<1> Chapter Three

Digital Campaigning Across Space: The Role of Technological, Political and Institutional Context

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Chapter one set out the core theoretical argument of this book – that digital campaigning has evolved through four main phases which have culminated in a ‘hyper-normalized’ state of major party dominance and the growth of an ‘apolitical’ elite at the heart of campaign organization. Chapter two put some flesh on the bones of this argument by showing how the findings about digital campaigning over time can be seen to support the idea of a four phase cycle and particularly where this fourth phase is now emerging. This chapter switches the focus from examining developments in digital campaigning over time to those occurring over space. Specifically, we seek to measure which countries can be seen as most advanced in the cycle and why this might be the case? At a systemic or institutional level what are the features of a polity that are most closely associated with advances in digital campaigning and particularly moves into the newest phase of online voter mobilization?

Measuring how far and fast countries have progressed through the four phase cycle is not a straightforward task. Tracking the extent to which digital campaigns meet the eight criteria listed in table 1 is difficult enough for one country, let alone multiple cases. Identifying a smaller set of ‘critical’ criteria on which campaigns can be compared is thus a necessary in undertaking this new spatial analysis. To do so we focus on the ‘demand-side’ characteristics of each phase as the most amenable to international calibration and comparison. Levels and modes of voter engagement with the campaign can be measured relatively easily with cross-national survey data. Measures of the internal power distribution and primary goals of political organizations, as well specifics about the location and size of the digital team are considerably harder to ascertain with any precision. Given that we are particularly interested to compare who has moved most rapidly through the four phase cycle our task is further narrowed by focusing on the voter response seen as ‘typifying’ phase IV of digital campaigns, that of ‘receive’. Where do we see the highest rates of online contact with voters during elections?

<2> Who has entered Phase IV?

To map the extent of online contact[[1]](#endnote-1) occurring across countries we make use of a unique international data source - the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The CSES is a post-election survey that is fielded in national elections over a fixed time period and includes a series of standard questions about political attitudes and behaviour.[[2]](#endnote-2) The study has a set of core questions and a variable thematic component that changes over time. Module 4, which was fielded in elections between 2011 and 2015 in participating countries, focused on the theme of mobilization and includes a battery of items that measure whether respondents were contacted during the campaign by political parties (direct) or by friends and family (indirect). The contact is also divided according to whether it was online or offline. The online mode is split further into three main types – e-mail, sms / text messages, and web-based methods, including social networks/micro-blogs such as Facebook and Twitter. Offline forms of contact are also split into three types – face to face canvassing, phone and mail (see Appendix 3.1) for the full text of the survey items). At the time of this analysis Module 4 was in its second release resulting in an N of 17 countries being included in the multilevel analysis. Since the 2015 British Election Study (BES) post-election mail-back/web completion survey included the CSES module and those data were also publicly available (but not yet integrated into the CSES) it was possible to include the UK in the descriptive stage of the analysis This addition was important in that it meant that all four case studies examined in subsequent chapters could be compared and ranked against one another and internationally on levels of digital mobilization.

Table 3.1 presents the basic frequencies for the different modes of contact across the 18 countries. The numbers are reported as percentage of the overall sample or population that reported receiving a particular mode by country and year of election.

**[Table 3.1 about here]**

Columns three and four of the table report the main variables of interest for this chapter which are the proportion of citizens that received any online contact from the party or informally through their networks. Column five reports the combined total from one and two i.e. the proportion of individuals within a country that had received either direct or indirect online contact. For comparison purposes we also report the frequencies of direct contact by parties through more traditional offline modes i.e. face to face and mail/telephone in columns six and seven. We again cumulate the preceding columns to report the proportion of voters receiving any type direct contact from parties and candidates (i.e. online or offline) in column eight. Finally we provide the rates of online sign-up by voters to receive party and candidate alerts and e-news by country. This variable is useful in terms of showing prior levels of interest in the online campaign. More importantly perhaps it provides a more accurate picture of the overall level of genuine or ‘net’ online mobilization that is occurring within a country. Given the lack of national email or mobile phone databases it is obviously difficult for parties to ‘cold call’ voters online in the same way that they can via offline methods. A more likely scenario is that the contact follows individuals having signed up to social media profiles or for email alerts. Once we take into account that prior sign-up, therefore, how much unsolicited or genuinely ‘cold’ contact remains?

Together these variables paint an interesting picture of the amount of different types of contact occurring. Comparing first the rates of offline to online contacting we can see that the latter is typically much less common than the former, particularly if we look at the rates of mail and phone contact. The latter rarely fall below ten percent of the population. The situation for face to face contacting, however, is more comparable with most countries seeing similar rates of online contact occurring and a few such as Taiwan and the U.S. seeing a doubling and even trebling of the rate taking place. Ireland stands out as the outlier here with a very high rate of personal contact that dwarfs the online mode.

Comparing the rates of online contact reported in table 3.1 it is clear there is considerable variance in the amount of online contacting that is occurring across countries. Looking at rates of direct online contact by parties the table shows that almost one quarter of the population in Greece and Taiwan received some kind of digital message about their vote from the parties or candidates in the lead up to the election. This compares to a low of less than one percent in the case of Thailand. Iceland and the U.S. follow in reasonably close proximity to the two top performing nations with 15 and 17 percent of their electorates having receiving official e-contact. The UK and Mexico come in somewhat lower but still report around one in ten of their population as having experienced some type of digital mobilization by parties during a recent election campaign.

