# Introduction

This paper sets out to analyse online campaigning by candidates in England during the 2015 UK general election campaign. Specifically, the deployment of different features of websites and social media, and the degree to which these features were used to interact with or potentially mobilise prospective voters. The analysis is based on an expansive primary dataset that includes every constituency-level candidate in England for five parties: the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Green Party. Candidate campaign presences on websites and social media were identified and coded based on a number of different features or types of use. These observations then form the basis for a quantitative analysis of the adoption and use of web tools for campaigning.

This work contributes to the field in two important ways. Firstly, this is the most comprehensive analysis of constituency-level online campaigns undertaken in the UK, featuring 2,590 candidates. It employs a newly devised methodology to measure online campaigns to a level of detail not undertaken at the candidate level in the UK before. The constituency-level is under-researched in scholarly work on online campaigning, particularly in the UK context, and as such, this paper represents one of the only UK studies to assess social media campaigning at this level. This is despite the fact that early web campaign scholars (Margolis and Resnick, 2000) maintained that e-campaigning could provide the most important advantages to candidate-level campaigns. It also has the benefit of providing a sample size large enough for robust statistical analysis. Secondly, this unique dataset provides an opportunity to revisit the dominant paradigm in the study of e-campaigning; the normalisation thesis. Despite some evidence that the web had primarily benefitted already-dominant political parties in the campaign field (Margolis and Resnick, 2000), there is now the chance to re-evaluate this impact on campaign change in light of the growing importance of social media for political communication.

# THE NORMALISATION THESIS

In its infancy, it was thought that the web would benefit minor political parties, eroding the traditional advantages of organisational hierarchy and media access enjoyed by established political parties (Rheingold, 1993). These ideas were seemingly supported by empirical findings in the early period of web-campaigns (Ward & Gibson, 1998; D’Alessio, 2000). However, as the web developed and audiences grew, the idea that it would equalise party competition was challenged. Research in this area has been heavily influenced by the normalisation hypothesis (Margolis & Resnick, 2000), which argued that the web would only serve to benefit the ‘already…influential’ (2000:72). Prior to the emergence of social media and the 2008 Obama campaign, the normalisation thesis gained much academic traction. Established parties consistently out-performed minor ones in empirical studies of website adoption (Gibson & Römmele, 2006; Strandberg, 2009; Sudulich & Wall, 2009).

A second strand of the thesis also emerged during this period, developed by scholars who studied the content of campaigns in detail and often found it lacking. They interpreted normalisation in a broader sense, to mean any online content that was essentially little better in terms of participatory or interactive elements than offline content (Foot and Schneider, 2002; Bimber and Davis, 2003). These arguments are becoming even more pertinent in a post-Web 2.0 era where the emphasis on the interactivity and engagement of political communication has intensified. Schweitzer (2011) refers to these two branches of the thesis as ‘relational’ and ‘functional’ normalisation to refer to party competition and content respectively, and those are the terms which will be employed here.

# Previous Findings: Relational Normalisation

Researchers into this area have very much concentrated on the national-level campaigns run by centralised party organisations. Less information is available on the candidate-level. This may reflect the difficulty of collecting candidate-level data and the varied importance of local and national campaigns in different contexts. The available research across the available studies however generally supports relational normalisation (Gibson & Römmele, 2006; Strandberg, 2009; Sudulich & Wall, 2009).

Normalisation theory has not gone entirely unchallenged however. There has also emerged a competing ‘ethos’ theory (Southern, 2015:4) in which smaller parties, in particular Green parties, are developing more sophisticated web-campaigns than might be expected for their size (Strandberg 2009; Gibson et al 2008; Sudulich & Wall 2009). Schweitzer also reported a similar result for the digitally-focused Pirate Party in Germany (Schweitzer, 2011). That some parties may feel drawn to using the web for ideological reasons is in keeping with theoretical perspectives that see web use as linked to ideological or organisational factors (Gibson & Ward, 2000; Kerbel, 2009).

A further challenge has been the emergence of social media. Specifically, the cheap and easy availability of such tools should allow more marginalised actors to compete on a more equal footing with the already-influential. This assertion is one which appears so far largely supported by a growing body of literature on social media adoption. A study of French campaigns at the 2009 EU Parliament elections (Vedel and Michalska, 2007) found that the incumbent party adopted only one type of social media, compared to smaller parties which adopted all four types assessed. Strandberg’s (2009) study of Finish online campaigning supports this also. Smaller parties adopted social media at similar or higher rates than their larger rivals. Whereas the largest three parties’ Twitter usage ranged from 19%-32%, candidates from the smaller Green League and Swedish People’s party adopted Twitter at 34% and 35% respectively. In the US, Williams and Gulati’s (2007) study of Facebook use at the 2006 Midterm elections found that candidates from both smaller parties – the Libertarians and the Greens – adopted Facebook at higher rates than Republican candidates, although both adopted at lower rates than Democrat candidates overall.

