions within the party. There are three prominent strategies to achieve this. The first is to cede policy influence and decentralize policy decisions; the second is to cede control of access and internal promotion; the third is to provide mechanisms for the accountability of the leadership.

1. *Policy influence*

The first mechanism is to offer activists policy influence and decentralize intra-party policy decisions. Intra-party democracy appeals to *policy-motivated activists* who can easily recruited if they are given a direct voice in policy decisions. According to the traditional view, this strategy is likely to make party leaders incur in costs. Assuming that party activists (or policy-oriented party members) come from the

² Taking a point of view that focuses exclusively on the importance of party membership, Susan Scarrow (1996: 42-45) lists eight non-exclusive interrelated benefits that can be organized in the same categories.

most extreme segments of party supporters, a party platform in their hands probably drift away from the preferences of the wider electorate. These costs can be measured in votes, but activists' control over policy can also affect the room for manoeuvre of party leaders in forming government coalitions, and make them incur "office costs".

Deepening Strom's formulation, it seems reasonable that the amount of these costs will depend on the degree of discrepancy between the policy positions that party leaders desire to project onto the electorate in order to win elections and office, and the policy positions desired by the activists.

In modern campaign practice, the party leaders try to control the electoral message to make salient just a few issues that favour them compared with their rivals. The ideological complexity of the party can influence the way that activists and sympathisers participation affects this control of the message. If a party has a comprehensive world ideology, what the good life is, and how it is attainable (see North 1990:363-64), it is easier to find discrepancies between the different individual interpretations. Left wing parties that advocate social change usually have to develop social "Weltanschauungs" in an effort to credibly explain what will be attained (and how). In contrast, conservative parties, given their valuation of the status quo do not require the development of a logically consistent world and the means to attain it. Commonsense advice and sayings are normally enough as a base for their political discourse (see for instance, Hirschman 1991). The result is somehow paradoxical. The leaders of the left wing parties that value the political participation for ideological principles face the risk of creating ideological friction and argument with wider participation. As the emergence of conflict and discrepancies in the electoral message can affect the electoral prospects of the party, left wing party leaders would like to maintain some control over participation. While, on the other hand, the leaders of the conservative parties that do not place ideological emphasis on political participation will not fear being harmed by ideological disputes among their members.

The second tentative variable is whether the party is in government or in opposition. While in opposition, political parties can benefit from any issue that negatively affects government action. At the same time, party leaders can selectively emphasize those issues that are more advantageous to their electoral strategy. Therefore, political parties in opposition will tend to have fewer problems with the spontaneous participation of members and sympathisers. The opposite will tend to be true for political parties in government.

2. Control of access and internal promotion

The second compensation mechanism that party leaders can use to solve the problem of credibility in their interaction with activists is "to focus on the internal office-related strategies, such as enhancing the prospects of upward organizational mobility for activists and officers or giving such members monopoly

rights to higher ranks of the organization.” (Strom and Müller 1999:17). This can be accomplished by “creating impermeable recruitment channels” that are particularly appealing to party officials. Strom points out that making the organization impermeable has the apparently paradoxical effect of increasing the policy orientation of party leaders, since these will come only from the activists’ rank and file. Such constrained internal promotion practices may have electoral costs, since it may leave a party with unattractive candidates for office, and the central party may desire to either manipulate the party leaders or at least make them less hard-line if the pressures of the electoral environment are fraught enough.

3. Leadership accountability

The third compensation mechanism that party leaders can use to attract and retain followers is leadership accountability. It “refers to the ease with which activists and members can replace party officers on the grounds of performance in office.” Following the insight of Wilson who stated that amateurs are “vitaly interested in mechanisms to ensure the intraparty accountability of officeholders and party leaders” (Wilson 1973:107), Strom presumes that “an organization with a high degree of leadership accountability therefore attracts amateur activists at lower price cost than organizations with less accountability.” Naturally this issue can become more complicated if we take into account the mediating role of the ideology or the organizational culture of the organization. If a party has a strong hierarchical organizational culture or ideology, the degree of tolerance of its members to the positions and interpretations of the world of its legitimate leaders can be very wide. The result may be that the degree of formal accountability of leaders to followers is very low, but they are nevertheless highly motivated to participate enthusiastically in the work of the party. In fact, Strom recognizes that “party leaders (...) presumably offer accountability concessions only as a last resort. To the extent that party members have the authority to replace their superiors, they render party leaders vulnerable and threaten their expected long-term surplus.” (Strom and Müller 1999:18)

Therefore, it is likely that party elites will invest effort in developing party discourses that remark on the dangers of party fractionalization, the division of command and internal confusion that can be the result of very strong mechanisms of internal leadership accountability in order to make them unattractive to members and activists. Then, this third mechanism has similar effects to those that can be found in the first. For party followers it is easier to accept a party leader without mechanisms of accountability if they have a clear understanding of the goals and purposes of the party. With a clear and lean ideology that emphasizes only a very few issues, to choose between one leader or another makes no real difference. In principle, any party member can be equally valid as a representative of the party in term of the policy positions advocated. The important issue is to be able co-ordinate the actions of party members so that everyone within the party accepts the same leader. If there is any difference between the leaders, this is due to their managerial abilities.

How do ICTs affect party electoral practices?

From the point of view of party leaders, the web (and other new ICTs like mobile phones), have obvious potential advantages in the crucial electoral arena (cf. Benoit and Benoit 2002; Foot and Schneider 2006). First, they are a formidable tool to convey information. They provide the opportunity to rapidly communicate complete messages in any format (text, audio or video) to a potentially enormous audience at a relatively low cost. In comparison to previous times, information is under the control of the party leaders and they can avoid the mediation and constraints of the traditional mass media. The web structure allows the establishment of links with individuals and groups that are identified with the goals of the party. These groups and individuals endorse and give credibility to party policy proposals and candidates and can be a complementary source or deposit of information that the party is interested in disseminating. In addition, these new technologies are characterized by their potential for interaction. If the party is able to mobilize online sympathisers, these can co-produce (manipulate or create ex-novo) and diffuse messages (through blogs or forums) in order to convince others to vote in favour of the party; or in a multiplicative manner, online activists can devote their efforts to mobilize other activists who can work online or offline in favour of the interest of the party. Last but not least, as has been shown by the recent electoral campaigns in the US, these technologies can be used to obtain impressive sums of money from small online donations of activists and sympathisers.

However, using the Internet for campaigning has its drawbacks. First, though the potential audience is enormous it is clear that information uploaded on the Internet does not reach everybody. There are segments of the population that are blind to this information. On the other hand, even if its cost is lower than, for instance, television, providing a sufficient volume of accurate and updated information through the web is costly. In addition, depositing a large amount of information on the web can go against the party's interest in keeping its position ambiguous on some issues that may crosscut its own "coalitions of supporters".

As Foot and Schneider (2006) put it more generally, the use of the web for diffusing a message implies losing control of it. Maybe, a message that was politically beneficial yesterday today is no longer opportune, but once some information is uploaded on the web, it is very costly or even impossible to withdraw it. This danger is even worse due to the potential of interaction and co-production of the new ICTs. Forums and chats where members, sympathisers and, even, opponents, can participate and express their opinions which can be an obstacle to the current prevalent advice on how to manage successful electoral campaigns: emphasizing a few issues where the perceived reputation of the candidate or party is superior to its rivals, and ignores the rest. The co-production potential of the new ICTs implies that not only can new undesired issues become the focus of public debate, but even the 'framing' or tone with which these issues are treated can be modified in undesired ways. This interference can affect general electoral strategy and electoral results, and if, for instance, it exacerbates the

opposition to other political groups it can reduce the room of manoeuvre for the elite in other political arenas, making it more difficult to design or to follow long-term strategies.