There is then a fairly sizeable group of countries that fall into a middle band of direct online contact, with between four and ten percent of the population receiving some kind of e-stimuli from parties. Interestingly when we look at the corresponding rates of sign-up by voters to receive online contact from the parties there does not appear to be any direct parity, beyond the case of Austria. Generally online sign up rates are exceeded by overall levels of direct party contact. This is interesting in that it suggests that parties were managing to do more than simply reinforce a prior interest in them and were managing to reach voters that had no pre-existing loyalties. In the U.S., Taiwan and particularly Greece the gap between the two variables is at least double if not greater, indicating a substantial web mobilization operation was in play. However for five countries the situation is reversed in that more people signed up than actually received contact. Perhaps the most surprising case in this regard is Thailand where around ten times more people reportedly signed up to receive campaign information than were actually contacted online. For the most part, however, the gap between demand and supply for digital content is quite small (a couple of percentage points). The fact that a disparity exists however does suggest that parties in certain countries were failing to fully exploit to their email lists.

Overall table 1 reveals is that levels of indirect online contact are typically lower than direct. The exception here is the U.S. where rates of this type of informal exchange actually exceed those of formal party mobilization. While we don’t know the content of that exchange and whether it involved the passing on of campaign information, such findings are at least suggestive that the two-step flow model of digital mobilization has become more established in the U.S. than elsewhere.

Based on this overview of frequencies it is clear that a divide exists between countries in their intensity of online campaigning. We can take a first step at marking this divide by grouping countries into four tiers of web mobilization using the total online contact figures reported in the penultimate column of table 3.2.

**[Table 3.2 about here]**

The top tier contains those countries in which at least 20 percent of the population received some kind of online contact during the campaign either from the parties or mediated through their social networks we can see that four countries meet this criteria – the U.S. Greece, Taiwan and Iceland. Dropping down a notch, we find that both antipodean democracies – Australia and New Zealand – make it into the second tier as does Mexico, the UK and Serbia. Finally France just edges over the ten percent threshold based on contact during its 2012 Presidential election. Our third tier which includes those countries where between five and ten percent of the population have received some type of online contact is quite heavily dominated by the northern European democracies of Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Finally the lowest rates of contact are seen in tier four which includes a somewhat random mix of older and newer democracies from varying geographic regions.

Before moving on to try to ascertain what might help to explain this ordering of nations we provide some additional insight into the rates of contact observed by breaking down the online contact received across countries into its three component parts – email, sms and web/social network. The results are shown in Table 3.3 and are interesting in that they point to a different pattern of contact within the top tier nations.

**[Table 3.3 about here]**

In particular we find that the vast majority of contact occurring in the case of Greece and Taiwan is taking place via sms. At least one in five voters in Greece and Taiwan received some type of mobilizing text message from the parties or candidates. Within the U.S the story is somewhat different, however, in that it is email that is the most common channel for parties to make their attempts at online mobilization, along with the web and social networking sites. Iceland is more of a hybrid case with both email and text messaging proving to be popular. This differentiation among countries in the channels utilized for dissemination of messages across the top performing countries is interesting in that it reveals that digital campaigning at its most pervasive does not necessarily follow a ‘one size fits all’ model. Technological capacity and voters’ existing preferences for digital communication are likely to play a role in shaping how those messages are distributed. Furthermore the differences observed raise questions about the relative efficacy and power of email and social network contacting versus text messages.

<2> Explaining Levels of Online Voter Mobilization

How then can we explain these findings? A quick eyeballing of those countries with the highest rates of online contacting reveals few obvious similarities. While a majority of nations in tiers one and two of table 3.2 report high rates of internet use among their populations, Greece does not.[[3]](#endnote-3) Institutionally the cases are also quite varied. Tier one contains both two party and multi-party systems as well a mix of PR and plurality electoral systems. The campaign environment also differs quite markedly among the top tier countries. Candidates and parties in the U.S. and Taiwan enjoy quite liberal regimes in terms of controls on their advertising and expenditure. Greece and Iceland by contrast impose strict spending limits on parties and offer state subsidized rather than paid media airtime.[[4]](#endnote-4)

To better explain the variance in online contacting observed in tables 3.1 and 3.2 and by proxy, those factors most conducive to entry into phase IV digital campaigning, we apply a more systematic approach. Specifically we fit a multilevel regression model to the CSES dataset which means the units of analysis – voters – are treated as individuals (level 1) nested within groups, in this case, countries (level 2). In order to build this model we combine the insights from two relevant but until now, largely unconnected comparative literatures. The first includes those studies that have tried to explain the frequency and quality of digital campaigning cross-nationally, i.e. the supply-side of the equation. The second covers a somewhat longer and more established body of work that has sought to identify the drivers of voter mobilization and levels of party contact more generally in comparative perspective.

<3> Comparative Studies of Digital Campaigns

Comparative analysis of digital campaigning is increasing but remains quite limited. The first major study was conducted by Norris (2001) at the turn of the millennium. Taking a large N approach she compared the presence and content of party websites across 179 countries in mid-2000. Her explanatory model included a range of party characteristics along with a number of aggregate indicators that measured countries’ levels of socio-economic, human and technological development. Her findings were important in showing that these societal factors and particularly technological advancement helped explain how active and particularly interactive parties were online.

The increase in party websites after the millennium meant that subsequent comparative research focused more on questions of how parties campaigned online rather simply adoption. Attention shifted from the broader socio-economic environment to the political context and the institutional configuration of the polity. Anstead and Chadwick (2009)[[5]](#endnote-5) were among the first to wrestle with this explicitly, identifying the party system as one of the main causes of differences in web campaigning across countries. Through a small N comparison of the UK and the U.S. they argued that the more ‘stratarchical’ or decentralized mode of party organization in America along with its more liberal campaign finance rules had permitted a much faster rate of diffusion and innovation in digital technology during elections. Together these factors generated an environment in which candidates functioned as political entrepreneurs, building ‘start-up’ organizations for each election and drawing in a massive number of volunteers and donations. The internet was the ideal campaign medium to use in this context, given its fast, networked and personalized qualities.