Thus far, evidence from the candidate level in the UK has also supported equalisation arguments. In an analysis of social media adoption by UK candidates during the 2010 election, Southern (2015) found that, while the normalisation thesis held for use of websites, smaller parties were prolific users of social media. Overall, then the current findings suggest that while use of websites for campaigning supports the normalisation thesis, there is much emerging evidence to suggest the same cannot be said of social media campaigning.

## Beyond Party?

One criticism that may be made of the literature in this area is the tendency to conflate budget and party size. Much of the explanation given for why larger parties adopt at higher levels than smaller parties is that they tend to have more money. This assertion is so embedded in the literature that some studies do not actually control for budget yet do offer it as an explanation for higher adoption levels (Gibson et al, 2008; Strandberg, 2009). But it may well be that there are motivations for adopting web-campaigns for larger parties over and above resources, such as projecting a polished image, or demand from supporters.

More recent literature (Lusoli, 2005; Vaccari, 2013), has started to question this measure as a simplistic reading of normalisation and proposed a multi-dimensional that includes factors such as campaign spend and incumbency. This is the approach this paper takes and therefore the question of relational normalisation will be more fully scrutinised here than in many previous papers on the subject by testing for not only party size but also incumbency and budget as measures of thereof. Testing for resources and incumbency as well as party size may reveal that despite lower budgets, smaller parties adopted sites at relatively high levels compared to larger parties. In this way, this paper will build upon previous works to test normalisation using this more multi-dimensional measure as well as re-examining other potential explanatory factors.

# Previous Findings: Functional Normalisation

As discussed, a second strand of the normalisation thesis focusses on assessing the content of online campaigns. While larger parties may still dominate online campaigns, campaign change may still be occurring via the content of online campaign communications, moving it from a ‘broadcast-mode’ model to one which incorporates more interactivity, engagement or mobilisation efforts than traditional media campaigns. The second strand of the normalisation thesis agues this will not occur. This question has become especially pertinent since the mainstreaming of social media but assessing websites for interactive or engaged content is relevant for answering these questions also.

One of the consistent criticisms of candidate websites in the UK in earlier elections has been that there is a lack of any real interaction or even attempts at it (Ward and Gibson, 2003; Coleman, 2001). More recent studies of national party websites have introduced more nuance into the debates by more fully scrutinising the interactive elements on campaign websites. Jackson and Lilleker (2009) found, after an extensive content analysis of UK national party websites, that while there were multiple examples of interactive tools offered, the parties’ approach to interaction was to try to control it rather than fully embrace it. They termed this ‘Web 1.5’ (2009:248).

This was supported further by Jackson and Lilleker (2010) in their study of British party and candidates sites during the 2009 European Parliament elections. They concluded that “an architecture of participation is partially in place, but control over the level and extent of participation remains in the hands of the party or candidate rather than the visitor” (2010:537). This general pattern of weak interactivity was supported by Lilleker et al. (2010) and Lilleker and Jackson (2010) in finding sites providing a sop to mobilisation and interactivity rather than embracing it. The literature has attempted to explain this, suggesting that candidates who open themselves up online are vulnerable in many ways, not least to exposing themselves to criticism from opponents and uncomfortable questions from electors (Stromer-Galley, 2000; Coleman, 2001).

Turning to assess the findings from social media campaigning however, there is emerging evidence from studies in the UK that social media campaigning may be challenging the ‘broadcast-mode’ narrative. Two studies of candidates during the 2010 election both found that even in an election where Twitter was nascent as a campaign tool, over 50% of those who were using it to campaign used it interactively (Southern, 2015; Lee, 2014). A study which assessed the use of Twitter by UK and Dutch candidates in their respective 2010 elections, found that around half of all Twitter campaign activity was interactive (Graham et al. 2016). A study of Twitter use in a small sample of 16 constituencies at the 2015 UK general election also found a significant degree of interaction (Gaber, 2016). This paper seeks to assess whether this pattern holds when every constituency in England is assessed.

# Expectations

Based on the literature outlined above there are two expectations regarding the adoption of websites and social media among candidates in the 2015 UK general election. Here, ‘already influential’ means incumbent candidates, candidates from larger parties, and those with higher budgets.

* H1-Already influential candidates will be more likely to a) adopt websites overall and b) adopt sites with a high number of features, in support of relational normalisation
* H2: Already influential candidates will be just as likely as less influential candidates

to a) adopt social media overall and b) use social media in an active and interactive manner, refuting relational normalisation.

It is expected that major parties will adopt websites at a higher rate than minor parties. Furthermore, it is expected that these sites will be more sophisticated, featuring a larger number of features compared to smaller parties.

For social media, it is anticipated that the reverse will be the case. This is based on the evidence to date showing that smaller parties are beginning to compete on a more equal footing with their larger counterparts via social media. There is one note of caution here however. When online campaigning was first adopted for campaigning in the mid-1990s, smaller parties equalised (Gibson and Ward, 1998) and then quickly fell behind (Ward and Gibson, 2003) and therefore it might be that this pattern could be repeated for social media. The evidence to date does not suggest this to be the case as yet, but it is something to be mindful of when assessing the results here.

