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Does Cyber Campaigning Win Votes? Online Communication in the 2004 Australian Election

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There is little doubt that the internet has been revolutionizing all forms of mass communication, with election campaigning proving to be one particularly visible area of innovation and change.¹ The election campaigns of Jesse Ventura and John McCain in the United States in the late 1990s in particular attracted significant attention, with claims being made about their ability to mobilise young voters and generate financial support through creative use of this new media. Despite the increasingly high profile of internet-based campaigning, little empirical evidence has surfaced to support such claims. Most academic analysis of online electioneering has focused on the distribution and content of websites, rather than evaluating the effectiveness of internet-based campaigning for building a support base and generating votes and resources. In other words, we know what cyber campaigning looks like, but does it win votes?

This paper addresses this question by evaluating the effectiveness of online election campaigning using data from a survey of election candidates in the 2001 Australian federal election. The survey included a number of questions about the use of the web and email for private and public, or voter-related communication, ends. Specifically, we examine whether candidates' web use or cyber-campaigning affects their fortunes at the ballot box, controlling for a range of personal, partisan and other campaign related activities. The findings show that having a campaign website, while linked with other, pre-existing approaches to voter mobilization, does have a significant and positive independent effect on a candidate's levels of support. Such a finding is significant in that it is one of the first studies to demonstrate a relationship between political actors' use of the web and election outcomes. While this is of interest to scholars of electoral behaviour and participation in general, this conclusion also has direct relevance for ongoing political events, given the current surge of support behind the Democrat Howard Dean in the lead-up to the 2004 presidential election.

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Cyber-campaigning from Dole to Dean

Although some of the first reported uses of the internet in the electoral context came as early as the 1992 US Presidential race, it was the 1996 election cycle that first saw concerted cyber-campaigning with Bob Dole and Bill Clinton both running high profile websites (Margolis et al., 1997). Outside of presidential politics, candidates for other national and state level offices also invested in the technology with many Senate, gubernatorial and House races seeing evidence of online campaigning (Epstein, 1996; Hall, 1997). Overall, the sites were regarded with a mixture of curiosity and scorn; candidates were accused of being too timid in their approach to the new medium and rather than taking advantage of the interactive capabilities of the medium, and its unique possibilities in combining text with audio and the visual presentation of material, they appeared content with simply migrating their offline content to the online environment, often with little editing (Stone, 1996). Sites typically comprised a photograph, some biographical information, a policy or position statement and contact details that sometimes incorporated an email address.

Outside the US, cyber-campaigning also took hold from the mid-1990s onward in many other democracies. The 1997 British general election, heralded as the 'first internet election' for the UK and witnessed a wide range of parties experimenting with the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to communicate with the voters (Ward and Gibson, 1998). Parties in other European countries, particularly in Scandinavia and the Netherlands where ICT use levels was relatively high also became convinced of the need to establish a web presence (Lofgren, 2000; Tops, Voerman and Boogers, 2002; Newell, 2001; Cunha et al., 2003). As in the US, however, their efforts were sharply criticised. It seemed that despite being cognisant of the importance of getting into cyberspace, parties were not sure about exactly what to do with their sites once they had been established.

The surprise victory of the independent candidate Jesse Ventura in 1998 in the Minnesota gubernatorial race was seen as providing the first indication of the medium's power to influence an election outcome. Ventura's use of the web and email was widely credited with enlarging his support base, particularly among younger voters and thereby delivering him the crucial extra votes needed to win office (Fineman, 1999). The candidacy of John McCain in the Republican presidential primaries of 2000 provided a further boost for internet campaigning, with widespread coverage being given to his apparent success in raising money from online donations. It was estimated that close to half a million dollars was added to McCain's campaign funds from internet donations after his win in the New Hampshire primary, this figure rising into the millions shortly thereafter (Kornblut and Abraham, 2000; Birnbaum 2000). These figures were subsequently queried, however, with claims being made that the amounts were actually raised from telephone calls, with credit card details subsequently being entered onto the website for processing.¹ No doubt the increasing attention to this aspect of web campaigning resulted from the US Federal Election Commission ruling that online credit card donations were eligible for matching funds (von Sternberg, 2000).

Beyond these high profile cases, however, it was clear that by 2000, use of internet was spreading rapidly among candidates and local parties. Kamarck (2003) reported that for state-level races in the US over 90 percent of the major party candidates had a website, and the proportion of contenders in House races that operated sites had

increased from one third in 1998 to two thirds. Prior to 1998, the increase was even more dramatic with D'Alessio (2000) reporting that the number of sites maintained by Senate, House and Gubernatorial candidates as a whole between 1996 and 1998 had more than doubled from 19 percent to 43 percent. Figures from *The Democracy Online Project* confirmed these figures.² Overall, sites were generally noted to have improved in quality with more multi-media facilities being available as well as more opportunities for feedback (Davis and Owen, 1998; Faucheux, 1998).

