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Parties, Candidates and Citizens On-Line

Studies of Politics on the Internet

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Förord

Ibland brukar man inför proseminarierna i statskunskap dela ut färdiga temaområden för uppsatserna vilket ibland har väckt en viss bestörtning hos studenterna. För mig var detta förfarande dock ett ödets lyckokast. Utan den blekaste aning om vad jag skulle skriva min uppsats om, nappade jag på en arbetsrubrik som handlade om politiska diskussioner på internet. Det ena ledde till det andra vilket nu slutligen har utmynnat i en doktorsavhandling i statskunskap om politik på nätet.

När man så nu efter många års hårt arbete så småningom skall sätta punkt för avhandlingsprocessen med en disputation, känns det glädjande att i detta förord få tacka och minnas en rad personer vilka avsevärt berikat arbetsprocessen. Utan dessa personer hade jag inte upplevt arbetet med avhandlingen som så angenämt och givande som det, tunga perioder till trots, har varit.

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Table of contents

List of figures

A. Introduction:

Article I:

Article IV:

C. Summary & conclusions:

List of tables

Article IV:

Article V:

A. Introduction

A. Introduction

1. The topic

Political campaign communication has seen major changes over time. Norris (2001a, 137) describes the transformations with a typology consisting of three stages; the premodern, the modern and the postmodern stage (cf. Farrell & Webb 2000, 103-108; Plasser & Plasser 2002, 6). The premodern campaigns were local, ad-hoc and inter-personal. The partisan press was the primary intermediary between the political parties and the citizens, and the electorates were characterized by stable social and partisan alignments (Norris 2001a, 137). The modern stage is characterized by campaign activities being increasingly coordinated at the central party level with the help of professional consultants. Television takes centre stage as the primary campaign medium and the electorate becomes detached from their traditional social and partisan ties (Norris 2001a, 139; cf. Blumler & Gurevitch 1995, 2; Dalton 2000; Mancini & Swanson 1996, 2; Swanson & Mancini 1996, 253; Wattenberg 2000). In the third stage of campaign communication, the postmodern stage, the trends of the modern stage are further amplified. The role of political consultants in political campaigns increases, the news media is fragmented into several channels, outlets and levels, and the electorate is even further de-aligned in their voting choices (cf. Blumler & Gurevitch 1995, 206-207; Norris 2001a, 140). In sum, these trends have resulted in a situation which, in the words of Mancini and Swanson (1996, 17), is characterized by "a weakening of political parties and emergence of a powerful role for the mass media…".

However, the postmodern stage has seen the rise of a communication tool which has been described as a possible "remedy" vis-à-vis the trends described above – the internet (e.g. Berman & Witzner 1997, 1313-1321; Dahl 1989, 519-522). The internet, it has been argued, has provided new opportunities for citizen participation in political life (e.g. Budge 1996, 28-31). Scholars have even stated that the internet is a 'democratizing technology' (Rheingold 1993, xxx). Other scholars have stressed the medium's potential to empower new voices in the political field and to engage new citizens in political activity (see discussions in Bimber 1998; Foot & Schneider 2002a; 2002b; Norris 2001b, 218; 2003, 24). The internet has also been predicted to offer political parties new opportunities for retaining control of their communication with the voters and to provide new opportunities for party-voter interaction (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995, 204; Hill & Hughes 1998, 2; Norris 2001a, 147). The internet could enhance both the top-down and bottom-up information and communication flows surrounding political actors (cf. Norris 2003,

26; Römmele 2003, 9-11). Therefore, regarding the evolution of campaign communication:

> "The new technology allows for forms of political communication that can be located schematically somewhere between the local activism of the premodern campaign (with direct town-hall meetings and political rallies) and the national-passive forms of communication characteristic of the modern television campaign […] as political use of the internet expands, the postmodern campaign does seem destined to add yet another distinctive layer of communication […] supplementing other existing channels" (Norris 2001a, 149)

However, as the internet has become more commonplace in society, scholars have questioned whether the internet will have such a 'distinctive' impact on traditional political life. Two core arguments merit attention: firstly, when traditional political organizations employ the web, there is little reason to believe that the 'new politics' will be that much different from 'politics as usual' (e.g. Davis 1999; Kamarck 1999; Margolis & Resnick 2000). Secondly, scholars have argued that politics on the internet could fail to vitalize the citizens' political participation. The internet, they say, will primarily be used by citizens who are already politically interested and active, resulting in a situation where the political actors are so-to-speak simply 'preaching to the converted' on-line (Hill & Hughes 1998, 185-186; Norris 1999; 2001b, 229-231).