The impact of new ICTs on party structure

Needless to say, the new ICTs do not *substitute* or *eliminate* the traditional ways of organizing political parties, but they rather *complement* and *transform* them. New ICTs change the relative advantage of the different means of conducting an electoral campaign, therefore party leaders would have an incentive to search for optimal combinations of the means they have at hand to obtain their goals.

1. Degree of openness to policy influence

In the first place, party leaders could consider promoting the use of the ICTs to capture inputs from society on the policy decisions that they can pursue. This kind of openness will have a negative impact on incentives to form part of the formal member structure. This move implies a decrease in the power of the formal structure and it is reasonable to expect some opposition from its members.

Three aspects should be taken into consideration here to predict the amount of openness of the party to policy proposals. In the first place, the benefits that party leaders can expect from openness of policy proposals. Is it in the government or is in the opposition? A party in opposition has to gain the support of a wider segment of the electorate; therefore, it can take advantage of a heavy use of the new technologies to involve new people and groups in the production of policy proposals, and with their help, make itself more attractive to a wider audience. The expectation that a party in opposition has incentives to open up to the influence of the electorate is reinforced in the case of a *major party* that has a considerable amount of its members expecting to gain power to implement certain policies or to occupy government office.

The second aspect that has been outlined before is the degree of expected conflict between the likely positions pursued by a wide amount of sympathisers participating and the positions defended by the leaders: that is the electoral costs of wider participation in the definition of party policy positions. As it has been said, parties with “wider ideologies”, with more points of possible discrepancies, or parties in government will be less prone to use the opportunities of the NICTs for making deliberate new policy proposals.

Finally, the third aspect related to the openness of the party policy proposals is the strength of the formal party membership structure. If traditionally a party has had a well-developed organizational structure offline that has been awarded with privileges in the elaboration of party policy (and because of this, the membership is full of policy-seekers), it is possible that the participation of a wider audience in this

elaboration will face some opposition. However, more probably the party will lose part of its formal membership as it is no longer necessary to be a party member to influence the party's policies.

2. Formal recognition of cyber-activism

The second organizational dimension on which party leaders have to decide is whether to accept a formal recognition of activism through the web. The general decline that political parties had experienced in their capacity of mobilizing activists has produced a general trend towards not creating locally based policy branches that allow the participation of members according to their policy interests. In the same vein there are proposals to create party cyber-branches whose members would have the same formal rights as those of the members of local branches. It is likely that the resistance to this recognition will depend on the strength and the permeability of the pre-existing political organization. If a party has based its attribution of internal offices through internal promotion and socialization in some shared values and rules, the insiders might consider it unfair to grant the same rights to outsiders. But from the point of view of the party leaders, the effective promotion of this formal recognition will be related to the relative weight of the benefits of offline formal organization compared with the benefits that online participation can offer. For example, if a party competes at local level and it is perceived that local branches (offline activism) have an important impact in the electoral results of a particular political competition, there will be less interest to formally recognize the rights of cyber-activism.

3. Degree of leadership visibility

Finally, the third organizational dimension is related to leadership accountability. Using new ICTs some leaders can gain visibility. This is a factor that can increase the risk of factionalization within the party because can give power to rival leaders of the current dominant coalition. In addition, it can be regarded as a danger by the central party offices as it may affect the coherence and unity of the party message on significant or controversial issues compromising party's electoral performance. From the point of view of party members, the visibility of party leaders gives them independence from internal democratic control. At the same time, party factionalization can promote the recruitment of party members (cf. with the analysis of the French socialist party by Sferza 2002). Different voices competing within the party can make it more appealing even for the wider electorate.

Probably, the net impact of this point depends of the institutional incentives that the electoral system provides to the personalization of the electoral campaigns. Admittedly, electoral systems with uninominal districts are more able to produce advantages of the diversification of the voices of the candidates, while the contrary is true for PR systems with closed lists, as the Spanish system is. Nevertheless, the beneficial or negative impact of the use of the ICTs by the party leaders will depend on the specific

situation of each party: the quality and quantity of their leaders and their relationship with their potential electorate.

In general, we should expect more incentives promoting a wide use of the new technologies by party leaders in parties that are pressed to win votes in the electoral market. However, this pressure can be mitigated by the existence of a party with a strong organizational structure or a party with a dominant coalition afraid of losing its control over the party.

Measuring the dependent variable: party organizational change

Party organizational change has been measured in the three dimensions analyzed above. Firstly, we looked to the degree of overture in the formulation of policy issues and the discussion of party ideology. There were tools designed to show the responsiveness of the party to the interest of the members? We were looking for the tools that communication theorist have characterized as bottom-up channels of participation. To what extent the NICTs allowed the participation of sympathisers or citizens? There were forums and spaces for debate and discussion in the party website? How open were these instruments? Which is the degree of commitment of the leaders to the results of this participation? The content analysis of the presence or absence of these tools in the websites of the parties can offer us a proxy for the overture of the parties, but what we wish to measure is the extent to which the policy proposals of the sympathisers are taken into account or influence the policy formulation within the party.

In the second place, we are looking for the formal recognizance of the cyber-activism in the party. There is a specific recognizance of the cyber-activism in the party statutes? Which is their position relative to the ordinary offline members? There is recognition of a cyber-branch of the party? Can act in the same way of other party branches? These questions can be partially answered through the analysis of the statutes and resolutions approved at the party conferences. Naturally, there are also validity problems in these measures because many of the rules approved can remain unimplemented, overlooked or modified in important ways by the daily practice. However, they reveal something about the configuration of interests within the party at a certain moment.

Finally, to measure the extent of the control of the members on party leaders it has been registered if there were plans for promoting the presence of party leaders and officers in the cyberspace through personal websites, blogs or counts in the virtual social networks. The increase of visibility of party leaders confer them independence and increases the gap between ordinary formal party members and party leaders. Therefore it has to be understood as a way of decreasing the internal democratic responsiveness of the leaders (in the same way, the German Green party forced rotation of party elected officials or the Portuguese Communist party prohibited the personal blogs).

Part II. The 2008 Spanish general election and NICTs

To provide some empirical evidence on the hypotheses outlined above, it has been carry out an analysis of the reactions collected on a sample of political parties of the Spanish and Catalan party systems after the 2008 general elections.

Two Spanish and two Catalan parties

I will concentrate my attention in four parties. Both pairs are composed by the major parties of the Catalan and the Spanish party systems. They were selected because they show enough variability in their situations and the way they handled the issue of cyber-activism to be appropriate illustrations of the different ways that party organizations can be affected by the diffusion of new ICTs.