# Data and Methods

This paper uses an extensive original dataset collected during the 2015 UK general election campaign. The campaign presence of every candidate in England, both on their websites and on their Facebook and Twitter feeds, from the five largest parties was identified and coded manually by one of three researchers. Coding of live feeds and pages began on 7th of April 2015 and ended on 1st May 2015, in an attempt to reduce the impact of potential campaign fluctuations (and therefore bias in the data) by avoiding the collection of data in the first week of the campaign or the final five days. Candidates can be slow to start their online campaigning in earnest once Parliament is dissolved, and the final days of the campaign often see an increase in campaign intensity (Lilleker and Jackson, 2010). The approach used here, then, should provide a more typical snap-shot of each candidate’s campaign. This has also been an approach used for coding live online campaign data in previous studies (Gibson and Ward, 2000; Gulati and Williams, 2010).

To test inter-coder reliability, 100 cases were randomly selected and coded by all three coders. Krippendorff’s Alpha scores for the key measures, here the ones which make up the dependent variables, were all over 0.80, showing a high degree of inter-coder agreement. The usual data cleaning techniques were employed post-coding. This provided a sample of 2,590 candidates across 533 constituencies. Observations were recorded covering website content and Facebook, and Twitter use.

Several specific features of each website were recorded. These were grouped broadly into the categories Williams and Gulati (2007) suggest as functions of political web presences: information provision, interactivity and mobilisation. Information provision features recorded included: 1) policy outlines 2) biography of the candidate and 3) news from the campaign. Features of interactivity recorded were: 1) the availability of a poll or petition, 2) a link to social media and 3) a space to comment or provide feedback. Finally, features of mobilisation recorded included: 1) buttons or ‘widgets’ designed to share the site, or aspects of the site, over social media, 2) links to join the party or donate to the party and 3) a space where one could sign up to volunteer for the campaign. The results of these are presented in table 1. These were then aggregated into additive ordinal measures, which can then be used as an appropriate dependent variable for modelling. This approach balances capturing a high level of detail with the need for efficiency when coding many cases.

To assess social media, both their Twitter feeds and Facebook pages were coded. It was recorded whether the candidate had a profile on either platform and also whether they had updated it in the past seven days. Furthermore, it was recorded whether they had responded to any comments or questions on them. If they had a profile but hadn’t updated it in the past seven days, this was coded as ‘static’ use. If they used it and updated it regularly (in the past seven days) but did not respond to comments it was coded as ‘active’ use. If candidates responded to comments (in the past seven days also) they were coded as ‘interactive’. This provides a good overall measure of functional normalisation and can be assessed by party to measure relational normalisation.

Instances where candidates addressed users who could not be considered members of the public, for example MPs from their own party, or prominent journalists, were excluded. This was to capture a stricter measure of campaign interactivity as interactions with 'ordinary' citizens or voters. A list of all MPs and journalists who are active on social media was prepared beforehand to aid with this.

These measures (of both website and social media use) provide a comprehensive level of detail about candidates’ web-campaigning and are also suitable for the ordinal regression modelling used in this paper. Multi-level ordinal logistic regression is the statistical method most appropriate here for final analysis, as the dependent variables are not binary and possess a clear order and individual candidates are nested within constituencies (Harrel, 2015).

This data was supplemented with additional constituency data from the British Election Study Census 2011 data (British Election Study, 2015) to control for appropriate features of each constituency when doing the analysis. These were: the rurality of the constituency, whether it had a higher proportion of over 65s than average, and whether it had a higher proportion of people with no qualifications than average. Candidate incumbency was also controlled for, as was budget data (Electoral Commission, 2016) as further key measures (besides party) of normalisation. Budget was coded around the mean into three categories.

The marginality of the candidates was also controlled for in the models. It was theorised that a candidate in a very marginal position, where every vote counts towards victory, may be more likely to use social media or online mobilisation as they will be trying to ensure they reach every potential voter available. However, marginal candidates also tend to be those with the most money due to parties funnelling their funds into the most winnable or defendable seats, so it may well be the case that ‘no hoper’ candidates make use of social media as it is free.

Analysis was done by firstly assessing different levels of use for each type of website feature to examine functional normalisation on websites. A multi-level binary regression model is then employed to assess patterns of overall use and to account for both the individual and constituency-level data deployed in the analysis. Multi-level ordinal regressions are then carried out on the additive measures of each website function to assess relational normalisation rigorously. A similar pattern of analysis is then carried out on the social media data to allow for comparison between media type.

# RESULTS: Website Use and Content

Overall levels of adoption are the first test of relational normalisation. There were few candidates who stood for election without some form of website; websites could not be located in only 12.4% of cases. This is only slightly lower than the proportion of candidates who had no website presence at the 2010 general election, which was 14% (Southern, 2015)[[1]](#footnote-1).