The view that institutions mattered for innovation in web campaigning was supported by Davis et al (2008) in their editorial overview of the findings from online elections in twelve different countries. Looking across the assembled cases they concluded that the presidential candidate-centered systems of the U.S. and Chile provided the best environment for internet campaigning to develop. By contrast, parliamentary democracies in which parties are more dominant were as less open to new medium and the type of personalized political appeals it promotes (Davis et al., 2008). The authors also speculated on whether the more commercialized and consumer-driven existing media systems in the U.S. and Chile encouraged the heavier use of the internet by both candidates and voters. The new media might appeal as a more direct and less ‘noisy’ channel to both provide and also access political information.

Despite the persuasive case set out by these small N and impressionistic accounts of differences in web campaigning across countries, larger cross-national investigation did not support their conclusions. Studies of both the 2004 and 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections concluded essentially a ‘null’ effect for a range of macro level political factors in explaining differences between political campaign sites and particularly preferences for web 1.0 and web 2.0 modes (Foot et al., 2007; Vergeer et al. (2012 Subsequent analysis of party elites’ views on web campaigning within twelve EU member states underscored this lack of differentiation in outlook. The only slight deviation to emerge was that campaigners in newer democracies proved somewhat more likely to favour Facebook than those with a longer electoral experience (Lilleker et al. 2014).

Outside the EU context Vaccari’s (2013) seven nation analysis of party and candidates’ web and email use over a four year period (2006-10) found systemic factors had a stronger impact. In particular he found that PR and higher voter turnout were linked to the production of richer web campaign content. Conversely lower rates of turnout and voter trust were associated with greater email responsiveness by parties. These differences, he argued showed that where parties enjoyed higher rates of popular support they were more likely to focus on producing a quality product for their visitors. However, where they were viewed more negatively they tended to deploy resources in a more pro-active manner to encourage familiarity and participation. Despite the greater prominence of macro-level variables in explaining the patterns of web campaigning in Vaccari’s analysis, his overall conclusion was that they remained secondary in significance to party-level effects. The “selective adoption of specific digital applications by political actors” he argued remains “rooted mostly in organizational rather than systemic considerations.” (Vaccari, 2013: 115).

The lack of variance in web campaigning revealed by these studies is perhaps not too surprising given the uniformity in practice that previous chapters had indicated was developing at this point. The early noughties were a time when phase II was in the ascendant and professionalization and standardization were the *modus operandi* for web campaign managers. Added to this is the methodological consideration that most of these studies were conducted during EU parliamentary elections which are widely seen as less important or ‘second order’ events (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Parties were arguably less likely to invest time and resources into developing their campaign presence compared with ‘first order’ national elections. Notably the one study that did actually analyse web and email use in national election campaigns found a stronger effect for systemic characteristics.

A final and possibly even more compelling reason for the apparent lack of country level variance identified by these accounts is that all of them focused on the ‘supply’ side of the equation i.e. websites and email content. Convergence among party elites on a new set of campaign practices is, according to ‘contagion theory’, not an unusual phenomenon (Matland and Studlar, 1996). Indeed one might expect this type of diffusion and mirroring to be more likely to occur in response to a global technology like the Internet. Had these studies looked instead for variance in the ‘demand’ side of activity i.e. voters’ experience of the digital campaign (which is the primary concern of this chapter) then it is likely that a more nuanced and differentiated picture would have emerged. Certainly this is a conclusion that is supported by the comparative literature on voter mobilization more generally. It is thus to this body of work and its key findings that we now turn.

<3> Comparative Studies of Voter Mobilization

Efforts to explain campaign contact and voter mobilization as one might expect, preceded the arrival of the internet. Indeed investigation of parties’ efforts to ‘get out the vote’ (GOTV) has a relatively long history in political science, stretching back to the experimental work of Harold Gosnell in the 1920s (1927). Until recently, however, much of the work focused on a single case – that of the U.S (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Gerber and Green 2000, 2008). The work also focused largely on contact as an independent variable and its effects on voters, rather than as a dependent variable and the drivers behind it. Despite some significant methodological differences in approach most studies pointed to two very clear and consistent conclusions. First, contacting voters is effective in increasing turnout. Second, face to face methods are much more effective than other less personal tactics such as direct mail or phone canvassing in getting voters to the polls.

Comparative work began in earnest in the early part of this century as international data sources began to emerge. Having shown the impact of contacting on turnout so convincingly in single nation studies, questions invariably arose as to whether it could help explain cross-national patterns in voting behaviour. Initiatives such as the Comparative National Election Project (CNEP) study and wave 2 of the CSES provided scholars with the tools they needed to address these questions. Their findings were important first in underscoring the key finding that contact matters for turnout. However they also broke new ground in demonstrating the extent of variance in the practice across countries. (Magalhães, 2007; Karp et al. 2008; Karp and Banducci, 2011; Dalton et al. 2011; Karp, 2012; Magalhães et al. 2015). In one of the first large N analyses of elections held during the 2001-04 period, Karp and Banducci (2007) reported a gap in contact rates of over 40 percent between the ‘top’ performing nation Ireland – where over half (56.3%) of respondents were contacted during the campaign – and Spain, where just 5.8%.of individuals reported the receiving any electoral stimuli. The figures measured all forms of contact since this earlier wave of CSES did not differentiate according to mode.

Such revelations switched the focus on contacting from an independent to dependent variable and explanatory models were developed to account for the differences observed. These models included a range of institutional, cultural and socio-economic variables similar to those that had been deployed by the cross-national analyses of web campaign production discussed above. The results revealed a much stronger role for system level characteristics, however, with citizen orientations and governance structures emerging as key determinants of mobilization rates (Karp et al. 2008; Karp and Banducci, 2010; Dalton et al. 2011; Karp, 2012).[[6]](#endnote-6) Specifically, countries with higher rates of turnout, single member districts or preferential voting systems and two large centrist parties typically saw the highest rates of contact. Such conditions it was argued increased GOTV efforts since it maximized the likely ‘pay-off’ of such activities for the larger parties in terms of ‘poaching’ one another’s voters. Where there was a wider range of smaller parties and more polarized electorates, the likelihood of such conversion was seen as much lower.