The first pair is formed by the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), the main state-wide left-wing party, and the conservative Popular Party (PP). The Socialist party is currently in government after wining the 2008 general elections. It won the 2004 general election and replaced the PP government after an electoral campaign marked by the terrorist attacks of 11-M in Madrid. Although Spain has a proportional electoral system, there is a bi-party system at work in the major part of the state due to the reduced size of the electoral circumscriptions. Actually, there is also another state-wide party, United Left (IU), a post-communist party but it plays the role of a minor party at state level and due to its extreme ideological position is usually forced to be a natural ally of the Socialist Party. The main source of multipartidism comes from non-state-wide parties that usually play the role of major parties at regional level in the most differentiated regions and nationalities. At the state wide level, these parties can play an important role in giving support to the Spanish government when the electoral results do not produce a majority victory of one of the two major parties given its usual centrist ideological position. As a result, the major parties are under pressure to embark in an intense continuous election campaign and they devote all their efforts to win the elections with a sufficient margin (see, for instance, Holliday 2003 or Gunther et al. 2005, for a general presentation of the Spanish political system).

The second pair of selected parties is composed by the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC) and Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC). The Catalan Socialist Party is federated with the Spanish Socialist Party. The party statutes state that the PSC is autonomous in Catalan issues, while accepting PSOE sovereignty at a state-wide level (cf. Colomé 1992). Currently the PSC is the major partner of the governing coalition in Catalonia. The two other partners of the tri-party coalition are a left-wing Catalan nationalist party, Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), and a new left party self defined as eco-socialist, Initiative for Catalonia-Greens (ICV), which is linked at the state level with United Left (IU). The other selected party, CDC is a centre-right Catalan nationalist party that has been the governing party jointly

with a minor Christian democrat Catalan party, Democratic Union of Catalonia (UDC) in the regional governments since the first regional elections in 1980 until 2003.

The electoral situation of both parties is fairly different. On the one hand, the Catalan Socialist Party controls the main political offices in Catalonia. It is the major party of the governmental coalition of the regional government and also controls the municipal council of Barcelona. Although the relationship with its partners in the regional coalition government is sometimes difficult and confusing and can have its costs at electoral level, the pre-electoral agreements with its partners make unlikely to lose the regional elections. In addition, even if it would be certainly hurting, a hypothetical loss at regional level is not as important for the Socialist party as for the CDC because of its association with the PSOE at state level. On the other hand, the CDC has been unable to form regional governments despite having always received a majority of the seats and (except once) of the votes in the regional elections. This has implied a lot of internal pressure for a party predestined to govern and whose membership has grown over years of control of the office. Although the wide-spread support for the party across the Catalan territory provides some stability, the lack of control of important local governments is an uncomfortable situation. This forces CDC leaders to use just any strategy, even if it is risky, to increase the possibility to win the elections.

The use of NICTs during the electoral campaign

The 2008 elections coincided with the campaign of the U.S. presidential primaries. As throughout the world, the Spanish campaign teams and journalists were impressed by the masterful ability of Barack Obama's campaign team managing the new ICTs to mobilize supporters and to get financial resources. Obama's political campaign was carried out taking into account the potential of decentralization and co-production provided by ICT, specially the social network tools and other enabling Web 2.0 tools.

As what can be understood in part as a "contagion" of the American experience, during the Spanish electoral campaign, traditional media paid close attention to the use of the web by political parties and constantly dedicated space to comment and describe the initiatives in newspapers and TV channels. The Spanish political parties responded to this attention and focused their efforts in producing events through the web. The candidates of the main political parties introduced themselves in the most popular virtual networks (Facebook, MySpace, Twenty, or even Second Life), the web pages of the parties provided forums and spaces for the participation of the sympathisers. Nevertheless, some of the initiatives with the biggest impact were the production and uploading to the party website of elaborated propaganda videos that could not only be re-distributed through the web but especially through the traditional TV broadcasts that were avid on this kind of audiovisual material. As a result, these videos and their message reached a much wider audience than the internet users.

All in all, it seems clear that political parties have used the web mainly as a way of increasing independence from and influence over the traditional media. This has been executed by the central offices of the party, rather than by a decentralized and wider participation of members and sympathisers of the parties. Of course, this does not mean that decentralized cyber-activism did not work in the electoral campaign (cf. Peytibi et al. 2008). In fact, the activity within and around the parties' blogospheres, for instance, was very intense, but its direct impact on the main electorate was marginal and not comparable to the impact witnessed in the recent U.S. elections. Clearly, one reason for this limited impact is the reduced diffusion of Internet in Spain. A survey-based study of the Fundación BBVA (2008) found that only around 41 per cent of Spanish households had internet access in 2008. In addition, only 10.12 percent of them admitted that they used it to search political information. These figures stay far away from those reported by Pew Internet & American Life Project for the recent U.S campaign.

However, Spanish parties' leaders were prone to accept the impact of NICTs in politics, especially in the mobilization of the electorate, for another reason. During the last conservative Aznar government, left-wing social movements conducted a mobilization strategy to show the disapproval with governmental policies, especially with regard to the entry in the Iraq war and other right-wing policies, in which the network of independent media on the Internet played a role. The unexpected defeat in 2004 of the Popular Party was attributed by its leaders in part to the mass mobilizations over mobile phones via SMS. They had the idea that "a political and techno-media conspiracy was led by certain leaders of the main opposition parties and executives of the most important media corporation. This group consciously and successfully coordinated a disinformation campaign through traditional media and the new ICTs that resulted in a PP electoral defeat" (Dader 2008:166). Since then, this is the model of opposition that the conservative political forces desire to imitate. In fact, mass mobilizations and the use of NICTs as pressure tools have been installed as an unavoidable strategy in the opposition against the socialist government. Although it is true that the Internet in Spanish political communication "flourished intensely only during an abnormal situation of political chaos", it is not clear that it "has had little lasting influence on the political and electoral processes" (Dader 2008:169).

PP and PSOE in the 2008 election campaign

In the first place, the level of participation allowed for in the PP party website was higher than in the PSOE's website. Both parties offered support for virtual campaigning through virtual platforms of volunteers ("Voluntarios Populares", in the PP and "Voluntarios Ciberprogresistas" in the PSOE). Both parties used their own internet TV and YouTube channels to spread their videos. But, in the PSOE the tools to obtain the points of view of supporters were more restricted or controlled than those of the PP. One of the spaces for citizen participation was "A thousand ideas more" (*Mil ideas +*) where visitors could make proposals for the electoral manifesto and voting or commenting them. In other space, "Ask Zapatero", visitors of the Socialist candidate website could formulate him questions. Significantly, the first of these instruments was moved away from the party website home page as the campaign progressed, whereas in the latter only official answers to some of selected questions remained. Admittedly, this has to be read as a clear indication that the campaign team of the Socialist Party had a strong and conscious use and timing of technological communication tools³.

In contrast, the Popular Party made efforts to open the party to citizen participation and to increase communication channels between candidates and supporters. For instance, visitors to the party's website could gain access to the social networks and forum of the party. To the surprise of many, these forums operated quite openly and showed few traces of censorship. The website also provided a cyber platform called "popular volunteers", which worked as a brainstorming forum for the election campaign.

Another difference between the PP and the PSOE campaigns can be found in the success of the specific campaigns they promoted.