The emergence of Howard Dean in 2003 as a key contender for the Democratic party's presidential nomination is seen by many as marking the 'coming of age' for internet campaigning. His win in the *MoveOn.org* online primary in June secured him wider public prominence with reports that he had raised almost one million dollars in one day from online donations after the victory being widely reported.³ Although comparisons are made to McCain, the multi-faceted use of the internet by the Dean campaign team arguably takes cyber-electioneering to a new level of sophistication. In particular, his use of the *Meetup.com* website in early 2003 to facilitate 'face to face' discussion among his supporters has been highly successful in building support bases in all fifty states. Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, has also made it a priority to target key 'bloggers'—opinion formers on the web—to ensure that Dean's message gets maximum publicity. Finally, the use of email to coordinate rapid responses from Dean supporters to criticisms of him in both the online and offline environment, have ensured that he remains on the 'front foot' when negative publicity strikes. While not everyone may share the faith of the Dean campaign team that these virtual tactics can secure the Presidency in 2004,⁴ the stage is now clearly set for internet-based technologies to play a highly prominent role in the coming election cycle. This is particularly so, given the changes to the campaign finance law passed in 2002, which if upheld by the Supreme Court, would set the stage for a significant increase in the web's importance. Effectively the new rules would favour internet campaign donations by forcing parties to rely more on small amounts, which tend to be more typical over this medium. More importantly, however, the exemption granted to the internet as a recipient of 'soft money' is seen as setting the stage for a significant investment by parties and candidates in web and email campaigns, with some commentators predicting at least a 300 to 500% increase in spending online.⁵

The Electoral Potential of Cyber-campaigning

Despite this apparent shift in the use of the internet by politicians toward voter mobilisation, as opposed to simple message dissemination or resource generation, systematic evaluation of the impact of internet campaigning on voters has been limited, and the evidence that has emerged is mixed. Much of the academic work in this area has focused on the 'supply' side of the equation with studies generally focusing on three areas of concern: first, who is, and is not, online; second, why they have felt the need to move into cyberspace; and third, what types of use they are making of the new ICTs, both in general and more specifically in terms of website content. Overall, the literature has painted an interesting picture of a rapid movement into cyberspace by most major and many minor political actors during the mid to late-1990s. As any scan of the generalist and more specialist web politics indices reveals, it is now more unusual to find a party

without a web page than a party with one.⁶ In terms of timing, as the discussion of the evolution of cyber-campaigning above has indicated, it was largely the major parties that took the initiative in establishing sites, particularly those on the centre-left (Gibson, Ward and Lusoli, 2003).

Subsequent studies of web campaigning at the regional and local level in a range of national contexts have offered additional insight into the drivers behind this diffusion. Klotz (1997), for instance, as well as noting the greater frequency of major party candidate sites in the 1996 Senate election, pointed to the importance of incumbency, with senators seeking re-election emerging as less likely to have websites than challengers. This inertia was thought to be due to the fact that as sitting politicians, these candidates were able to rely on their official government sites instead of establishing campaign-specific sites (D'Alessio 2000). By 2000, however, as Kamarck (2003) reports, the gap between challengers and incumbents in producing websites had shrunk to insignificance, at least for state-wide races, attesting to the growing importance of having a campaign-specific presence on the web. The continued low profile of House incumbents on the web was explained by their greater likelihood of running unopposed and thus lower intensity approach to campaigning in general. Reinforcing this interpretation, was her finding that where competitive House races emerged, incumbents were much more likely to use the web (Kamarck, 2003: 88).⁷ Beyond the US, evidence from the UK general election of 2001 presented by Ward and Gibson (2003) lend support to the importance of the closeness of the race in promoting web campaigning. In their analysis of the distribution of local party and candidate sites across the English constituencies they found that the most competitive seats were more likely to see both challenger and incumbent online compared with less competitive seats.

In addition to these structural aspects of party competition, the sub-national analyses have also indicated that factors such as party ideology or outlook as well as its target audience also predict the likelihood of an online presence. Ward and Gibson's (2003) analysis of the UK general election found that the Liberal Democrats were most likely to operate sites and that their overall quality was better than that of the Labour or Conservative parties. Significantly, such divergence was not captured by the national level study, with Labour and the Conservatives running sleek and professionally designed sites (Gibson et al, 2003). Similar findings emerged from analyses of state and regional party websites in Australia during 2001 and local parties and candidates' sites in the 2002 federal election in Germany, where the Greens and the centrist Free Democrats (FDP) respectively, performed as well if not better than their two major counterparts on the left and right (Gibson and Ward, 2003; Gibson, Rommele and Ward, 2003). Such results suggest that groups emphasizing popular participation and decentralisation of power and/or who have a more educated and middle class support base may be more inclined than others to channel their resources toward web campaigning. Analysis of factors beyond these more political and structural variables, particularly the individual demographic and social traits of candidates engaged in web campaigning, thus far have not been investigated in any detail. Some evidence from Greer and LaPointe's (2003) analysis of sites in statewide office between 1998 and 2000, however, has suggested that gender is not a relevant concern, with the proportion of female candidates' having sites being roughly proportional to their overall numbers in the elections as a whole.