<2> Towards an Explanatory Model of Digital Mobilization

Joining these two literatures together provides the basis for developing and testing a comparative model of digital mobilization which is the central goal of this chapter. In particular the findings from the mobilization studies are central in showing that party contact varies significantly across countries, and that these patterns are linked to structural as well as cultural aspects of the polity. We would thus expect this to carry over into studies of digital contact. The comparative analyses of elite adoption of digital tools revealed a much more subdued picture of variance. Where systemic effects are felt, however, their impact actually ran counter to those observed in the mobilization studies. Specifically, Vaccari (2013) found that parties were significantly more likely to invest in their digital campaign content under proportional electoral rules rather than under the more restrictive first past the post systems. Furthermore, cultural features such as higher levels of citizen political engagement which had been positively associated with parties’ offline mobilization activities appeared to have a less intuitive and even inverse relationship with parties use of some more interactive digital campaign tools. Thus, while our explanatory model is specified primarily by reference to the theory and findings of the voter mobilization literature, we do build in some expectations of deviance in the direction of and impact of certain major independent variables.

Following the approach taken in previous studies we start by specifying the ‘baseline’ or capacity-related factors that are likely to determine the amount of digital mobilization occurring in a country. Here we include the three ‘standard’ indicators of human, economic and political development. Societies with higher levels of human and economic capital more likely to have the infrastructure and levels of literacy required for modern GOTV activities to take place. In addition those countries with a longer track record of stable democratic rule and history of free and fair elections will have parties that are more experienced in running campaigns and mobilizing citizens. The fourth main development indicator included is technological and measures the extent of internet use among the population. In order for citizens to receive online contact they need to have access to the medium.

Beyond these ‘necessary’ conditions for digital mobilization to occur, a range of other more politically relevant characteristics are expected to increase its frequency. One of these is the political culture of a country and particularly whether a positive orientation exists toward governing authorities and the system more generally. The expectation of the mobilization literature is that where voters are more politically engaged this will increase mobilization efforts by parties since they perceive a more receptive audience for their GOTV messages. Indicators typically used to capture engagement are voter turnout rates and levels of political trust and interest in society. Of course a possible counter argument to be made here is that lower levels of engagement and particularly sudden declines in turnout could spark greater attention by parties to get voters out to the polls. Such a response was supported by the findings of Vaccari’s (2013) cross-national analysis of parties’ use of email during election campaigns. Levels of existing political engagement are thus expected to have a significant impact on the extent of digital mobilization occurring in a country. however, the direction of the effect is left unspecified.

Given the findings from prior studies, regime characteristics are expected to play a major role in determining levels of digital mobilization. Electoral systems are seen as particularly important in this regard with their effects typically predicted around their division into two main types – preferential voting or single member districts (SMD) and proportional representation (PR) methods in which voters choose from a party list. *Ceteris paribus* preferential systems are expected to have higher rates of contacting since they encourage and indeed necessitate individual candidates’ to cultivate a personal vote and build up name recognition. The more personalized mode of communication provided by websites and social media profiles might arguably increase these incentives even further. That said, and again following prior investigation by Vaccari (2013), it may be the case that the more equalized environment of PR increases the incentives for the smaller parties to campaign, especially online given its relatively low cost. As such, while we expect the electoral system to significantly predict rates of digital mobilization we are agnostic over which type is most effective in doing so.

The electoral cycle, type of contest and presence of compulsory voting are also expected to affect the rates of digital campaign contact. A higher frequency of elections is likely to produce a faster cycle of innovation and investment in voter contacting overall, particularly in new methods. The type or level of election being contested is also expected to be important in driving levels of contact both up and down. Presidential contests in particular are seen as likely to increase rates of voter mobilization over and above other types of national elections. Such races have the highest status and profile for voters and typically see the biggest turnout. Investment in mobilization is thus likely to yield a higher return for parties. Again, given the opportunities that the digital medium provides for personalized campaigning one might expect Presidential elections to see a particularly high investment in online mobilization. Finally, compulsory voting is likely to increase all efforts to contact voters including those using the internet. Given that the odds of contacting someone who will actually vote are obviously higher in countries where voting is mandatory, the potential benefits of voter mobilization efforts are correspondingly increased.

In terms of the party system effects, these are likely to be seen in two main and inter-related dimensions – size and ideological dispersion or spread. A multi-party environment with a wide spread of ideologically opposing parties is, in principle, likely to prompt high levels of campaign contact. However, as noted, the findings from comparative studies of traditional modes of voter mobilization have consistently challenged this logic, finding that centrist two-party systems are in fact more likely to see higher rates of contacting. Given the empirical evidence reported by Vaccari (2013) linking PR systems to higher web campaign intensity we opt to retain the expectation of a positive relationship to emerge between the number of parties and their level of ideological spread and the extent of digital voter mobilization. A third and final aspect of the party system that scholars of comparative voter mobilization have argued is an important predictor of contact rates is its overall strength. Extending the logic used to argue for preferential voting effects, the case is made that where party organizations are weak and conversely candidates dominate, contact will increase given campaigns’ need to cultivate a personal following and support base.