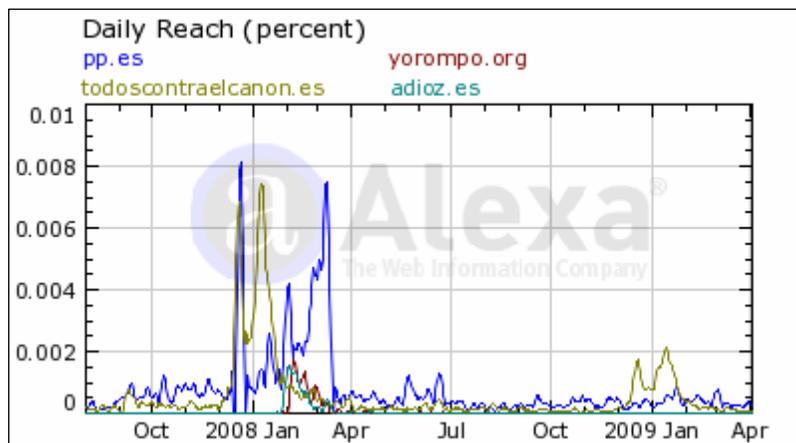


Figure 1. Wide internet traffic in the PP website and the specific campaigns around the PP

³ Another example of this aim to control the information provided by the party website was the possibility that a visitor could obtain a "personally tailored" party manifesto after answering 5 questions.

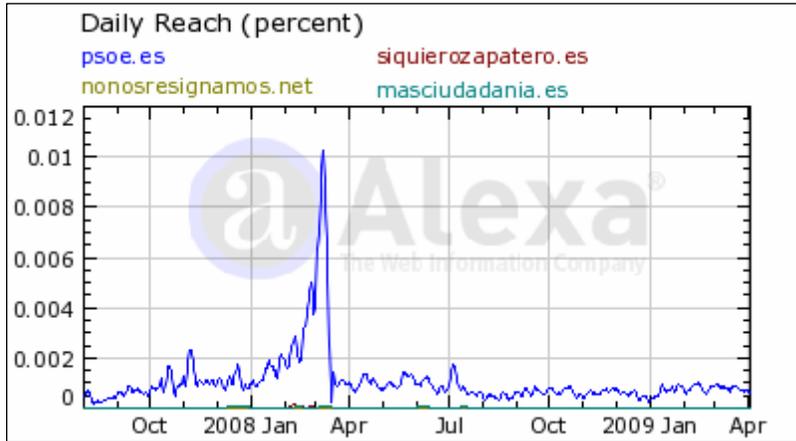


Figure 2. Lesser traffic in the most successful specific campaigns around the PSOE

Each figure (**figures 1 and 2**) shows the data traffic on the main party website of the PP and PSOE jointly with some of the most successful parallel online issue centred campaigns. We must be cautious in interpreting the information in Internet traffic from Alexa ⁴ because it is based in a sample of self-selected participants. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see the wide difference between both landscapes. Traffic access to the main party websites is similar in volume and both trends shows similar peaks around the Election Day. However, what stands out is the contrast between the levels of online mobilization in the PP compared with the almost empty graph of the PSOE. It seems clear that the level of online mobilization of certain issue-oriented publics is superior in the PP than in the PSOE.

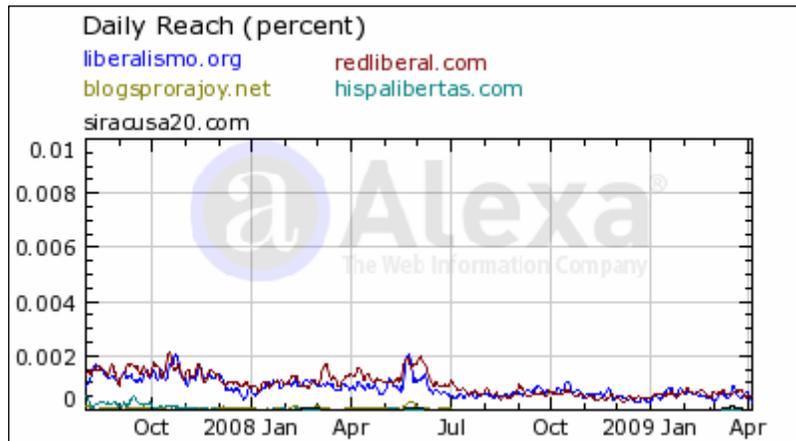


Figure 3. The intense traffic in the networks of blogs ideologically connected with the PP continued after the elections

⁴ Alexa (www.alexa.com) ranks sites based on tracking information of users its Alexa Toolbar for Internet Explorer and from integrated sidebars in Mozilla and Netscape. It can be assumed that the sample bias comes both from the point of view of user behaviour (the members of the sample are people that accepts to reveal or send information of their navigation behaviour) and from the geographic distribution of the sample.

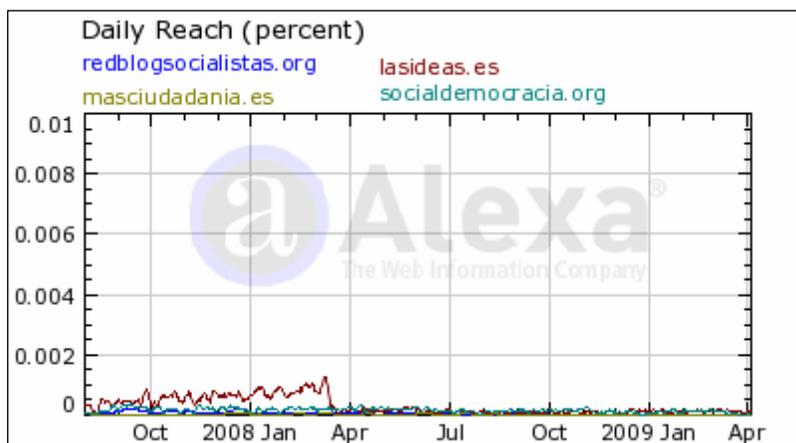


Figure 4. *The traffic in the networks of blogs connected with the PSOE peaked in the elections and vanished afterwards*

The blogospheres of both parties also differ. Certainly, it is very difficult to measure the blogospheres⁵ and the use of tools as Alexa here is even less appropriate. But we have used the traffic to the Internet portals that concentrated networks of blogs ideologically connected to both parties to have some measure of their success attracting audience.

Figure 3 was obtained by introducing some of the addresses of blog networks ideologically close to the PP. Some of them are under the umbrella of the online newspaper Libertad Digital. Liberalismo.org and Red liberal networks represent the most radical ideological right. Following the electoral defeat of the PP, there has been a growing division between the blog-sphere and the PP leadership of the Conservative Party in opposition. In fact, the network of blogs to support Rajoy ceased to work because the majority of blogs aggregated demonstrating against the popular leader.

The image of the PSOE's blogosphere is diametrically opposed (**figure 4**). On the one hand, they do not have the same structure around digital media as can be observed in the PP. These networks are either open, or are directly integrated within the party structure. On the other hand, it seems they have not shown any internal conflict within the party (Peytibi et al 2008:10). Consistently with this, the graph of the PSOE blog network access shows a decline after the elections in May 2008. Naturally, this does not mean necessarily that the right-wing political blogging dominates in the Spanish blogosphere, because it could be that the activity of the left is less organized or centralized in clear focal points, but it seems reasonable to think that a centralized and inter-connected blogosphere has more visibility and can reach a wider public more easily.

⁵ The blogosphere is a difficult entity to be measured for many reasons. It is complex (it is composed of many individuals with weak or nonexistent borders) and it is dynamic (individuals flow continuously in and out). In addition the evanescence of the information makes it even more difficult to be measured with valid and reliable instruments.