[Table 1 about here]

Assessing the number of site features, the first overall test of functional normalisation, the table clearly shows that candidates preferred their website to be information provision-heavy compared to other functions. 52% of candidates had three features of information provision, compared to only 2% who had no information provision features and 11% who had one. Websites were being used for more than just information provision, however. Only 21% of candidates overall had no mobilisation features on their websites. Furthermore, only 10% had no interactive features on their site. For both these types, one feature is most common. This suggests there is still caution about adopting these types of use on their campaign sites, particularly interactive features. Although information provision is still the dominant type of use displayed overall, there does seem to be enough here to suggest that even on a ‘Web 1.0’ platform there has been a move towards incorporating some interactive and mobilising features. Overall, then, there is only mixed support for functional normalisation.

# Factors Associated with Website Adoption and Content

The regression analyses will now be presented and discussed. A multilevel binary logistic regression is presented first. The analysis is completed by running ordinal multi-level logistic regressions for each type of site function. The ordinal models assess different types of feature on the candidates’ websites, using the same measures presented in table 1 as the dependent variable in each case. For clarity, the information provision model assessed the presence of policy, a candidate biography and the presence of campaign news. This was then converted into an additive ordinal measure-that is, if none of the features were present on the site the candidate was scored a zero, if one feature was present they were scored a one and so on, up to all three features recorded.

For the interactivity model here, the features which made up the dependent measure were 1) the presence of a poll, 2) a link to the candidate’s social media and 3) a space on which to provide comments or feedback. For the mobilisation model, the features which made up the score here were 1) widgets to share parts of the site to one’s own social media, 2) a link to either join or donate to the party and 3) a link to volunteer for the campaign. ‘No features’ was the reference category in each model.

[Table 2 about here]

Firstly, assessing the binary model, all candidates were less likely to have any website than candidates from the Conservatives. Incumbent candidates were more likely to adopt a website (although the result is not significant) and candidates with high budgets were much more likely to adopt a site. Measured in a binary manner the results support relational normalisation fully.

Turning to the ordinal models, and assessing the presence of information provision features firstly in terms of party, patterns of normalisation are largely supported here, with a few exceptions. Green party candidates were, by a fraction, the most likely to display information provision features, followed by Conservative party candidates, Liberal Democrat candidates and Labour candidates. UKIP candidates were by far the least likely to display information provision features. With the slight exceptions of Green and Liberal Democrat candidates, the ranking of parties here falls largely in line with expectations.

Assessing other significant results, incumbent candidates were less likely than challengers to display information provision features on their sites. It may well be that they are conscious of the higher scrutiny they are likely to receive, restricting their online campaign content. This does however go against expectations, with incumbency being a facet of normalisation through the wider reading of it employed here. Assessing the last facet of normalisation, budget, there are again significant results. A candidate with a high budget is much more likely to display numerous information provision features than one with a low budget, supporting hypothesis one.

Assessing other significant factors, both safe and no-hoper candidates deployed less information provision features than marginal candidates did. This is not surprising as marginal candidates are fighting for every vote and so are more likely to display information that may win votes, be it a biography or a policy position. Interestingly, candidates were more likely to have more information provision features in constituencies where a lower proportion of constituents had no qualifications and in rural areas. This perhaps points to candidates having an awareness of the constituency they are standing in and then tailoring their online campaigns.

For interactivity, the patterns of adoption fall almost exactly in line with expectations in terms of normalisation for party size. Adoption of interactive features ‘ranks’ in the same order as party size. Again, incumbent candidates were less likely to adopt interactive features. And again candidates with high budgets were more likely to adopt more interactive features as those with low budgets. The pattern is similar to that for information provision and shows that patterns of normalisation are largely supported, and quite strongly so, again with the exception of incumbency as a measure. Marginal candidates were most likely to adopt interactive features compared to safe or no hoper candidates, suggesting some candidates felt that a more engaged effort online may help them gain votes.

Finally, assessing the adoption of mobilisation features, looking at party and in contrast to the other types of feature, there is evidence to refute normalisation here. Labour candidates were over twice as likely as Conservative candidates to adopt mobilisation features, as were Liberal Democrat candidates. The Liberal Democrats suffered a dip in support and membership upon entering into coalition (Clarkson, 2016) and they may have seen online tools as a way to try to turn out their remaining supporter, hence mobilisation being the only type of site feature where this pattern occurs.

Green candidates were only very slightly less likely to adopt these features than Conservatives. This is the strongest evidence for equalisation in the website data. For other facets of normalisation, once again, incumbent candidates were less likely to adopt these types of features and candidates with higher budgets were a lot more likely to, reflecting the patterns for other feature types.

Altogether, despite some anomalies, the results here rather strongly support the expectation that patterns of website use by candidates at the election in question support normalisation, at least when measured via party size and budget. This suggests that the advantage candidates from larger parties with larger budgets already have is only being affirmed via campaign websites.