The final ‘layer’ of explanatory variables modeled here relate to the campaign environment itself. Perhaps the most obvious and self-explanatory of these is the competitiveness of the contest. The closer a race is, the more the contestants are likely to try to galvanize support and hence the higher levels of voter mobilization will be. The rules governing campaign finance and expenditure are also expected to play an important role with less regulated systems expected to see a higher rate of voter contacting. Such systems provide parties with more resources and freedom to undertake GOTV drives. Of course tighter spending restrictions might also make parties more eager to exploit the new digital channels given their cheaper cost. As such we may see an inverse or negative relationship between financial caps and online contacting in particular. The controls governing campaigns’ access to the media are also likely affect the level voter outreach during an election – again in mixed ways. More restrictive regimes i.e. those where commercial advertising is prohibited and state subsidized media is the main channel for parties to communicate their message are expected to increase the incentives for parties to develop their own direct channels to talk directly to voters. However, it is also possible that access to a paid media environment could increase attention to digital contacting since this allows for the cross-promotion and recirculation of the audio-visual material produced for these other markets.

Beyond these ‘usual suspects’ a further layer of regulation in the area of data protection and privacy is now arguably becoming necessary to include in studies of voter mobilization and particularly those dealing with digital targeting of messages. To develop this point we draw on Bimber’s (2014) study of the 2012 U.S. Presidential election in which he noted that the level of personalized communication that occurred during this campaign was “not mirrored in other countries at this point.” A key reason for the disparity he argued was that “privacy regulations prevent parties and candidates in many countries from engaging in the practices undertaken in the U.S., especially in 2012. (132). Effectively American candidates now enjoy an unmatched capacity to drill down and micro-target the electorate through their extensive and increasingly rich voter files. The rapid spread of smart phones and uptake of platforms like Facebook and Twitter provide anew and very amenable conduit for this new type of individualized contacting. The capacity to build and use these growing stores of data on citizens is thus becoming a critical factor to consider in explaining cross-national patterns of ‘receive’ mode in any format, but particularly for digital messaging. A measure of the extent of countries’ data privacy and protection rules is therefore an important new parameter to add into our explanatory model.

Table 3.4 presents a summary of the explanatory model of digital mobilization developed to this point. Specifically it lists the independent variables we are testing by category or layer of explanation, proceeding from the baseline prerequisites through to the more fixed and variable political characteristics. For each variable we indicate whether we expect a positive or negative impact on digital mobilization based on our review of the extant literature. Where the literature gives conflicting or unclear expectations we place a question mark next to the variable.

**[Table 3.4 about here]**

<3> Testing the Model

The core dataset used in this analysis is the CSES module 4 (release 2). As well as providing data on the level of receive mode across countries, i.e. our dependent variable, CSES provides a range of individual and macro level variables that map onto the explanatory model set out in table 2.4. Where there are gaps in the CSES these are filled by relying other international data sources. Full details of the data set and variable operationalization are provided in appendix 3.2.

*Dependent variable*: Since we are using multilevel modelling with voters (level 1), nested within countries (level 2), the dependent variable – receive – is measured at the individual level. Specifically we combine responses to the CSES questions of whether a voter received online political contact from a party or through their social networks to create a new binary variable of ‘total online contact’ (see appendix 3.1 for full details of question wording of each component). This ensures that we include the official contact coming directly from the parties as well as the mediated or two-step flow that is particularly associated with phase III.

*Independent variables*:

Given we are adopting a multilevel approach, both systemic and individual level characteristics likely to determine the receipt of online campaign contact are specified. With regard to individual level variables we are limited to the standard CSES socio-demographic and political data on respondents. Based on past research we expect age, sex (being male), trade union membership, education, income and level of partisanship to be related to receiving campaign contact. We also include the online sign-up variable which is unique to module 4 and as discussed above is expected to be very highly correlated with the dependent variable. Including it on the left hand side of the equation thus allows us to control for some of the endogeneity problems afflicting our dependent variable and generate a ‘cleaner’ measure of the influence of the other independent predictors.

At the aggregate level a range of sources were used to measure the variables listed in table 2.4 for the 17 countries included in the analysis[[7]](#endnote-7). We begin with the baseline conditions which include the three main indicators of societal development – human, economic and political. These are measured with the UN index of Human Development scores, GDP per capita at the time of the election in question, and age of democracy respectively. The fourth baseline variable – level of technological development – is measured as the number of internet users per 100 population and as the natural log of this. The logarithmic transformation was applied given the original values of variable were quite negatively skewed, with over 80 percent of countries having above 50 percent of the population online. After the transformation, the data are smoothed to reduce a disproportionate impact of the lower values on the outcome variable.

To measure the political culture or democratic ‘health’ of a country we used two aggregate measures of political engagement. The first was attitudinal and measured the proportion of respondents who said they were ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ interested in politics in each country. Since CSES data lacked an appropriate question, the figures were calculated from a combination of the World Values Survey (WVS) wave 6 (2010-2014) and the European Social Survey (ESS) round 7 (2014) Both sources were used to avoid the problem of missing data since no one survey covered all of the countries included in this analysis. The item on political interest was the most comparable and relevant attitudinal measure available across the two surveys in terms of the question stem and response categories. The second aggregate measure of engagement was behavioural and measured average turnout in a country during the post-WWII period. Given that we know some countries had compulsory voting systems in place we added this variable to the model as a control.

The electoral system was measured with a binary variable that indicated if the country operated a PR system or a preferential SMD model for its legislative or parliamentary elections. An indicator of the average number of candidates per electoral district or district magnitude was also included. This was seen as a useful additional means of testing whether a personal or party vote is driving levels of mobilization. Binary variables were also assigned to capture whether the election in question was for the Presidency and also if compulsory voting is in place. Finally a measure of the number of months since the last national election was included to test the impact of a faster electoral cycle.

The fourth layer of explanation – the party system – was modelled with three variables. The first of these was the size of the system which was measured through the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) as recorded in the CSES macro file. Second the level of ideological polarization of the party system was measured using Dalton’s formula based on the average left-right placement of parties in the CSES micro file. Finally we included an indicator of the strength of the party system which was based on the extent to which it was considered as party or candidate-centred (Carey and Shugart, 1995). For this we used scores on the index produced by Wallack and Johnson (2012). See appendix 3.2 for full details of the sources and variable computation.