The PSC and CDC in the electoral campaign

As it is said before, both the PSC and CDC were not particularly active in these elections. The PSC is the party associated with the PSOE in Catalonia and in the general elections therefore tends to take a secondary position. For CDC, the Spanish parliamentary elections are not their highest priority, it competes at the Spanish general elections, but its main constituency and priority is to gain and retain representation in Catalonia. In addition, the candidate for the elections representing the electoral coalition of CiU was the leader of the smaller party, UDC, and much of the campaign communication was developed through the candidate's personal page. Hence, CDC was not very motivated to put its effort into a peak performance and neither was their militancy too motivated to find work in these elections. Nevertheless, it seems that since the 2006 elections both parties got into some kind of race to see which of the two has the ability to create a greater blogosphere. Apparently, the PSC is winning the race in numbers of blogs, while CDC has lagged behind. It also appears that the philosophy behind the development of the blogosphere is somewhat different. The PSC gives the impression of being more organized on the basis of policy issue or territorial interests in an effort to strengthen its presence in these areas. For the CDC, however, the idea seem to be to establish a capillar network, not clearly aligned with the party and which, therefore, go beyond the social areas closest to the party. The absence of internal conflict and a high level of mobilization produced a rather low profile in the CDC blogosphere.

Cyber-activists and ideology

In order to explore the hypothesis of the impact of the discrepancy of the ideology of cyber-activists I have used the post-election survey by the Spanish Sociological Research Centre (CIS 2008) conducted between March and May 2008. In this survey, in addition to typical questions about the conduct of voting in elections, has introduced other questions we are interested to perform a simple test that allows to distinguish the political parties according to the degree of discrepancy between the ideological position of voters and the ideological position of their cyber-activists.

To determine their ideology, the respondents were asked to locate themselves on six salient issues of the Spanish politics and in the traditional left-right scale. In addition, respondents were asked if they had obtained information from the election campaign via the Internet and if they had participated actively or passively in different kind of campaign activities using new ICTs.

Table 1 shows the percentages of voters that declared that have obtained information of their political parties through the Internet during the electoral campaign, have sent or received emails and SMS related to the electoral campaign. The sixth column shows the percentage of cyber-activists. This measure corresponds to all those who responded positively to having searched online for the campaign, to having sent SMS or emails relating to the election campaign. Therefore, cyber-activists are characterized as

those that declared that used actively the NICTs in the electoral campaign. The percentages of the cyber-activists column are only slightly higher than the response obtained in the most frequent response, finding information online. Interestingly, PSOE and PP interchange their positions in the two columns. The PSOE shows values very similar to the overall sample in the information seeking behaviour during the campaign, but percentage under the general public in the rest of activities. The PP inverts this relation. CiU's and PSC's percentages show greater variability with respect the general electorate, but we must take into account their limited sub-sample of voters. In fact, the differences observed between CiU and the other parties are not statistically significant.

Table 1. The cyber-activists. Party vote and use of the NICTs in the 2008 electoral campaign

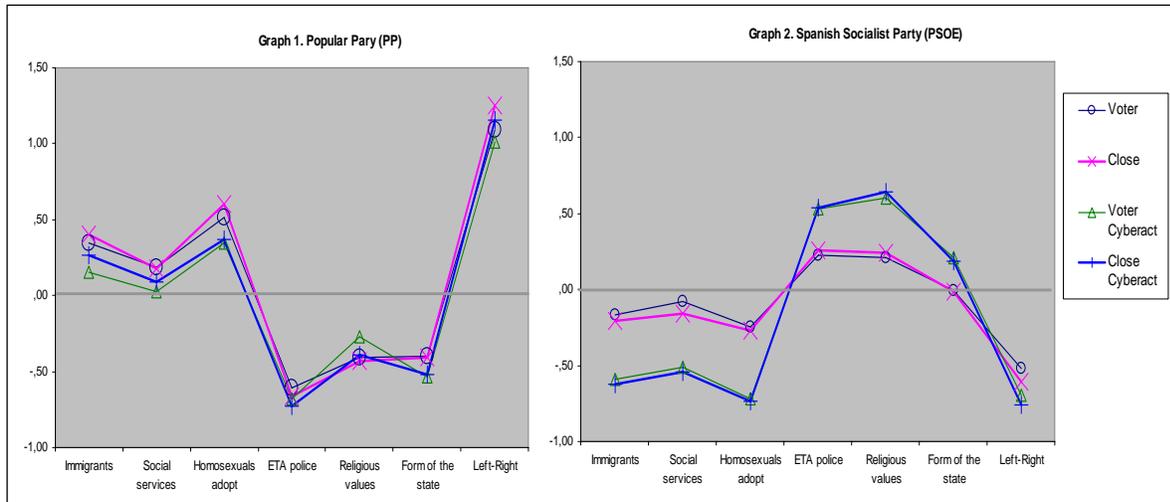
| Parties | Campaign information (1) | Send e-mail (2) | Send SMS (3) | Receive e-mail (4) | Receive SMS (5) | Cyber Activists (1 or 2 or 3) | N |
|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| PSOE | 10,3 | 4,6 | 2,0 | 8,3 | 4,9 | 12,4 | 2440 |
| PP | 9,5 | 5,9 | 3,1 | 9,6 | 6,7 | 13,7 | 1431 |
| PSC | 8,7 | 3,2 | 0,9 | 6,0 | 2,3 | 10,0 | 378 |
| CiU | 13,2 | 2,3 | 1,6 | 10,2 | 3,2 | 16,3 | 106 |
| Total | 10,3 | 5,1 | 2,4 | 9,0 | 5,5 | 12,7 | 5282 |

Cell entries are percentages. Source CIS 2008

Once operationalized the cyber-activism, it is possible to measure the discrepancy between the ideological positions of the voters of the parties (and of those who feel close to the party) with respect of cyber-activists that are voters of the different parties.

The following graphs (1 to 4) represent the mean positions on seven issues of four types of respondents: those who are voting for parties, those who are close to parties, cyber-activists voters and cyber-activists close to the parties. Because the range of responses of the different questions varies in the graphs are represented the standardized values relative to the mean and standard deviation of the entire survey sample on each question.