Invariably, discussion about who is online leads to speculation as to the rationale behind parties' and candidates' use of web campaigning. While the evidence just cited suggests that a combination of ideology, resources and electoral dynamics play a role, researchers have also sought to delve into this topic more directly with surveys of party officials in a number of different countries. The findings, while showing some variance across parties and national contexts, point to a consistent regard for the web as way of making more information available. Much lower down the list of priorities is that it offers new and interesting ways to interact with supporters, despite its two-way communication possibilities. Beyond these broad trends, however, the major and minor parties have been found to diverge in their reasoning for being online, with the latter viewing the opportunities for virtual party headquarters and organisation building via the internet to be one of its principle merits (Gibson, Rommele and Ward, 2003). This recognition no doubt helps explain why the smaller parties are more likely to see the internet as very useful, compared with their larger counterparts (Gibson et al. 2003; Gibson, Römmele, and Ward 2003; Gibson and Ward, 2002; Gibson and Ward, 1998).

Consistent with the survey findings showing that information provision and message dissemination are key benefits of being online, profiles of site content designed to identify the functions and purpose of parties and candidates' websites have reported a heavy emphasis on information provision and education rather than any promotion of interactivity (Gibson et al, 2003; Norris, 2003; Norris, 2001). Such studies have also revealed that despite the apparently higher levels of enthusiasm among the minor parties for the medium, they are generally falling behind the major parties particularly during election periods, in terms of the functionality and sophistication of their sites. At the national level, reports from the 2001 UK general election revealed that the major parties were investing considerable time and money in maintaining their sites as well as value adding with facilities such as search engines, online credit cards and membership forms (Ward and Gibson, 2003). Data from the US confirms this picture, with Greer and LaPointe's (2003) analysis of US state-wide elections in 1998 and 2000 revealing the websites of major party contenders to be richer and more functional than those of minor parties. These findings being repeated by Foot and Schneider (2003) in their 2002 analysis of House, Senate and gubernatorial websites.⁸ At the cross-national level Norris' (2001) analysis of 399 party websites in November 2000 further supports this bias toward the major parties. Her analysis shows that as well as being less present online, the truly minor or fringe parties also offered less content in terms of information and interactivity than the major parties.

Overall, therefore, the literature confirms the spread and growing attention to the web by political actors right across the political spectrum, as a means of securing existing and new sources of support. Whether or not these efforts are proving to be successful, however, is rarely examined. Most of the initial work on the impact of internet technology and political parties focused on its broader implications for organisational change, either in the internal arena of member-elite relations (Rommele, 2003; Lofgren and Smith, 2003; Gibson and Ward, 1999; Smith, 1997) or at the inter-organisational level, looking at its potential for a re-balancing and equalising of inter-party competition. As web campaigning has advanced, however, and more data examining voters' habits online has become available, attention has been increasingly paid to its individual level effects. In particular, a series of reports issued by the *Pew Center for the People and*

Press and the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* in the US have dealt with voters' interest in online politics and news sources more generally.

In general, these studies have shown that public awareness of campaign and party-specific sites is low, despite the growing levels of web use around the world. A report issued in 2000, for instance, revealed that despite a marked increase in the numbers of Americans using the net for news on the presidential campaign between 1996 and 2000 (from 22 to 33 percent) the proportion viewing candidates' sites actually dropped from 25 to 7 percent.⁹ Data from the UK and Europe, show a similar picture. A Work Foundation survey conducted during the 2001 UK general election reported that only 15 percent of online users intended to look for campaign news on the internet And within this group, only one-fifth planned to visit party-specific sites.¹⁰ Data from a specially commissioned NOP survey on political organisations' use of the internet conducted in 2002 confirmed the low penetration rates for parties' online messages, with only four percent of those online reporting that they had ever visited a party site.¹¹ Finally, Eurobarometer data also show minimal levels of interest among voters across the EU countries for party-authored information on the web, with approximately five percent overall looking for it, and much greater interest being displayed in more established news sources (Gibson, Ward and Lusoli, 2003).

Despite revealing very limited penetration of web campaigns at the aggregate level, these studies do suggest that it may not be an entirely fruitless exercise. The Pew Center study cited above, for instance, revealed that among those respondents who did visit online politics sites, two-fifths said that their vote choice was affected by the information they received, this rising to half of all those aged 18- 29 years. The same study also reports that among those who took the time to visit candidate or campaign-specific websites, a third found them useful, although there is no indication whether they changed their vote decision as a result.¹² Further evidence supporting the influence of web campaigns was provided in a follow-up report on the 2002 online campaign, which asked whether the online information accessed had swayed the respondent's voting intention. One quarter of respondents admitted that it had, although this represented a fall from 34 percent in the previous mid-term elections in 1998. Finally, 13 percent of those looking for online news said explicitly that they wanted to find information to help them make their voting decision.¹³ The NOP survey from the UK underscored these findings, reporting that among those respondents who had visited party sites, most became more rather than less interested (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward, 2002).

Thus, even though the audience for web campaigning may be small, the evidence suggests that it has the potential to influence voters' decisions. Up till now, however, a rigorous test of the electoral effects of web campaigning has not been absent. In the section we aim to fill this gap by conducting an analysis of Australian candidates' use of the web as a campaign tool during the 2001 federal election, and relating that to mass voting behaviour. To do so we utilise data from the special post-election candidate survey run in the Australian Candidate Study (ACS).