The fifth and final bloc of variables related to the impact of the immediate campaign environment and regulatory framework surrounding it. To measure controls on spending and media advertising we used two variables from the IDEA Political Finance Database. These were whether a country imposes caps on election spending and also if free or subsidised media are given to parties for campaigning. The competitiveness of the campaign was measured by the margin of victory (in percentage terms) for either the leading party or Presidential candidate in the election under analysis. Finally, to measure controls over parties’ use of citizen data in campaigns a 5 point additive index was created using the DLA Piper Data Protection Laws fact book. This included indicators of whether the country has an official chief information officer or data commissioner, whether it mandates and enforces data protection laws and how far it has regulated online privacy. Again for full details of index construction see appendix 3.2.

Before undertaking the analysis a number of adjustments were necessary to ensure the modeling was as robust and reliable as possible. The first and most important of these was to enter the macro level independent variables in a selective and sequential manner. Given the relatively small set of countries we had available at the time of analysis we could not test all the level 2 variables identified in table 3.4 in a single model. We thus tested the impact of each bloc consecutively and selected the most significant predictive variables to include in a final or cumulative model.

A second major modification was to exclude Switzerland from the analysis due to missing data. Specifically the online sign-up variable data, which was considered a vital control variable, was not included in the Swiss study. This reduced our overall country N to 16 which remains within the range of an acceptable number of level 2 units.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Given the outcome variable is binary logistic multilevel models were used. The analyses were performed with STATA 12 using maximum likelihood estimation[[9]](#endnote-9) and with fixed slopes and intercepts. Fixing these parameters was regarded as the best approach to take given we had no *apriori* grounds to expect that the impact of the independent variables’ (either individual or systemic) would vary significantly in strength or direction across countries. Also fixing these parameters improved the efficiency and robustness of our model estimation since it reduced the number of coefficients that it was necessary to estimate.

<2> Findings: What Factors are Driving Phase IV of Digital Campaigning?

Below we present the results of the analysis and draw out their implications for the drivers of digital campaigning. In particular, we start to build a profile of the factors that seem most likely to facilitate a country’s entry into phase IV. The first set of results are reported in table 3.5. Here we show the findings for the five separate explanatory blocs. Each model includes the same range of individual level predictors and dependent variable, but varies the explanatory group or bloc of independent variables.

**[Table 3.5 about here]**

Looking first at the individual-level factors we can see a common pattern across all the models in terms of the demographic and political profile of online contactees. Gender is important with men being more likely to be targeted than women. Education also has a consistently strong effect in that those with the highest levels or education are up to ten times more likely to receive online contact than those with no qualifications. Age is important, with younger people being significantly more likely to be contacted through digital channels than their older counterparts. This runs counter to the trends found in studies of offline or traditional forms of mobilization and suggests that parties may be engaging new voters through digital channels. The youth effect is tempered, however, by the fact that union membership and partisanship, both of which are traits associated with older voters, are positively and significantly associated with receiving online contact. Finally, as one might expect, the online sign-up variable has a very strong and positive coefficient. Having signed up to receive party messages makes someone around 5 times more likely to report online contact. The fact that the other independent variables remain significant after controlling for its effects is important. This would suggest the parties are managing to go beyond their existing online support base to reach some new sources of electoral support.

Model 1 presents the results for the baseline or societal development group of variables. None of the variables are statistically significant at the .05 level although the log of internet use comes close, hovering at just above the 0.10 level.[[10]](#endnote-10) Such results suggest that the intensity of digital campaigning is not directly dependent on the overall socio-economic performance of a nation or the longevity of its democratic experience. The extent of internet use within society and levels of technological take-up within the wider populace, however, may have some effect on the level of online contacting taking place.

Findings from the second explanatory bloc of ‘political culture’ variables (model 2) are more compelling, with one variable – political interest – emerging as statistically significant. Interestingly its effect is negative, indicating that, in line with Vaccari’s (2013) earlier findings about email responsiveness, digital mobilization occurs more frequently where citizens are less positively disposed toward politics. This relationship could be explained in one of two possible ways. First one could argue it indicates the perceived weakness and lack of effectiveness of digital campaigns. Essentially where parties find themselves facing a losing battle to persuade voters they are more likely to resort to cheaper online means. A more positive interpretation, however, is that where parties perceive more disconnection from politics, they invest more in newer methods to signal a shift from ‘politics as usual’. Either way the findings are somewhat surprising given the widely accepted view among scholars of mobilization that it is generally toward the more engaged and easily persuadable voters.

The findings from model 3 provide some of the strongest evidence for macro-level effects on the rates of digital mobilization. The variable indicating whether the election in question was a Presidential race emerges is one of the most significant predictors of receiving online contact in any of the models tested. These higher profile and more personalized elections, as expected, provide a strong stimulus to internet-based forms of voter contact. Beyond the nature of the office being contested, the only other coefficient in the bloc which approaches statistical significance is the electoral system. Again in line with the findings of Vaccari (2013), it appears that online campaign contact is intensified by PR systems. Even taking into account the weakness of the relationship, the finding is still important in further supporting the idea that the dynamics driving online contact differ to those shaping prior offline mobilizing efforts. Attempts at voter persuasion through these more traditional methods were typically more common within preferential voting systems.

The variables measuring the impact of the party system (model 4) appear to be uniformly unimportant in predicting online contact. This is somewhat surprising, particularly with regard to the size variable given the long standing association of internet technology with a more diverse and equalized party environment. Given the findings of model 3 such a finding could be seen as confirming that it is the incentives of the electoral system that matters most to stimulating digital contacting, rather than simply the number of parties competing. When smaller parties have a more realistic prospect of gaining office they invest the resources required into online voter outreach. The results from model 5 which examines the impact of the campaign variables are similarly un-compelling with one clear exception – the competitiveness of the race. Specifically where the election was highly one-sided i.e. the margin of victory was more than 10 percent, significantly less online voter contact occurred than in races where the gap was smaller than 10 percent.