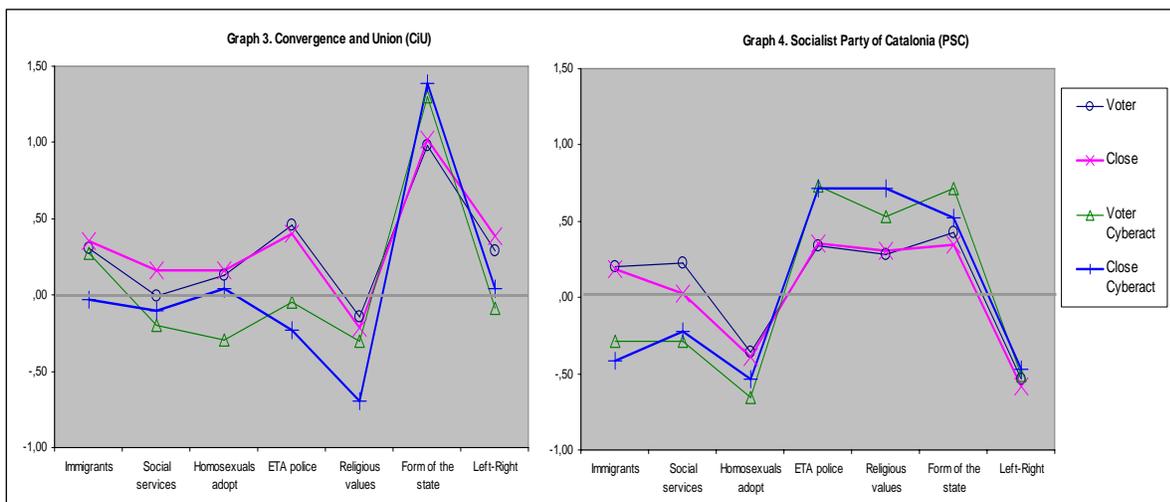
The first issue concerns positive (0) or negative (10) values with regard to immigration. Negative values indicate a positive evaluation of migration and vice versa. The second issue asked whether the respondent prefers more social services even if this leads to increased taxes (0) or if the respondent prefers fewer taxes with fewer social services (10). The third question asked was if homosexuals have the right to adopt children (0) or if adoption should be prohibited for the welfare of the children (10). Fourth, it raises the dilemma between a military solution to ETA (0) or dialogue with ETA (10). The fifth question asks whether it is more important to defend traditional moral and religious values (0) or the fundamental freedom of the individual (10). The sixth is an ordinal question related to the preferred form of the Spanish state. One end of the scale corresponds to a completely centralized state (1) whereas the other end to a state that recognizes the right of the autonomous communities to become independent nations (4). Finally, the seventh issue is self description either as left-wing (1) or right-wing (10).



Low discrepancy between the ideological profile of the PP cyber-activists and the PP voters contrasts sharply with the high discrepancy in the ideological profiles of the PSOE (Mean positions in policy areas and ideological scale)

The first graph corresponds to the PP. As is to be expected, in all issues it shows the different groups of voters adopt a right-wing position. The issue on which their positions are closer to the entire electorate is the one that referred to social services. The issues related to the shape of the state, the adoption of homosexuals and, above all, their position on the left-right scale, show more extreme positions with respect to the electorate. Overall, what stands out with regard to the PP graph is that the positions are very similar for all groups of voters and cyber-activists.

Graph 2 shows the PSOE's positions. The general positions are nearly symmetrical to those observed in the PP, which corresponds to left wing positions. What stands out in the chart is the wide discrepancy between the positions of the cyber-activists and the positions of voters and those who feel close the party.



Discrepancy levels between the ideological profile of the PSC and CiU cyber-activists and their voters are quite similar. The reason for the high variability might result from the small size of CiU and PSC voters sub-samples (Mean positions in policy areas and ideological scale)

Graphs 3 and **4** show the positions of the CiU and the PSC. CiU positions range from the right to the left of the Spanish electorate. But despite taking more leftist positions than the PP they share a somehow similar profile. The main difference lies on the issue of the form of the state; this is hardly surprising for a Catalan nationalist party. With regard to the extreme positions of religious values, it should be remembered that the survey asked for the vote to electoral coalition CiU, that holds together CDC and the Christian Democrat party UDC. The positions of the PSC also have a similar profile to the PSOE. The right-wing positions of PSC voters on issues such as immigration or social services are somewhat surprising. Nevertheless, as with **Table 1**, we must be cautious and take into account that the biggest changes and apparent anomalies which appear in these two graphs could be due to the small size of the sample and the error estimates associated with the averages.

Table 2. Differences between mean party voters' and mean party cyber-activists positions on policy issues and left-right ideological scale

| | Immigrants | Social services | Homo-sexuals adopt | ETA police | Religious values | Form of the state | Left-Right | Sum of the squares |
|-------------|------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------|------------------|-------------------|------------|--------------------|
| PSOE | 1,319** | 1,184** | 2,000** | -1,211** | -1,353** | -0,177** | 0,365** | 10,60 |
| PP | 0,601** | 0,436** | 0,722** | 0,308** | -0,463** | 0,117** | 0,176** | 1,43 |
| PSC | 1,341** | 1,199** | 1,094* | -1,353** | -0,753** | -0,213** | -0,036 | 6,88 |
| CiU | 0,116 | 0,547 | 1,867 | 2,088 | 0,556 | -0,281** | 0,823** | 9,22 |

** : mean differences statistically significant at $p < 0.01$; * : mean differences statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

To get an overall measure of the ideological divergence between the parties, **Table 2** calculates the differences between the mean positions of the voters and cyber-activists in the parties. In the last column the sum of squared differences is calculated. The difference between the values obtained for the PP and the rest of the parties are very large. However, despite the small difference in the average values in different subjects of the PP, all of them are statistically significant. As can be seen in **graph 1**, the positions of PP cyber-activists voters are more left-wing than those of PP voters in general. The difference between both PSOE's groups is especially remarkable. As already mentioned, the values of the differences in the CiU and the PSC are not always significant because of the low magnitude of their sub-sample. In fact, with respect to the CiU, the sole differences that are statistically significant are the issue of the state form and the left-right self-location.

This section performs an approximation to the measure of the ideological discrepancy between the ideological profiles of cyber-activists and the general voters of the parties. The parties can be ranked according to the amount of this discrepancy. The idea behind computing this measure was that the wider this discrepancy, the higher could be the electoral costs to the party of promoting cyber-activism. If the ideology of the party cyber-activists does not fit with the ideology of their general voters, their message will not be heard by this electorate or, worst, it is likely to interfere with the party leaders strategically designed electoral message. The higher the discrepancies, the lower the incentives of the party-leaders to promote cyber-activism.

Responses at parties' conferences

In this section I will survey the movements of the party leaders, the reactions of cyber-activists and the counter-reactions of the traditional offline members in the party congresses held after the 2008 Spanish general elections. The underlying structure of the situation is the same for all parties. There is a triangular relation between the leaders of party organizations, cyber-activists and the traditional members of the party. Party leaders have the incentive of colonizing this new virtual world and are recognizing its importance both for politics in general and to win elections. Therefore, they are interested in offering incentives to cyber-activists to work for the party, such as recognizing a formal status within the party by using some combination of the three compensation mechanisms described above. But in doing so, they endanger the position of traditional party members and their acquired privileges. If the new kind of party activism would negatively affect offline activism, the costs for the party could be greater than the benefits. Therefore, party leaders have to carefully consider how to solve problems in order to obtain the maximum benefits.

The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE)

In the case of the PSOE, the leaders made a proposal to promote the presence of the party in cyberspace. On the one hand, they proposed “to grant the constant and permanent presence of the party in social networks through the work of trained people accountable to the party” (PSOE 2008a: 52) and also proposed a moderate recognizance of cyber-militancy: “the cyber-volunteers (who appeared during the election) had to turn into cyber-militants, that should be active outside of the electoral period also”. In fact, they thought of a status similar to “sympathisers” which is reserved for people who doesn't desire full involvement with the party (and for militants who don't pay their membership dues) (see PSOE 2008a: 53-54). They have the right to be informed by the party and can attend party meetings but they lack the right to vote. Some PSOE members made an amendment to the proposal of the party trying to obtain full member status for cyber-activists (including the right to speak and vote in meetings and congresses) and also to create a virtual branch of the party which would make affiliation to a local branch unnecessary (cf. Prieto 2008). During the 37th convention, the amendment was defeated by the votes of the Youth Section of the Socialist party in Madrid. It is significant here the age worked against expectations. Amongst the predominantly middle-rank members of office-seekers, formal recognizance of cyber-activism was perceived as a thread to their careers. In the words of the PSOE's cyber-activists the result was a 'fake' (or incomplete) recognizance of 'cyber-militancy' (see PSOE 2008b: cap 4,158-161).