Cyber-campaigning in Australia

Before looking specifically at whether web campaigning is affecting electoral outcomes in Australia, we use data from the ACS to place its evolution in the context of the cross-

national trends identified above. Overall, the Australian parties have been slower to adopt websites than their counterparts in the US and other countries around the world. While the first national site was launched by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in July 1994, the other parties were slower to follow, with the National Party only establishing its site in 1998 (Gibson and Ward, 2002). Smaller parties, such as the Greens, were also slow in establishing a federal site in Australia, although a number of its state branches already had built a web presence (Gibson and Ward, 2003). Based on the analyses of site content and also party officials' clear lack of enthusiasm to respond to questions about the role of the web, the medium does not appear to have assumed great prominence in party communication strategy (Gibson and Ward, 2003; Gibson and Ward, 2002). Using the findings from the 2001 ACS, however, we can provide a more systematic and updated picture of the overall distribution of websites at the local level among the parliamentary parties' candidates. The ACS asked the federal election candidates if they maintained a personal (as opposed to a party) website.¹⁴ Table 1 shows that among all of those surveyed, just over one-third maintained a website. However, if the minor parties are removed, nearly one-half of all of the candidates standing for major parties (the Labor, Liberal or National parties) maintained a personal website.

Table 1: Candidates Maintaining a Website, 2001 and 2004 Elections

	All		Major party		Minor party	
	2001	2004	2001	2004	2001	2004
Yes	37	36	48	44	31	32
No	63	64	52	56	69	68
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(455)	(420)	(168)	(161)	(287)	(259)

The question was: 'Did you maintain a personal website on the internet as part of your election campaign in the electorate?' Minor parties are Australian Democrat, Green, One Nation.

Sources: 2001, 2004 ACS

Based on previous studies, we would expect several factors to explain parties' and individual candidates' propensity to use the web for campaigning. First, despite minor parties' enthusiasm for new ICTs, we would expect major party candidates' to be more prominent. Second, political resources such as incumbency, as well as a candidates' overall legislative experience and their length of time with the party could prove influential since this would allow them greater access to party and governmental resources to assist with website maintenance and development. Third, following the patterns uncovered in general internet use, one might expect a bias toward the more educated, higher occupational status candidates. Age might also be expected to play a significant difference, with younger candidates (i.e. below 40 years of age) showing a greater familiarity with the medium, compared to older candidates. To test these hypotheses, Table 2 uses a range of independent variables to predict whether or not the candidate reported having a web page, as well as whether or not they used the web to access political information about the election. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, logistic regression techniques are used.

Table 2: Resources and Candidates Maintaining a Web Page

	Logistic regression estimates	
	Est	SE
<i>Individual resources</i>		
Age (years)	-.02*	.01
Gender (male)	.25	.26
Tertiary education	.33	.42
<i>Party membership (Liberal-National)</i>		
Labor	.10	.37
Democrat	.06	.38
Green	1.43**	.34
<i>Political resources</i>		
Lower house candidate	1.26**	.39
Incumbent	1.84**	.45
Legislative experience	.29	.41
Length party membership (years)	.02	.02
Constant	-2.02	
Nagelkerke R-sq	.09	
(N)	(374)	

** statistically significant at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Logistic regression results showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting the probability of having a web page. All variables are scored zero or one except age (years) and length of party membership (years). For party membership, the excluded category is Liberal-National candidates.

Source: 2004 ACS.

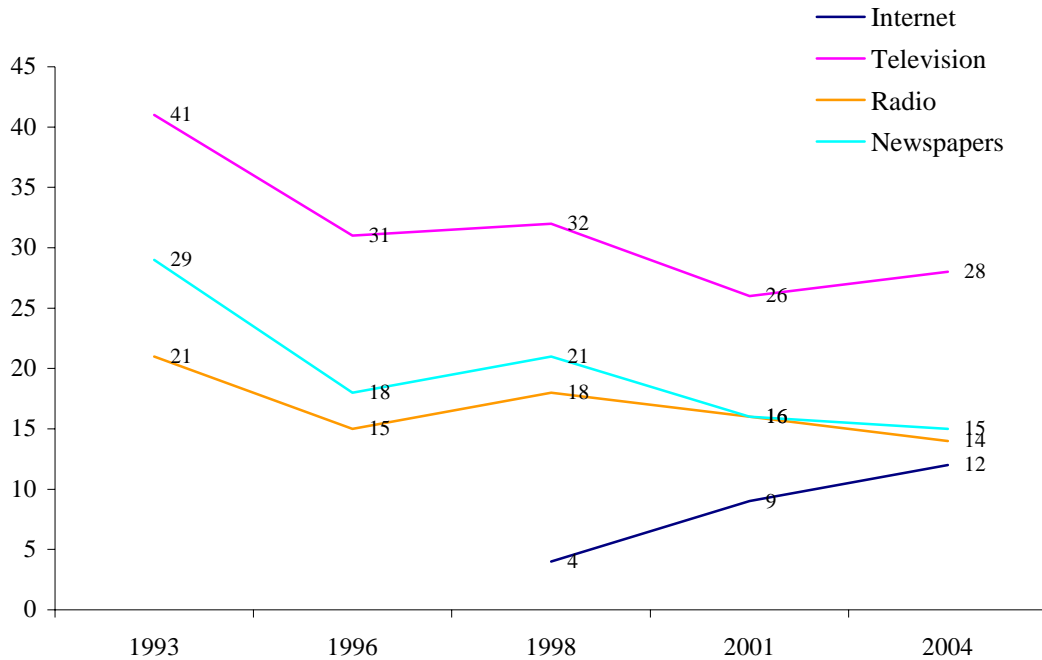
The results in Table 2 are fascinating in that they show party membership—being from a major left-wing party—and being young as the only two significant factors in predicting whether a candidate engaged in web campaigning. Personal resources, either in terms of socioeconomic status as measured through education, or ‘insider’ status, in the shape of incumbency and prior legislative experience, do not exert any decisive impact. Such results are intriguing since they indicate that it is candidates’ ideological attitudes and outlook that are the key drivers for web campaigning rather than more instrumental factors relating to resources and capacity.