While the lack of impact of more traditional regulatory measures on rates of digital contacting could be accounted for by the relatively new and ‘immature’ status of the internet as an election technology, the failure of the data privacy index to predict its occurrence is somewhat disappointing. While this may mean that parties use of email and web-based methods of voter contact are in effect beyond the reach of government control it could also suggest that a revision and refining of the measure is required. In particular, as currently set up it does not capture the controls on political organizations use of voters’ personal data which are likely to differ from companies and non-governmental entities. In addition, there may also be a gap between the official level of control that can be exercised over how individuals data is handled and the extent to which that is enforced or implemented. This disjuncture is something we explore further in the case studies that follow.

Based on the preceding analyses we extracted five macro variables that are significant or close significance in explaining levels of online mobilization. This includes the log the of internet use, levels of political interest, whether the election was Presidential, the electoral system (preferential vs PR) and margin of victory. These five predictors were carried forward to our final multilevel model. Table 3.6 presents the results of that consolidated analysis.

**[Table 3.6 about here]**

As we might expect, the individual variables continue to behave in the same manner shown in the previous models. The macro effects also remain largely consistent although there are some changes in the strength of their effects. Most notably variables measuring the closeness of the race have become more significant and their effects are more fine-tuned. Thus, while a very uncompetitive race still sees the least effort by parties to engage in digital mobilization, an exceptionally close race (where there was less than a two percent margin of victory for the winner) does produce a significantly greater investment of resources. This increased and more nuanced impact of electoral competitiveness is accompanied by a drop in the impact of interest in politics which is now no longer significant. Otherwise the log of internet now increases in importance, becoming significant at the .05 level. Similarly the effect of a PR electoral system increases but still remains on the margins of significance. The big story, however, remains around the impact of Presidential elections. The coefficient indicates that voters in these elections are five times more likely to be contacted online than voters in non-presidential elections.

<2> Summary and Conclusions

The main aims of this chapter were two-fold. First, we sought to identify where the fourth phase of digital campaigning is emerging in global terms and second, to understand why some countries appear to have embraced it more actively than others? To investigate these questions countries were compared on the extent of internet-based contact that voters reported receiving during an election campaign using comparative survey data. Receipt of targeted digital messages, as Chapter one made clear, forms an important ‘demand’ side indicator of phase IV ‘data driven’ campaigning. The findings largely followed expectations based on findings of prior empirical studies reviewed in the previous chapter. In particular the U.S. emerged as a leading or ‘tier one’ nation for phase IV style campaigning. There were also strong performances by some of the more ‘wired’ countries in South East Asia and Northern Europe. By contrast, Thailand, a young democracy with very low technological capacity had almost zero capacity for digital campaigning. Among these more intuitive findings, however, there were also a few notable surprises. This included the location of several affluent and established democracies such as Germany and Japan toward the tail-end of the distribution. Conversely the top tier position of Greece proved somewhat puzzling given its lack of profile in the wider literature on digital campaigning.

To help interpret the results a systematic analysis of the individual and contextual factors associated with higher rates of digital mobilization was undertaken. The results of this exercise were revealing on a number of counts. At the individual level it was clear that there are certain types of voter who are more likely to receive online contact during the campaign. This included perhaps most obviously those who had already signed up to receive this type of stimuli. Beyond self-selection, however, such individuals were also more likely to be male, to be younger, and highly educated. They were also typically more strongly attached to political organizations such as parties and unions. With the exception of age, therefore, the result suggest that parties are not reaching an under-mobilized segment of the population with their digital campaign efforts. Closer analysis of whether this pattern holds up for individual nations and whether any mobilizing effects may be going unnoticed is undertaken in the country chapters that follow.

At the system level the results were also significant in confirming that rates of online contact are linked to certain institutional and technological aspects of a polity. In particular countries with highly competitive Presidential elections and a more wired citizenry proved most open to this new type of mobilization. Such conclusions are of interest for this chapter first and foremost by helping to identify the environment most conducive to phase IV digital mobilization. Beyond these insights, however, they are also useful in extending the findings from previous ‘supply-side’ studies of web campaigning which had concluded that context made little difference to party practice and deployment of the technology. Examined from the perspective of the voters or the ‘demand’ side, it appears that context in fact does matter in terms of the receipt of digital campaigns or what we might see as their success or ‘hit rate’. Furthermore the analysis shows that the systemic and individual level factors that encourage online contact differ in subtle but significant ways from those prompting offline mobilization. Thus despite a growing integration and merging of the two modes reported in the , the results suggest the two have not as yet fully coalesced.

<3>Next Steps

While the analysis presented in this chapter goes some way to explaining advances in digital campaigning, and specifically a country’s entry into phase IV, it clearly faces limitations. From a purely methodological standpoint it is evident that the multilevel models tested here explain only a limited proportion of the overall variance in the dependent variable.[[11]](#endnote-11) Furthermore the sample size in terms of number of level 2 units or countries included meant that it was not possible to test all the macro level variables simultaneously. Subsequent releases of the CSES data should offer the basis for testing a more fully specified model. Even with a larger number of countries included, however, the analysis is still likely to face the omitted variable problems. The level of internet use in a society for example, while a useful proxy for the degree of familiarity and openness of citizens to using the technology, does not capture the wider cultural propensity to use it for political purposes. Similarly, parties’ long standing historical associations with certain types of campaign media such as direct mail or television may create a path dependency that accelerates or reduces their willingness to use internet tools. Measuring and modelling these traits for a small number of countries factors is challenging, converting them into accurate indicators for a larger N cross-national analysis is nigh on impossible.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly the analysis is based ultimately on a snapshot of current levels of digital contact across countries. Using these findings to reach conclusions about the drivers of entry into phase IV and digital campaign innovation more generally puts a lot of pressure on this one measure. As table 1.1 has shown the phases of digital campaigning are multi-dimensional and defined by a wide range of both demand and supply side variables.