Several reasons can help to explain this. First, the Spanish Internet community is still small and the impact of cyber-militancy is, therefore, limited. This limited use of this new form of communication is especially acute among the major parties that have the support of older generations. Second, the key

aspect of the organizational strategy of the party in the convention was not cyber-militancy but the redesign and reinforcement of local party branches to make them more efficient in the electoral strongholds of the PP: the urban areas of Madrid and Valencia. The leadership of the PSOE considered geographically based activism crucial for winning the next elections rather than cyber-activism (PSOE 2008b: cap 4, 145-155). Finally, in the leadership calculation of gains and losses of cyber-activism we must take into account the expected grade of discrepancy or coherence between the strategic electoral message promoted by the party and the preferred ideological positions of cyber-activists. As is shown above, the discrepancy between the ideological positions of the PSOE electorate and its cyber-activists (as measured in a post-election survey of the 2008 elections) is the largest of all the political parties that we have considered. Therefore, the leadership of the party cannot consider cyber-militancy to be very helpful in order to get the right message across to the public compared to its strategic political communication. In fact, sometimes be a major hindrance, as has been found when the Party leaders have had to reprimand public officers for the content of their posts on their blogs.

The Catalan Socialist Party (PSC)

In the case of the PSC the debate and the reactions were not as intense as in the case of the PSOE. The PSC congress was held after the federal congress of the PSOE, and knowing the results of this, the reluctance of leaders and cyber-activists to address the issue of the formal recognition of cyber-militancy is predictable. As proof of the quietness of the party congress: the commission of organization and statutes passed the text of the resolutions in the record time of less than six hours. The congress put the online and the offline presence at the same level in the 4th chapter of the board on organization named "an impulse to proximity". Similarly to the PSOE, the text claimed that party officials should be present in cyberspace (PSC 2008a:78-80). The resolutions of the congress stressed the strategic importance of the social websites as "a new space for ideological combat and the construction of cultural hegemony" (PSC 2008b:112-113) and, curiously enough, reinforced the proposed role of the party leaders in cyberspace: "it is an outstanding challenge that all the party leaders have a blog as a part of their political and communicative activity. Party leaders have to identify the PSC activists that are leaders in their social networks on the Internet and take advantage of them in ideological combat, informing them of the positions of the party and taking them into account in the communication of strategy." Reading this text what is noteworthy is the concept of the party as a tool to transform society, where ideas of hierarchy and a regular army come as a background reference. Of course, this position seems to be quite at odds with the current general philosophy of the Internet and Web 2.0. Although the text talks about permeation to the spontaneous proposals of the public, or the adaptation to a new political culture, little in the text warns of this contradiction.

The issue of cyber-militancy was relegated to second place. As one of the drafters of the approved proposal said (Rodríguez 2008) they focused on "the strategy and use of the web ... communicative

strategy ... the leadership and how to induce party leaders to come onto the web.” The formal recognizance of cyber-militancy was not a real problem. In fact, one article of the PSC statutes made the creation of a virtual branch already possible (passed in the 9th congress held in 2000, see PSC 2004) and the cyber-activist policy section of the party has been constituted in March 20 of 2009, almost one year after the congress.

This can be explained by different factors. In the first place, the PSC is experiencing moderate electoral pressure. Although it is a major party in the Catalan sub-system and therefore one of its *raison d'être* is to govern, it is currently the biggest partner in the tri-party governmental coalition of Catalonia together with the Republicans (ERC) and the eco-socialists (ICV). As a consequence, there is no pressure for obtaining office and, even when the PSC does not obtain good electoral results (as in the last regional elections held in 2006), the opposition has difficulty in winning more seats in the parliament than the tri-party. This lack of pressure is not an incentive for innovation and change in the organization of the party. If it's not broken, don't fix it, as the saying goes. And, if party leaders think that the promotion of the new ICTs might lead to resistance or open an internal fracture within the party, they would have little incentive to promote them.

This type of resistance is more likely to appear in the more bureaucratic local structures of the party found in the industrial municipalities around Barcelona and Tarragona. In these municipalities the party still has members of the old labour movement who retain a very traditional conception of the socialist party as a centralized mass party. In addition, in these local branches the membership has grown hand in hand with socialist control of local government since the democratic transition. As is well known, party membership increase in Spain is highly correlated to incumbency in office. And now the leadership of the party is supposed to be more sensitive to the demands of this sector of the party. After the changing of the guard that followed the resignation of Mr. Pasqual Maragall as the socialist candidate to the presidency of the Generalitat the rising faction in the party were the “captains”, the socialist mayors of the red-belt cities. On the other hand, there is another dominant tradition within the Catalan Socialist Party, the left liberal anarchist unionist tradition (see Colomé 1992), that fits better with the spirit of the Internet age and also serves to explain the remarkable use of the internet within the party, the pressure for the institutionalization of cyber-activism in the party and the mixed results obtained.

Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC)

In the case of the CDC, the tension between leaders and cyber-activists was even lower than those we have seen in the PSC. In fact, the promotion of amendment 2.0 that proposed “the creation of a virtual branch of cyber-activists and bloggers without territorial basis but dependent on the specific policy commission of new technologies” was carried out by people close to the party leaders. According to the amendment promoter (Novoa 2008), after a somewhat hostile reception in his local group the amendment

was accepted as an amendment of addition. In the party congress, 99 percent of delegates voted in favour of the proposal without any dissenting vote. The statutes recognize that access to membership can be made through a sector branch (CDC 2008: art.8). At this moment, the New Technologies sector has begun to operate (but, to my knowledge, the virtual branch has still not started). The leadership of the party has begun an ambitious campaign to induce party officials and candidates to operate in cyberspace, especially through blogs.

It is clear that the CDC leadership needs electoral victories at any cost, especially at regional level. Therefore, it is willing to use any means to mobilize the electorate and the new ICTs are perceived by its leadership as a perfect means for this aim. This strategy of online mobilization is consistent with another recent strategic move by the party launching the so called "Great House of Catalanism", the creation of a space beyond the party to attract intellectuals and significant people to an ideological space sympathetic to the CDC's political proposals.

On the other hand, the CDC has a party structure that is quite different to the structure of the PSOE or PSC. It is supposed to be the party with the widest membership in Catalonia, which according to party officials, is estimated at around 50,000 members. This can be explained in part by the fact that it had formed the Catalan government 20 years after the first regional elections and by its deep territorial penetration in local government. But it is also explained by a mobilization of sympathisers through a great variety of pre-existing social local networks of Catalan cultural groups that had grown as a resistance structure under the Francoist regime. This allows a kind of loose social club structure of membership without strong centralized management. This structure is less likely to offer strong resistance to the leadership strategies of promoting the new ICTs in campaign activities; but, at the same time, the strong local basis of the membership makes this structure less likely to take advantage of NICTs' based strategies.