However, there is some evidence to suggest it isn’t quite as unambiguous as that. The results for mobilisation features show quite a clear refutation of relational normalisation. This shows the importance of the more detailed assessments of site content, as the binary models masked these patterns. Furthermore, candidates with small budgets were actually more likely than those with medium budgets to adopt interactive and mobilisation feature-heavy sites. This could suggest that those with the smallest budgets were attempting to use their limited funds to mobilise or engage potential supporters online, which might have been cheaper than other campaigning activities, which they would have preferred to use if they had medium budgets.

Furthermore, for each feature type, incumbent candidates adopted at lower levels than challengers. This could be seen as somewhat surprising due to the fact that incumbents are likely to have the kind of pre-existing links offline that would lead to higher-profile web presences. As stated above, (Stromer-Galley, 2000) they may avoid interactivity especially as they potentially have more to lose and wish to retain control of their message. Overall then, the evidence here suggests that online campaigns may offer challengers a means to level the campaign playing-field compared to incumbents.

# RESULTS: Social Media Use and Functional Normalisation

[Table 3 about here]

Assessing the overall level of adoption, a quarter of candidates had no Twitter campaign profile. Very few (7%) had a Twitter profile that they did not updated regularly during the campaign. Furthermore, only 20% of all candidates used Twitter and updated it regularly but did not respond to people. By far the most common type of use was on Twitter was interactive use, with almost half of all candidates used Twitter this way (just taking candidates who used Twitter, 63% of them used it in this manner). This is compared to only 18% of candidates who responded over Twitter in the 2010 general election campaign (Southern, 2015), a marked increase. This is clear evidence that Twitter is becoming a mainstream political campaign tool and is furthermore moving political campaigning, in some small capacity at least, away from functional normalisation and that interaction is almost becoming the norm here.

[Table 4 about here]

Firstly, assessing the overall level of adoption, 57% of candidates used Facebook to campaign. There is a less striking picture in terms of functional normalisation however. More candidates were using this platform in ‘broadcast mode’, seen here by the ‘Active’ category. That is, posting regularly but making no attempt to reply to comments or questions. However, 16% of candidates did use Facebook interactively, almost double the proportion who did so in 2010, where the figure was 9% (Southern, 2015). This suggests that Facebook use is certainly moving in the direction of interactive use becoming, if not the norm as it appears to be on Twitter, then certainly more common. All in all then, evidence from Twitter largely refutes normalisation, whereas evidence from Facebook on the whole supports it.

# Social Media Use and Relational Normalisation

The analysis now moves on to assess social media use. Again, binary models are presented first to assess the factors associated with overall adoption of social media. Then ordinal models are presented to assess not only any use but also the type of use. The dependent variable in the ordinal models is the use of each type of social media measured in the same way as in tables 3 and 4, with ‘Static’ use as the reference category.

[Table 5 about here]

Firstly, assessing the binary models, the results for party largely support relation normalisation. Although for Twitter, Labour were over twice as likely to adopt as Conservative candidates, the smaller parties were all less likely to do so. For Facebook, the two largest parties adopted at similar levels, with the smaller parties trailing. In a similar pattern to that exhibited in the website analyses, incumbent candidates were less likely to adopt both Twitter and Facebook. Also similar, but perhaps surprising given that social media are free to use, are the results for budget. Candidates with high budgets were much more likely to adopt both Twitter and Facebook.

Assessing the ordinal models, here there is some evidence of equalisation, somewhat in line with expectations. On Twitter, although Labour candidates were much more likely to adopt Twitter and use it interactively compared to Conservative candidates, Green party candidates adopted and used Twitter at higher levels than Conservative candidates. Liberal Democrat and UKIP candidates are just ahead of the Conservatives also, although the results are not strong or significant. Therefore, although this cannot be said to offer a whole-sale refutation of normalisation with Labour so dominant, Green party candidates once again appear to be performing well for their size in social media campaigns.

Assessing Facebook, there is even stronger support for this assertion. Green candidates were more likely to adopt Facebook and use it interactively than both of the largest parties and the result is significant. This pattern had been observed in numerous studies to date (Gibson and Römmele, 2006; Strandberg, 2009; Gibson et al, 2008; Sudulich and Wall, 2009), with Green parties adopting online campaigning at a higher rate than might be expected for their relative size.

Incumbent candidates were much less likely to adopt and use both types of social media in their campaigns, and the results here are significant. This undermined normalisation to an extent then and, similarly to the findings for campaign websites, suggests that there are other factors at play for incumbents, such as the added risks of losing control of their message (a particular possibility on social media).

Budget was a significant factor in the adoption and use of both types of social media. Medium-budget candidates were more likely than low-budget candidates to adopt and use them and high-budget candidates were much more likely to do so. This supports normalisation patterns, which runs counter to expectations and is somewhat surprising. Social media are free to set up and run and on the measures employed here would not be particularly time-consuming to run actively or interactively. Based on these factors social media in theory lend themselves to candidates with low budgets. As an explanation for the patterns shown here then, it might be concluded then that interactive social media campaigns were handled by staff employed by the candidate or seen as an optional extra once other things had been paid for.