The Internet and the Election Campaign

Turning more directly to the question of the impact of candidates’ use of the web during the election campaign, the overall usage levels do not indicate widespread internet use. Combining the ACS data with that from the Australian Election Study (AES) of the

electorate’s internet use patterns it is clear that, in line with the findings from other countries, the internet was used only modestly by voters for information about the election (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Media Use During Election Campaigns, 1993-2004 (Percent)



‘How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in television/radio/the newspapers?’ (percent say ‘a good deal’). ‘Did you make use of the internet at all to get news or information about the [1998/2001/2004] Federal election?’ (percent say ‘yes’).

Sources: 1993-2004 AES.

Table 3 shows that among voters, just under one in 10 reported using the internet for election news, most of them doing so on several occasions or less; frequent users constitute just 1 percent of the electorate. Restricting the analysis to just those voters with internet access—who form 59 percent of the electorate¹⁵—shows that 16 percent had used the internet for election information. This compares with 43 percent who said that they followed the election on the radio, 53 percent in the newspapers, and 69 percent on the television.¹⁶ In contrast to voters, candidates made considerable use of the internet for election information—as we might expect. Around seven out of 10 candidates with internet access (or 94 percent of all candidates) said that they used the internet ‘many times’ to source election information; just one in 20 with internet access did not use it at all for this purpose.

Table 3: Voter and Candidate Use of the Internet in the 2004 Election

	Voters		Candidates	
	All	Internet access	All	Internet access
Don't have internet access	33	Na	6	na
Have access, didn't use	55	82	5	5
Yes, once or twice	6	8	7	7
Yes, several occasions	3	5	17	18
Yes, many times	3	5	65	70
Total	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,739)	(1,160)	(462)	(433)

The question was: 'Did you make use of the internet at all to get news or information about the 2004 federal election?'

Source 2004 AES, 2004 ACS.

While this low level of penetration in terms of the web campaigns' message clearly limits its influence on individual' voting decisions, the key question that these aggregate figures do not tell us is whether among those receiving the message, it made any difference to their vote? Such effects could be direct in terms of informing or changing a vote decision, or indirect, in that it was linked with other campaign activities, particularly media coverage that helped to boost the profile of the candidate at large (for a review of direct and indirect effects see Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2002). Before looking at the combined direct effects of these different campaign resources on the election outcome, we examine the linkage between candidates' offline campaign activity and their web utilization.

The 2001 ACS allows for examination of these questions since it included a large battery of items designed to measure the extent of campaigning offline by the election candidates. In terms of offline campaign activities, the most relevant of these for our purposes are the time spent on various campaign activities, and the level of party support given to the candidate to conduct his or her campaign. Three separate campaign activities are identified: media interviews (combining time on interviews for the TV and radio, and for national newspapers); canvassing (doorknocking and organising direct mailing); and party activities (discussions with national party officials and local party members). Of the three activities, the candidates reported spending most time, 17.5 hours per week, on party activities, followed by canvassing (12.3 hours) and media interviews (4.3 hours). In terms of party support activities, three measures are included: organizational support (which is measured by a cumulative scale of seven areas of party support, ranging from the candidate receiving leaflets and handouts prepared by the party, to party funds and visits by high profile politicians); how early the candidate prepared for the campaign, measured in months; and the average number of party workers available on any one day of the campaign. In Table 4 we report the findings from a logistic regression model that examined the extent to which engagement in traditional offline campaign activities was linked with whether or not the candidate had a web page.

Table 4: Candidates' Web Page and Campaign Activities

	Logistic regression estimates	
	Est	SE
<i>Campaign activities (hours per week)</i>		
Media interviews	.19	.10
Canvassing	.10	.07
Party activities	-.01	.06
<i>Party support</i>		
Organizational support (0-10)	.02	.05
Party workers (number)	.44**	.13
<i>Length of campaign preparation (months)</i>	.05*	.03
Constant	-2.07	
Pseudo R-sq	.13	
(N)	(435)	

** statistically significant at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Logistic regression results showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting the probability of having a web page.

Source: 2004 ACS.

These results indicate that there is a particularly strong and significant association between the amount of media interviews a candidate engaged in and their having a web page. However, having more party workers is also an important predictor of website deployment as is preparing for the election campaign as early as possible. By contrast, receiving numerous and diverse kinds of party support, through leaflets and visits, does not influence the presence or absence of a web page. There are, then, important links between various facets of the election campaign and web utilization. The next section expands on these findings to test whether or not these campaign activities had any effect on the outcome of the election.