This structure is somehow consistent with the ideology of the party. In its foundation it had the vocation of being an umbrella party of the different streams of political Catalanism, but the incapacity to attract social-democrat sectors in the first years of the democratic transition has pushed the party to positions on the centre-right. During the years in the government its ideology has turned into pragmatism and "pure nationalism', without attributes" and, in the end, "CDC has been defined more of a political movement than a classical political party" (Marcet and Argelaguet 1998: 76). Although, this ideological neutrality has somehow recently vanished from the party communicative strategy after quitting the government and as a reaction to the electoral rise of the left wing Catalanist party (Republican Left of Catalonia), the party ideology is still underspecified. It is possible to find a wide range of political positions within it. For instance, although some sectors of the party have close connections with the Catholic Church, recently a group called "Convergais" has been officially recognized to promote the rights of homosexuals. In sum,

this loose ideology, that doesn't see any great problem in internal dissension, fits fairly well, or at least is not contradictory, with the general philosophy of activism through the Internet.

The Popular Party (PP)

In the case of the PP the impact of the formal recognition of online activism wasn't discussed in the party congress. This is somehow paradoxical because actually cyber-activism was very present before and during the congress. Hordes of radical bloggers accused the party leadership of being far too moderate and backing the old guard of Mr. Aznar and the President of the autonomous community of Madrid, Esperanza Aguirre. Contrary to what some analysts expected, the congress of the party was successfully kept under control by the current party leader Mr. Rajoy.

Nevertheless, the statutes passed in the 16th Congress of the Popular Party (PP 2008) made some significant changes to the previous statutes (PP 2004). Article 17 was modified thus creating the post of the party affiliate ombudsman and regulating more detail citizen participation in virtual forums and in virtual MP's offices. In addition, this article established that the regional and the county party websites should have the same structure as the central party website, specifying that they should have a space for virtual forums. On the other hand, the congress modified the article that regulates internal democracy and the electoral processes within the party (art. 30) "trying to make more transparent the process of selection of the president". Although the party has always had a formal democratic system of leadership selection, the usual process has been a designation of the successor by the former leader. In sum, the party congress resulted in a reinforcement of the rights of traditional offline members through the regulation of the selection of candidates and the creation of the members' ombudsman, while at the same time, attempted to increase cyber-activist participation through virtual forums.

This combination of institutional solutions fits fairly well with the current situation of the PP. It is the party with the widest number of affiliations in Spain, but this affiliation has grown without offering compensating mechanisms to the members. For sure, as with the other parties, patronage has been an important factor in the growth of party membership, but over the last decade there has also been a high level of ideological mobilization across a narrow range of issues in which the party has a reputational advantage: The fight against ETA terrorism (which is connected with the form of the state) and moral and religious issues (abortion, rights of homosexuals and education). This high mobilization and degree of consistency around some issues is what we have found in the cyber-activist ideologies, and is a partial explanation of why the party leadership could take advantage of cyber-activism without bothering too much about its impact. In the 2008 general elections, the current leadership of the party tried to change the strategy of increased mobilization and the use of delegitimizing strategies against the socialist government because of the extraordinary elections of 2004. But this change to a more moderate and centrist policy issues that try to gain the support of wider sectors of the electorate has been seen as treason by the more polarized

and now relegated sectors of the party. And, because of this, regulating participation and ceding rights to the general membership can be seen as a way to contribute to a more balanced participation in the party and a help to avoid the manipulation by rival factions in the current leadership.

Summary and conclusions

Table 3. Summary of cases and variables

| | Independent variables | | | | | Institutional recognition of ICTs at party conferences | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Government | Electoral pressure | Left | organizational weight | Ideological coherence | participatory tools policy | promotion cyber-activism | recognition Cyber-Activism |
| PSOE | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | + | + | + |
| PP | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | ++ | 0 | 0 |
| PSC | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | ++ | + |
| CDC | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | ++ | ++ |

Table 3 provides a visual summary of the main argument and cases presented in this paper. The strength of the adoption of some institutional mechanisms recognizing the cyber-activism as measured in the party statutes approved at the party conferences that followed the Spanish general elections of 2008 (last three columns) is connected with some characteristics of the parties that are likely to affect the incentives to change the organization. Some of the characteristics are related to their ideological family and their pre-existing organizational structure. It has been argued that left wing parties have more problems with the unrestricted participation of their members, while right parties do not. In addition, the strength of the pre-existing organizational offline structure can moderate the pressure to recognize rights of the new cyber-activism. In strong party organizations, members have received a wide recognition of their rights and privileges and, because of this, 'normal' offline members doesn't want to lose their position and see the cyber-activists as an unfair competence. Other characteristics are contextual: the position in the government or the opposition and the overall electoral pressure, i.e. to what extent the party leaders are pressed to obtain short term electoral results. It is assumed that the governmental position affects the willingness of the leadership to allow the free participation of their followers. It can also be affected by the electoral pressure. Usually a party in government can take advantage of the dominant risk aversion among the electorate that prefers the status quo to any change. In our case, the Catalan Socialist Party that governs Catalonia in coalition suffers less pressure than the governing Spanish Socialist Party. On the other hand, the PP as well as the CDC in opposition comes under high pressure to win elections. Finally, the last factor that can hinder or facilitate the formal recognition of cyber-activism is the degree of congruence between the electoral message designed by the party leaders and the issue positions defended by the cyber-activists. It is clear that the leaders of the organization have to weight the advantages of the social presence of the party against the costs of loosing their control of the message

that has to reach the electoral targets, and these costs are likely to be higher the higher is the discrepancies between the party electoral message and cyber-activists' preferences.

The analysis of the above cases has found that these explanations are somewhat convincing. The PSOE has a hierarchic party structure composed in great part of office-seeking members, a complex left wing participatory ideology, and faces a highly compromised and competitive electoral situation while in government. In consequence there are reasons for controlling the activity of cyber-activists groups that have an specific political agenda that is not always aligned with the strategic plans of the party-leaders. The case of the PSC is very similar to the PSOE but it has a lesser hierarchic organization and lesser electoral pressure. As a result, the institutionalization of the ICTs is very similar in both parties but with the PSC's cyber-activism enjoying a higher degree of tolerance and recognizance.

The case of the PP is more complex. In principle, the internal structure of the PP is formally far less participatory than in the socialist parties and more concerned about reaching out to voters. In the last electoral cycles its ideology has been very compact in the sense that there are few points populistically emphasized by its party leaders and, therefore, sympathisers' mobilization has been very welcome and, specifically, cyber-activism. Our period of study has been affected by a change in the party-leadership orientation and by an intense struggle against other factions for the control of the party. The current party leader has faced a strong adversarial campaign via the Internet for its centrist policies. As a result the institutional choice at the party congress has been ambiguous. On the one hand, it has regulated and reinforced the status of the traditional participatory tools of the party websites. On the other hand, it has increased the defence of the status of traditional offline party activism. It is reasonable to think that these moves are intended to make it easier for the party leadership to modulate and make it more difficult to manipulate party activism by the rival factions.

Finally, in the case of the CDC, both internal (ideology and party organization) and context variables (major party in opposition) work in favour of the institutionalization of the new ICTs and, despite some resistance by a large organizational pre-existing structure largely based on offline relations, it is in this party that we have found a high and comprehensive recognition of the status of cyber-activism.

Naturally, this is only a preliminary work. The hypotheses formulated in this paper need to be tested in other cases and political systems to see to what extent they are generalizable. Nevertheless they can help us to understand how party structures are able to mediate in the introduction of the new ICTs in politics and forecast the strength of the role of cyber-activism in a party according to its strategic situation, organizational structure and ideological characteristics.

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