Looking at other significant results, surprisingly no-hoper candidates were much less likely to adopt and use both social media types. One might expect that, as candidates who are not likely to win usually have lower budgets than those with a good chance of winning, that they might have adopted social media, which are free, to promote their campaign. But this does not seem to be the case. Instead, they may have concluded that, as they were very unlikely to win in any case, and as low-key candidates, they are likely to have only a small following on social media, it was not worth the effort.

Candidates standing in constituencies where people were younger and less likely to have no qualifications were more likely to adopt and use Twitter. Similarly to the findings for websites, this suggests that candidates have an awareness of the type of constituency they are standing in and tailor their online campaigning activity accordingly, itself an interesting finding.

# Discussion

This paper set out to retest the normalisation thesis in the context of the 2015 UK general election with newly-gathered primary data. Consider the theoretical contribution of the findings here, there are several instances where normalisation does not hold, suggesting online tools are indeed changing campaign communications. In terms of relational normalisation, Liberal Democrat candidates adopted and used mobilisation features on their websites at twice the rate of Conservative candidates and Green candidates were almost on a par with Conservative candidates in adopting mobilisation features. This is a relatively strong refutation of relational normalisation. Although this is only present for this site feature type, the fact that it was mobilisation is encouraging from an equalisation perspective.

The Green party also subverted relational normalisation to a significant degree on social media, particularly on Facebook. Green candidates were most likely across all parties to adopt and use Facebook and they were more likely than Conservative candidates to adopt and use Twitter. Furthermore incumbent candidates, despite being more likely to have a website overall, were far less likely to adopt interactive and mobilising website features. This pattern continued for social media, where incumbents were less likely to adopt both social media types. In this sense, the evidence here suggests that online tools offer challengers a means to level the campaign playing field compared to incumbents.

Considering the content of online campaigns, candidates clearly did not shy away altogether from interactivity on their campaign websites. A fifth adopted more than one interactive feature on their site. There is a similar pattern for mobilisation features but to a greater extent, with a quarter having more than one mobilisation feature. Finally, for functional normalisation of social media, interactive use of Twitter was actually the most common type of use among those candidates who adopted Twitter as a campaign tool. Among those who used Twitter, 63% used it interactively. Although Facebook lags behind this 28% of candidates who adopted Facebook as a campaign tool campaigned interactively with it. Overall, then the findings here offer fresh evidence to refute normalisation.

There is a note of caution which might be considered here for relational normalisation on social media however. Rather than being evidence of social media undermining relational normalisation per se, (due to the results for other parties) this seems to point more to support for the ‘ethos’ theory (Southern, 2015). Parties with an open, grassroots structure or a young or tech-savvy support base (Green parties but see also the Pirate party in Germany) are more likely to adopt online campaigns and run them in an interactive or engaged manner. As discussed in the literature review, this could well be explained by the ethos of the Green party and on the evidence here the ethos theory is arguably better supported than the equalisation theory. This has broader implications for this field of study and, combined with earlier studies concluding similar, is a significant finding in itself. This suggests that this theory is worthy of more detailed investigation in future studies on this subject.

Overall then, the evidence presented here suggests that, despite some specific findings to the contrary, online campaigning is providing an opportunity for some smaller parties to level the electoral playing field (Rheingold, 1993). Furthermore, far from online campaigning being flat, dull and uninterested in anything other than broadcasting offline campaign messages, there is more interaction and mobilisation occurring than might be expected, and it is seemingly increasing over time.

In terms of online campaign growth since 2010, website adoption stayed around the same with 88% of candidates having a campaign website compared to 86% in 2010 (Southern, 2015). There was a marked increase in social media campaigning however, with 74% of candidates using Twitter to campaign here compared to only 34% in 2010 and 57% of candidates using Facebook to campaign compared to 41% in 2010 (ibid). There were also increases in interactive use. Twitter users, campaigned interactively in 63%, compared to 54% in 2010 and Facebook users, campaigned interactively in 28% of cases here compared to 22% who did so in 2010.

In an age when there is concern over a lack of voter engagement and participation, the fact that interactive and mobilising features, particular via Twitter, are becoming relatively common in online campaigns suggests that online tools may well be one potential way to address this. More and more people are now contacting their MPs online, with several MP’s now stating that engaging with voters over Twitter has become an everyday part of the job (BBC, 2015).

It should be pointed out here that use of social media for politics among the broader population is still reasonably low. According to the British Election Study wave six, which was conducted just after the 2015 general election, just 14% of people who used Twitter found political information from it during the campaign (Fieldhouse et al., 2015). It is likely these people were already highly politically engaged and so even revolutionary use of social media by parties is likely to only have minimal impact on the outcome of an election.

Nevertheless, almost 12million people now follow an MP on Twitter with the average number of followers an MP has being 21, 000 (Tweetminster, 2017). Interactive and engaged use of social media could be something that parties and MPs include in their online communications with voters as an on-going, everyday process which could potentially foster a sense of closeness and demonstrate their responsiveness to voters’ needs. So although it is hard to say whether the impact on electoral outcomes might be significant, savvy use of these tools could reach a wide audience and provide one potential remedy to voter disaffection and apathy. Indeed, there are signs that this may already be happening.