In the chapters that follow we attempt to address these gaps by providing a more detailed historical account of digital campaign developments in four of the nations’ examined here. Specifically we examine one country from the top tier of mobilization – the U.S. – and three countries that occupy consecutively lower positions within tier two – Australia, the UK and France. In each case we start by assessing how far each country’s ranking aligns or conforms to the ‘ideal’ macro environment identified in this chapter. The correspondence (or lack thereof) with expectations is then used as the basis for a more nuanced account of the conditions surrounding the growth of digital politics in that particular country. In particular we look for those factors that appear to have played a role in constraining or accelerating the uptake of new media in campaigns.

We then move to document developments in digital campaigning in more detail over time, working forwards to show the changing nature of internet use by parties and candidates in successive elections. As well as providing a more comparable and richer history of these nations’ experiences in digital campaigns than has hitherto been offered, the narrative also presents a more rigorous test of our four phase model. To what extent to the trajectories of digital campaigning observed in each of these four countries map on to the progression outlined in Chapter one? What, if any signs of experimentation can be detected and how long did countries remain at this early point? How long did it take for a concerted push into the more activist mobilization and community building phase to occur and where do these countries’ now sit’ in evolutionary terms.

Below these broader trends, the case study approach also means we can take closer look at the changes in the supply and the demand dimensions associated with each phase. In particular it is possible to investigate the role of parties in driving the cycle. Are some parties more keen to embrace the new techniques and push into phase IV than others? Does this vary with size, incumbency or ideology and are these patterns repeated across countries? Or is party innovation more idiosyncratic and context specific? On the demand side the case studies also allow us to build a more nuanced picture of the changing nature of voter responses to the digital campaign. In particular it is possible to map changes in citizens engagement with the digital campaigns and how far they have involved simply reading about the campaign online to more active roles of redistribution and finally to receiving targeted messages?. When did these shifts occur? Did they align with what the parties were doing? More importantly, do differences emerge between party supporters that support the conclusions about the innovations occurring on the supply-side? Do left-wing partisans for example undertake more redistributive activities than those on the right? Does this match with the story that emerged from the elite andn organizationally focused analyses?

In short, the case studies allow us to drill down below the broad but impressionistic evidence supplied by Chapter two of a four phase development model and see the extent to which it holds up at the national level? In addition we can supplement the narrower but more systematic evidence supplied by this chapter about what is driving the movement across those phases of development? Beyond the institutional and technological configuration of a nation what other dynamics are acting as stimuli to increase the pace and quality of digital campaigning. In particular what is the role that individual parties and their supporters have played in this process.

1. We use the term online rather than digital contact in this chapter since a key focus of the analysis to compare their frequency and distribution with non-digital forms of contact – mail, leaflets, phone and in-person. When analysed in conjunction with digital forms these other modes are typically referred to as ‘offline’ and digital as ‘online’. To maintain that ease of distinction and consistency with other studies, we adopt this prior terminology. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For further details see [www.cses.org](http://www.cses.org) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Intenational Telecommunication Union (ITU) statistics for 2010 report that 44% of the Greek population were online. This made it the only major Southern European democracy to report less than 50% of its population online with Spain (66%) and Portugal and Italy (54%). See Excel file ‘Percentage of Individuals using the Internet’ Available at https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For details on countries electoral finance rules and media use during elections see the IDEA Political Finance Database. Available at http://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/political-finance-database [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Although this work is cited as 2009 Anstead and Chadwick had produced an earlier working paper version of the Chapter in 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This included a number of the key variables already tested in the web campaign models such as the level of democratic development, use of a single member/preferential or proportional voting system, the party system size and competitiveness of the race. It also included some new structural features such as the extent of ideological polarization within the party system, the prominence of the election as a presidential or legislative race, the district level competitiveness of the race and finally whether compulsory voting was in place. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The multilevel model is tested on 17 and not all 18 countries listed in in table 3.1. The UK is not included in the final cross-national analysis since at the point of this analysis it was not part of the release 2.0 of the integrated Wave 4 CSES file. The results reported here are taken from the 2015 British Election Study (BES) which fielded the CSES module as part of its mailback component. Further details of the 2015 UK CSES survey and sample are provided in appendix 4.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The general rule of thumb on the minimum N of level 2 units required for multilevel modelling varies with some scholars arguing as few as 8 while other argue for up 100 (Stegmueller, 2013). Gelman (2006) has even claimed that Bayesian methods can produce unbiased estimates of variance components with as few as 3 units at the highest level using a carefully considered, weakly informative prior. However, Stegmueller (2013) concluded that multilevel models using ML estimates that did not include cross-level interactions needed between 15- 20 countries to produce estimates of macro effects level with acceptable levels of bias. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The analysis was run with the xtmelogit command which is a maximum likelihood estimate (7 iterations). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Internet use as a simple percentage was not significant in an earlier iteration of the model and removed from the final specification. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Due to the multi-level structure of the model summary statistics such as pseudo R-square are not appropriate to calculate since they do not account for the variance in both levels of analysis. Instead intra-class correlation coefficients (ICC) were calculated and compared across models. The ICC is an inferential statistic designed for analysis of group data and describes how much additional variance is explained by the addition of the level 2 variables. None of the ICC coefficients were higher than .23 for any of models tested (including the final version) which indicates the macro factors provided at best a modest contribution to the explanatory model beyond the individual level variables. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)