Evaluating the Electoral Consequences

So far we have examined the extent to which party candidates in the 2001 Australian election maintained web pages, the links to party and other resources, and the inter-relationship with other facets of the election campaign. This section brings these various elements together by examining the combined effects of campaign activities and having a web page on the vote.¹⁷ It should be made clear that in examining this question in the Australian context we are interested specifically in whether web campaigning affected vote choice, as opposed to the decision whether or not to vote. Generally speaking, campaigns serve two functions: to mobilize voters to cast a ballot; and to convert voters to voting for a particular party. Election campaigns for national office in Australia have a distinctive character because of the system of compulsory voting. Compulsory voting

effectively means that mobilization is achieved by the electoral institutions, so that the purpose of the campaign is solely conversion. Since the electoral system (and to some degree the character of the campaign) is different for the upper and lower houses, the results in Table 5 are restricted to lower house candidates.¹⁸ The dependent variable is therefore the first preference vote won by the candidate.

Most importantly, the results in Table 5 show that having a web page had a significant effect on the vote, net of a wide range of other factors. Candidates who maintained a web page increased their first preference vote by 3.8 percent, net of individual and party resources, party membership and other aspects of campaigning. The standardized coefficients (in parentheses) suggest that the overall importance of having a web page is more important than possessing a tertiary education, and only slightly less important than incumbency. Indeed, maintaining a web page is a more significant predictor of the vote than all three campaign activities combined. This is an important result, and suggests that a web presence may be one of the most significant initiatives that a candidate can make in planning his or her campaign. Nor can the result be ascribed to web pages being the preserve of incumbents, more experienced candidates, or ones with better party resources to fall back on, since all of these factors are taken account of in the model.

To put this finding in perspective, in order for a candidate to gain the same increase in the vote as occurs from maintaining a web page—3.9 percent of the first preference vote—the candidate would have to devote 49 hours per week to canvassing, rather than the average of just under 13 hours reported in the survey.¹⁹ Candidates who concentrate their resources on the web will clearly do better than those who use more traditional approaches to campaigning. In fact, the results in Table 5 show that not only does time spent on media interviews have no significant impact on the vote, time spent on party activities—such as fund raising and meeting local and national party officials—actually reduces the vote. During an election campaign, candidates are clearly better advised to devote their time to talking to voters, rather than to their party colleagues.

How are we to interpret these results, and in particular the very substantial effects of having a web page on the House of Representatives' vote? Given the earlier results from Table 4 which revealed a strong association between the web page and media interviews and the presence of party workers we would argue that the importance of having a web page is less in terms of voters accessing the page and changing their vote in response to the content, and more in terms of the profile such a page conveys to the media. The web page may well act as a gateway to the candidate, and as a means of promoting their candidature with the media and in attracting party workers. More simply, the presence of a web page may denote someone with political flair and drive, who will be distinctive in the quality of their campaigning. Whatever the explanation, it is clear that use of the web to disseminate information about the candidate delivers a substantial electoral advantage, at least as important as other, more conventional methods of political campaigning.

Table 5: Resources, the Campaign, Candidates' Web Page, and the Vote

	Means	OLS coefficients	
		b	beta
<i>Web page</i>	.36	4.05**	.11**
<i>Individual resources</i>			
Age (years)	57.64	-.01	-.02
Gender (male)	.67	.19	.01
Tertiary education	.89	2.00	.04
<i>Party membership</i>			
Labor	.20	-6.12**	-.13**
Democrat	.22	-28.35**	-.64**
Green	.28	-25.16**	-.62**
One Nation	.12	-26.85**	-.48**
<i>Political resources</i>			
Incumbent	.13	12.98**	.24**
Legislative experience	.11	1.32	.02
Length party membership (years)	9.36	-.15	-.08
<i>Campaign activities (hours per week)</i>			
Media interviews	3.72	-.15	-.04
Canvassing	11.16	.04	.03
Party activities	15.85	.08*	.07*
<i>Party support</i>			
Organizational support (0-10)	5.50	.10	.01
Party workers (number)	6.55	.00	.00
<i>Length of campaign preparation (months)</i>	7.51	.34**	.08**
Constant		26.08	
Adj R-sq		.56	
(N)		(420)	

** statistically significant at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed.

OLS regression estimates showing partial (b) and standardized (beta) coefficients predicting the percentage first preference vote for House of Representatives candidates only ($n = 420$). All variables are scored zero or one except age (years) and length of party membership (years), campaign activities (hours per week) organization support (0-10), party workers (number) and length of campaign preparation (months). For party membership, the excluded category is Liberal-National candidates.

Source: 2004 ACS.

Discussion

This study has addressed a number of important empirical questions about candidate's use of new ICTs in elections, an innovation that is seen as a vital component in the development of the postmodern campaign (Norris, 2000). Utilising the rich resource of

the 2001 Australian Candidate Study, it has been possible to profile first, who uses the new technology and how it relates to traditional campaign techniques. Second, and arguably more importantly, we have been able to estimate the effects of having a web page on the election outcome. In terms of the individual and political characteristics of candidates, being younger and also from the major left-wing party, the ALP, increases the likelihood of a personal website being established. In terms of the campaign, a web page facilitates more exposure in the traditional media through interviews, and it is predicated on having more party workers and preparing for the election well in advance.