When the 2017 general election was called, the Labour Party announced that they planned to put social media front and centre in their 2017 general election campaign (Stewart, 2017) in a bid to mobilise their increased membership, particularly their new younger members. The Conservatives for their part spend £1.2million on targeted Facebook advertisements, largely attacking Jeremy Corbyn (Kentish, 2017). However, despite this extensive spend by the Conservatives, certain commentators felt that Labour’s focus on positive, sharable content had managed to outflank the Conservatives online and was likely a contributing factor in mobilising the youth vote (Therrien, 2017). This study has shown that interactive social media campaigning is already common, even at the constituency level. With the 2017 shock result arguably being driven by an increase in youth turnout (Skinner and Mortimore, 2017) this mainstreaming of interactive social media campaigning is likely to continue and further study of this should continue also.

Table 1) Number of Features of Different Website Functions

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Site Features** | **Information Provision** | **Mobilisation** | **Interactivity** |
| *No Site* | 12.36 | 12.36 | 12.36 |
| *No Features* | 1.93 | 20.69 | 10.42 |
| *One Feature* | 11.12 | 40.69 | 56.37 |
| *Two Features* | 22.70 | 21.12 | 18.73 |
| *Three Features* | 51.89 | 5.14 | 2.12 |
| *Total* | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Table 2) Multi-Level Binary Selection Model and Three Multi-Level Ordinal Logistic Regression Models Assessing the Adoption of Different Features on Candidate Campaign Websites

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Binary Multilevel** | **Information Provision** | **Interactivity** | **Mobilisation** |
|  | OR(S.E)sig | OR(S.E)sig | OR(S.E)sig | OR(S.E)sig |
| **Conservatives** |  |  |  |  |
| Greens | 0.62(0.20) | 1.12(0.18) | 0.37(0.06)\*\*\* | 0.90(0.13) |
| Labour | 0.35(0.11)\*\*\* | 0.68(0.09)\*\*\* | 1.10(0.14) | 2.53(0.31)\*\*\* |
| Lib Dem | 0.36(0.11)\*\*\* | 0.97(0.15) | 0.56(0.08)\*\*\* | 2.28(0.31)\*\*\* |
| UKIP | 0.19(0.06)\*\*\* | 0.31(0.05)\*\*\* | 0.28(0.05)\*\*\* | 0.46(0.07)\*\*\* |
| **Man** |  |  |  |  |
| Woman | 0.20(0.17) | 1.07(0.10) | 1.20(0.12)\* | 1.05(0.09) |
| **Challenger** |  |  |  |  |
| Incumbent | 1.17(0.63) | 0.49(0.10)\*\*\* | 0.60(0.11)\*\*\* | 0.43(0.07)\*\*\* |
| **Low Budget** |  |  |  |  |
| Medium Budget | 1.16(0.16) | 0.92(0.10) | 0.80(0.09)\* | 0.75(0.08)\*\* |
| High Budget | 2.87(0.65)\*\*\* | 1.67(0.22) \*\*\* | 1.31(0.18)\* | 1.41(0.17)\*\*\* |
| **Marginal** |  |  |  |  |
| Safe | 0.41(0.22) | 0.71(0.13) | 0.51(0.09)\*\*\* | 0.64(0.10)\*\*\* |
| No Hoper | 0.27(0.13)\*\*\* | 0.49(0.10)\*\*\* | 0.70(0.12)\* | 0.63(0.10)\*\*\* |
| **Younger** |  |  |  |  |
| Older | 1.04(0.15) | 0.88(0.08) | 0.83(0.09) | 1.03(0.10) |
| **Fewer Quals** |  |  |  |  |
| More Quals | 1.50(0.26)\* | 1.12(0.10) | 1.03(0.10) | 1.15(0.10) |
| **Urban** |  |  |  |  |
| Rural | 1.50(0.26)\* | 1.11(0.12) | 0.86(0.10) | 1.04(0.11) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Cons | 32.95(17.34) |  |  |  |
| Cut 1 | ~ | -4.71(0.27) | -3.10(0.23) | -1.50(0.19) |
| Cut 2 | ~ | -2.59(0.23) | 0.40(0.22) | 0.79(0.18) |
| Cut 3 | ~ | -1.11(0.22) | 3.09(0.25) | 2.86(0.21) |
| Rho | 0.04 |  |  |  |
| R2 | 0.10 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.05 |
| N Groups | 533 | 531 | 531 | 531 |
| N Obs | 2590 | 2270 | 2270 | 2270 |

(In the selection model P ≤ 0.05=\*. P ≤ 0.01=\*\* and P ≤ 0.001=\*\*\*)