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This thesis focuses on two aspects of internet politics; the use of the internet, mainly in political campaign contexts, by a) political actors and b) citizens. The thesis has two delimitations which need to be addressed. Internet politics can be divided into three general areas (Margolis & Resnick 2000, 8-21): *intra-net politics*, which exists within the net with no connection to the real world, *politics that affect the net* referring to actions taken off-line which regulate the on-line environment, and *political uses of the net* containing the on-line activity, with the purpose of affecting off-line politics, of traditional political actors such as parties, candidates, government and interest groups. The focus of this thesis is clearly within this third area of internet politics. It is primarily centred on the on-line activity of *traditional* political actors – i.e. the political actors whose activity has been regarded as essential to modern day representative democracy (Norris 2003, 21-22; Sartori 1976, 24) – and is only to a limited extent concerned with the activity of other types of organized interests. The thesis is not, however, focussed on the adoption and employment of the internet by *non-traditional* political actors, such as transnational advocacy networks and new social movements. These non-traditional actors have been

described as potentially willing to use the internet to activate, communicate and mobilize around political issues of an *ad-hoc* nature (cf. Bimber 1998; Foot & Schneider 2002a; 2002b; Norris 2001b, 239). Moreover, the focus of the thesis is on the activity of the traditional actors in times of political elections. Political activity on the internet obviously also takes place between elections. Mancini and Swanson, however, stress that elections are occasions which "are critical periods in the lives of democracies […] reflects and shapes a nation's social, economic, cultural, and, of course, political life" (Mancini & Swanson 1996, 1).

To summarize, the preliminary aim of the thesis is to examine whether politics on the internet – in regards to the activity of both the political actors and the citizens – shows signs of being a distinctive type of politics or whether it merely appears to be an extension of off-line politics. In general terms, the preliminary purpose here is:

To examine in what ways, if any, the internet is affecting the politics of representative democracies in terms of its usage by political actors and citizens in times of elections.

2. Theoretical discussion

Representative democracy can be defined by two features: pluralistic competition among parties and individuals for all positions of governmental power, and participation by citizens in selecting their representatives through free elections. These dimensions both rely on civil liberties to speak, publish, assemble and organize in order to ensure effective competition and participation (Norris 2001a, 23; cf. Schumpeter 1952). In this section, different theories and empirical findings regarding how the use of the *internet* might come to affect the patterns of pluralistic competition by political actors and political participation by the citizens are presented and discussed.

2.1 Political actors and the internet

The first area of interest pertains to the arguments presented by scholars concerning the use of the internet by political actors such as parties, candidates, and other organized interests (Margolis & Resnick 2000, 14).

Two theoretical paths describing the internet's impact on the conduct of political actors can be found in scholarly literature: the equalization theory and the normalization theory (e.g. Bimber & Davis 2003; Davis 1999; Gibson et al. 2003a: Margolis & Resnick 2000). As indicated by the term "equalization", the first theory perceives campaigning on the internet to lead to a situation in which electoral competition between different political actors is more equal than when they solely campaign off-line. In summarizing

these scholarly visions (e.g. Corrado & Firestone 1997; Rash 1997), Margolis and colleagues (Margolis et al. 2003, 58) state that the equalization theory contains the following core argument:

> "…the advent of the internet, seen initially as a democratic force, led to expectations that information and communications technologies (ICTs) might disproportionately benefit fringe and minor parties thus assisting the growth of anti-establishment parties […] the lack of editorial control and relative low cost of creating a website meant that minor political movements could establish a platform for their view more easily than in the mainstream media and could reach a considerably larger audience. In short, the internet could help level the electoral playing field" (Margolis et al. 2003, 58)

The internet lowers the costs of publishing large-scale information and multimedia via political websites. It also provides senders of political messages with the ability to maintain control of the conveyed message without editorial intervention (e.g. Carlson & Djupsund 2001, 69; Coleman & Goetze 2001, 5; Hill & Hughes 1998, 22; Margolis et al 2003, 58). These particular features of the internet provide potential benefits to all political actors. These benefits, however, ought to be relatively more central for the fringe and minor political actors who, in many cases, find it difficult to stay in stride with the major actors via traditional communication channels (cf. Margolis et al. 2003, 58; Norris 2001b, 170; Sadow & James 1999, 5). These actors would now be able to compete on more equal terms with their major counterparts than via campaigning in traditional mass-media.