The most important findings relate to the impact of the web page on the vote. Our results reveal strong support for the proposition that a web campaign is an integral part of securing victory in an election. Net of a wide variety of other factors, including incumbency, party affiliation and political experience and support, the use of a web page delivers just under 4 percent of the House of Representatives first preference vote. This is more than all of the traditional methods of campaigning combined, and is only slightly less than incumbency, usually considered one of the major electoral influences. The web is, then, a major vote attractor for candidates and has the potential in closely fought contests to determine the election outcome. But what are the mechanisms by which the web converts voters?

One possibility, as noted above, is the indirect route, whereby the mass media use candidates' web pages to decide whom to contact for newspaper, radio and television interviews. In this model, the web acts indirectly to increase support for candidates since it allows them to compete more effectively for attention from journalists working for the traditional media. This enhanced media attention heightens their public profile and crucially provides them with greater visibility among voters. As was also noted above, this explanation does find some support in the data with the strong association between having a web page and spending time during the campaign on media interviews. An alternate but not necessarily competing hypothesis is that the web also directly influences voters. Although the findings reported in Table 3—that just under one in 10 of all voters accessed election information on the internet—do not suggest strong support for this interpretation, if this group are more calculating in their vote, and more susceptible to political messages which are placed on the web, then it is possible that websites might more directly influence the vote. Such an interpretation would fit with the comparative evidence, which indicates that those who choose to decide on their vote late in the election campaign are more likely to be rational, calculating voters, than capricious and disinterested (McAllister, 2002).

What, then, is the evidence to support the view that those accessing election information via the web are significantly different in their campaign behaviour or attitudes compared to other voters? Once again, a rigorous test of this hypothesis is impossible, but we can gain some insight by examining the differences in campaign behaviour and attitudes between those without internet access, those with access but who did not follow the election on the internet, and our group of interest, those who did use the internet for election information (Table 6). The results suggest that the group who followed the election on the internet are very distinctive. Not only do they display significantly greater interest in the election and a readiness to discuss politics with others, they are more likely to care about the election outcome, and to view policy issues as the main determinant of their vote decision. Perhaps most revealing, they are more

independently-minded than others voters, being less likely to use a 'how to vote' card in the House of Representatives election, or to tick the party box on the Senate ballot paper. Such findings, therefore, do lend support for the view that the web may have a direct influence in how voters cast their ballot.

Table 6: Campaign Attitudes and Behaviour Among Voters

	No internet access	Did not follow election on internet	Followed election on internet
Interested in election 'a good deal'	30	25*	48**
Discussed politics with others 'frequently'	17	20	38**
Care which party wins 'a good deal'	68	70	77*
Policy issues most important in vote decision	49	47	53
Did not use 'how to vote' card in H of Reps	41	45	59**
Did not tick box on Senate ballot	12	10	20**
Thought of changing vote during campaign	22	24	32**
(N)	(579)	(952)	(208)

** statistically significant from those with no internet access at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Thus, it can be argued that web campaigning exerts both a direct and indirect positive effect on candidates' level of electoral support. Such findings are clearly of significance for the practitioners of this mode of campaigning and also potentially for the voters and country at large, if the practice leads to a swing in election outcomes. However, while it is tempting to extrapolate directly from the findings in Table 5 to make predictions about the extent of vote conversion that is possible if one moves to the online environment, some caution is required before drawing any decisive or longer-term conclusions from these findings. As the results in Table 6 revealed, those voters who access the internet for election information are highly distinctive in their political behaviours and outlook, and so at least part of the electoral effects identified may be a consequence of the unique interaction between these voters and the new media. In addition, the novelty attached to using new ICTs may also be operating to raise voters' sensitivities to online political messages and exerting an undue influence on their vote choice. As use of the Web and email becomes more mainstream, therefore, one might see its effects become less pronounced on voters. Certainly, as the medium becomes commonplace in election campaigning as a whole, one would expect its ability to generate any indirect benefits for the candidates through wider media attention to weaken. Setting long range hypothesising aside, however, these results suggest that within the current political environment at least, running a web campaign is an important component to ensuring success at the polling booth.