Table 3) Type of Twitter Use by Party

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Twitter Use** | **Conservatives** | **Greens** | **Labour** | **Lib Dem** | **UKIP** | **Total (N)** |
| *No Use* | 16.64 | 27.24 | 8.73 | 32.31 | 45.79 | 26.06 (675) |
| *Static* | 34 | 34 | 21 | 41 | 42 | 172 |
| *Static* | 6.43 | 6.91 | 3.98 | 7.88 | 8.05 | 6.64 (172) |
| *Active* | 135 | 107 | 93 | 105 | 89 | 529 |
| *Active* | 25.52 | 21.75 | 17.65 | 20.19 | 17.05 | 20.42 (529) |
| *Interactive* | 272 | 217 | 367 | 206 | 152 | 1,214 |
| *Interactive* | 51.42 | 44.11 | 69.64 | 39.62 | 29.12 | 46.87 (1214) |
| *Total* | 529 | 492 | 527 | 520 | 522 | 2,590 |
| *Total* | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 (2590) |

Table 4) Type of Facebook Use by Party

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Facebook Use** | **Conservative** | **Greens** | **Labour** | **Lib Dem** | **UKIP** | **Total (N)** |
| *No Use* | 30.62 | 42.28 | 31.12 | 53.27 | 60.34 | 43.47 (1,126) |
| *Static* | 85 | 59 | 68 | 67 | 77 | 356 |
| *Static* | 16.07 | 11.99 | 12.9 | 12.88 | 14.75 | 13.75 (356) |
| *Active* | 183 | 137 | 187 | 122 | 70 | 699 |
| *Active* | 34.59 | 27.85 | 35.48 | 23.46 | 13.41 | 26.99 (699) |
| *Interactive* | 99 | 88 | 108 | 54 | 60 | 409 |
| *Interactive* | 18.71 | 17.89 | 20.49 | 10.38 | 11.49 | 15.79 (409) |
| *Total* | 529 | 492 | 527 | 520 | 522 | 2,590 |
| *Total* | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 (2590) |

Table 5) Two Multi-Level Ordinal Logistic Regression Models Assessing Candidates’ Social Media Use

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Tw Binary** | **FB Binary** | **Tw Ordinal** | **FB Ordinal** |
|  | OR(SE)Sig | OR(SE)Sig | OR(SE)Sig | OR(SE)Sig |
| **Conservatives** |  |  |  |  |
| Greens | 0.70(0.14) | 0.90(0.15) | 1.56(0.28)\*\* | 1.66(0.31)\*\*\* |
| Labour | 2.13(0.42)\*\*\* | 1.00(0.14) | 2.23(0.34)\*\*\* | 1.22(0.17) |
| Lib Dems | 0.45(0.08)\*\*\* | 0.45(0.07)\*\*\* | 1.11(0.18) | 0.84(0.14) |
| UKIP | 0.26(0.05)\*\*\* | 0.37(0.06)\*\*\* | 1.00(0.18) | 0.86(0.17) |
| **Man** |  |  |  |  |
| Woman | 1.02(0.11) | 1.06(0.10) | 0.90(0.10) | 1.09(0.12) |
| **Challenger** |  |  |  |  |
| Incumbent | 0.38(0.11)\*\*\* | 0.60(0.13)\* | 0.73(0.17) | 0.99(0.19) |
| **Low Budget** |  |  |  |  |
| Medium Budget | 1.28(0.14)\*\*\* | 1.12(0.12) | 1.22(0.16) | 1.27(0.18) |
| High Budget | 2.35(0.36)\*\*\* | 2.11(0.29)\*\*\* | 1.88(0.28)\*\*\* | 1.70(0.26)\*\* |
| **Marginal** |  |  |  |  |
| Safe | 0.58(0.15)\*\*\* | 0.42(0.09)\*\*\* | 0.48(0.11)\*\*\* | 0.46(0.08)\*\*\* |
| No Hoper | 0.46(0.13)\*\*\* | 0.43(0.09)\*\*\* | 0.42(0.09)\*\*\* | 0.66(0.12)\*\* |
| **Younger** |  |  |  |  |
| Older | 0.97(0.11) | 0.88(0.09) | 0.75(0.08)\*\* | 1.05(0.12) |
| **Fewer Quals** |  |  |  |  |
| More Quals | 1.35(0.14)\*\*\* | 0.90(0.08) | 1.43(0.16)\*\*\* | 0.96(0.10) |
| **Urban** |  |  |  |  |
| Rural | 1.09(0.13) | 1.20(0.14) | 1.24(0.17) | 1.61(0.21)\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Cons | 6.64(2.04) | 3.49(0.82) |  |  |
| Cut1 | ~ | ~ | -2.70 (0.26) | -1.02(0.23) |
| Cut2 | ~ | ~ | -0.80 (0.25) | 1.16(0.23) |
| R2 | 0.10 | 0.07 | 0.04 | 0.02 |
| N Groups | 533 | 533 | 530 | 520 |
| N Obs | 2950 | 2590 | 1915 | 1464 |

(In the binary selection models P ≤ 0.05=\*. P ≤ 0.01=\*\* and P ≤ 0.001=\*\*\*)

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)