Endnotes

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- ¹ 'Experts want to dissect McCain's internet fundraising' Rebecca Fairley Raney. *The New York Times on the Web* Feb 18, 2000. Available at <www.nytimes.com/li...ch/00/02/cyber/articles/18campaign.html > Accessed on 19 February 2000. 'Volunteers' actions lead skeptics to question McCain's online donations.' Rebecca Fairley Raney. *The New York Times on the Web* Feb 12, 2000. Available at <www.nytimes.com/li...ch/00/02/cyber/articles/12campaign.html > Accessed on 14 February 2000.
- ² According to figures from press reports and 'Online democracy by the numbers' a presentation by Ryan Thornburg in January 1999, 46 percent of candidates in House and state-wide elections maintained sites in the 1998 election cycle. Findings presented at a conference organised by *The Democracy Online Project*, George Washington University. Available at <<http://democracyonline.org/databank/conf1numbers.shtml>> Accessed on 07/07/01.
- ³ 'Dean's grass-roots cash cow' by E. J. Dionne Jr. *Washingtonpost* Available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A23937-2003Jul7.html?referrer=email>> Accessed on July 20, 2003.
- ⁴ 'Dean.com' by Ryan Lizza. *The New Republic Online* 23 May 2003. Available at <<http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030602&s=lizza060203>> Accessed on 4 June 2003.
- ⁵ 'Internet and campaign 2002 Analysis' Special Report by Phil Noble. *Politics Online* Nov 4, 2002. Available at <http://netpulse.politicsonline.com/soundoff.asp?issue_id=6.18 > Accessed on 6 November, 2002.
- ⁶ See for example Yahoo's index of political parties or Richard Kimber's Political Resources pages. See:
http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/Politics/Parties/By_Country_or_Region/
<http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/parties.htm>
- ⁷ A survey by Netelection.org in 2000 supports this point, showing that 78 percent of incumbent congressional candidates were found to have established websites in competitive districts compared with 50 per cent in more secure districts (Lynch 2001). Underscoring this, evidence from the British 2001 general election has signalled the relevance of electoral competitiveness as a stimulus to web campaigning, with the tightest races (margin of victory less than one per cent) being far more likely to see both incumbent and the principal challenger online than other contests (Ward and Gibson 2003).
- ⁸ 'Candidate web sites in the 2002 US election' Kirsten A. Foot and Steven M. Schneider. Available at <http://politicalweb.info/reports/Politics-Online-2003.pps> Accessed on July 29 2003.
- ⁹ 'Youth vote influence by online information' issued by the Pew internet and American Life Project. Dec 3, 2000. Available at <<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/reports.asp?Report=27&Section=ReportLevel1&Field=Level1ID&ID=94>>. Accessed on January 12, 2001. These findings are supported by a survey of American adults conducted in November 2000 for the *Democracy Online Project* (based at George Washington University) that examined use of the internet for election-related information, see 'Post-Election 2000 Survey on internet use for civics and politics' December 4, 2000. *The Democracy Online Project*, George Washington University. Available at <<http://democracyonline.org/databank/dec2000survey.shtml>> Accessed on 07/07/01.
- ¹⁰ 'Whatever happened to the e-lection' James Crabtree. The Work Foundation. 2001. Available at <http://www.theworkfoundation.com/pdf/Election_percent20designed1.pdf> Accessed December 2001.

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- ¹¹ 'UK political participation online: The public response' Gibson, R.K, Lusoli, W and S. Ward. A report published for the ESRC 'Internet and Political Organisations and Participation' project. Available at <<http://www.ipop.org.uk/>> under 'Results'. Accessed on October 23, 2003.
- ¹² 'Youth vote influence by online information' issued by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Dec 3, 2000. Available at <<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/reports.asp?Report=27&Section=ReportLevel1&Field=Level1ID&ID=94>>. Accessed on January 12, 2001. These findings are supported by a survey of American adults conducted in November 2000 for the *Democracy Online Project* (based at George Washington University) that examined use of the internet for election-related information, see 'Post-Election 2000 Survey on internet use for civics and politics' December 4, 2000. *The Democracy Online Project*, George Washington University. Available at <<http://democracyonline.org/databank/dec2000survey.shtml>> Accessed on 07/07/01.
- ¹³ Most people simply wanted to learn more about what was going on (43 per cent) and just under one quarter sought information to reinforce their existing reference. 'Untuned keyboards: Online campaigners, citizens, and portals in the 2002 elections' March 2003. Michael Cornfield and Lee Raine. Pew Internet and American Life Project. Available at <www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_IPDI_Politics_Report.pdf> Accessed on October 6, 2003.
- ¹⁴ The Australian Candidate Study was a mail-out, mail-back survey of all federal election candidates standing for the Labor, Liberal, National, Australian Democrat, one Nation and Green parties in the November 2001 federal election. Fieldwork commenced in early December 2001 and was completed by early March 2002. A total of 840 candidates were contacted, with 477 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 56.8 percent.
- ¹⁵ In Australia, the most recent estimates suggest that 52 percent of Australian households are connected to the internet, placing Australia third in the world in terms of internet infrastructure, penetration, and use, just behind the US and Sweden. See Report from the Australian Bureau of Statistics *8147.0 Continued growth in home internet use – ABS* Released 30/06/99
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/A86C5F6A8C1CF031CA2568A90013633A?Open&Highlight=0,internet>
- ¹⁶ The figures are for respondents who said that they followed the election 'some' or a 'good deal' on each of the media.
- ¹⁷ Analyses were also conducted adding the range of variables in Table 3 into the model. However, since our major interest is in the campaign and web utilization, and since the substantive results for these variables remain unchanged whether or not these additional controls are entered into the equations, for parsimony they are excluded here.
- ¹⁸ The upper house is elected by proportional representation using the single transferable vote, with each state and territory forming one constituency. Because the Senate system allows voters the option of choosing a candidate group or party (which most do) rather than ranking single candidates, the electoral system is similar to a party list. By contrast, the lower house is elected by the alternative vote based on single member constituencies. The different electoral systems also have a major influence on campaigning for each of the houses.

¹⁹ The partial coefficient for canvassing is .08, which suggests an increase in the vote of .08 percent for each additional hour of canvassing per week. The calculation therefore is $.08 * 49 \text{ hours} = 3.92$.

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