There are some empirical findings which lend support to the equalization theory which merit attention here. Norris (2003, 42-43) concludes that her cross-national analysis of 134 party websites in the EU countries indicated that the smaller parties' websites did give them more "voice and visibility" than these parties had received via traditional media. Newell's (2001, 81-82) analysis of Italian party websites revealed that the smaller parties appeared more inclined to turn to the 'new' medium than their major counterparts. Cunha and colleagues (Cunha et al. 2003, 87-88) also argue that their findings concerning party websites in Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal, facilitate "party-competition levelling". Tkach-Kawasaki even states that: "the Internet is clearly opening up new channels for smaller parties, candidates, interest groups…" (Tkach-Kawasaki 2003, 118). Other scholars have noted the tendency of smaller party candidates to use the internet at a higher rate than major party candidates (e.g. Herrnson & Stokes 2003; Sadow & James 1999).

Contrary to the situation depicted in the equalization theory, scholars have put forward a "normalization" theory. According to this theory, the internet will merely produce a "no-change" situation in regards to its impact on the electoral competition

between political actors (Margolis & Resnick 2000, 53-76; Margolis et al. 1997; 2003; Resnick 1998). "… it seems more likely that the established political patterns of the real world will predominate in cyberspace" (Margolis & Resnick 2000, 73). According to this view, politics on the net is only a reflection of off-line politics and will fail to upset established power structures (Hill & Hughes 1998, 182; Norris 2003, 24; Margolis & Resnick 2000, 2; Ward et al. 2003, 23). Two central arguments have been made in defence of this standpoint. First and foremost, political websites are entirely dependent on people finding them, therefore, the importance of meta-campaigning in traditional mass media should be stressed (Carlson & Djupsund 2001, 85). The major organizations' greater campaign budgets and visibility in traditional mass media provide them with greater power in guiding citizens to their sites. This further reinforces their dominant positions on the electoral playing field (Gibson et al. 2003a, 50; Margolis et al 2003, 58). Secondly, the costs of constructing and maintaining sophisticated political websites are steadily rising, and the need to employ technical expertise in order to stay up-to-date is accentuated (Margolis et al. 2003, 58). Where technical amateurs once could keep up with the professionals in constructing and maintaining sophisticated websites, they are now increasingly lagging behind. The political actors who have the largest resources are those most likely to construct the most sophisticated political websites. This serves to further disadvantage political actors with fewer resources (Margolis et. al. 1997; Margolis & Resnick 2000, 16; Margolis et al. 2003, 58). In summary, the normalization theory states that:

> "Even though the minor party sites have the potential to draw more attention than their parties normally would receive from the mass media, virtual party headquarters are no substitute for money and organization on the ground the [major parties, author's note] and their candidates […] have used their superior resources to emerge as the dominant electoral presence on the web" (Margolis & Resnick 2000, 66)

The normalization theory has received empirical support from several studies, too. Margolis and colleagues stated that "politics as usual" appears to be the most likely effect of the internet after analyzing party and candidate websites in the 1996 US presidential election campaign (Margolis et al. 1997, 73-74). A similar analysis of the 2000 US presidential election also led to the conclusion that "cyberspace reflects the real world" (Margolis et al. 2003, 65-66). Beyond the US context, similar tendencies have been reported from Russia and the Ukraine. Here, Semetko and Krasnoboka state that their findings indicate a "normalized pattern of major party dominance" (Semetko & Krasnoboka 2003, 91; cf. March 2003, 20). Findings from Australia, Germany and the UK similarly indicate an on-line dominance by the major parties (Gibson et al. 2003a;

2003b; Gibson & Ward 2002). Regarding political candidates, there are several studies which have shown that major party candidates are more inclined to have a campaign website than their minor and fringe party counterparts (e.g. Gibson & McAllister 2003; Greer & LaPointe 2003; Kamarck 2002). Scholars have also found that major party candidates tend to have more sophisticated websites, in terms of content richness and presentation, than the candidates of minor and fringe parties (e.g. Davis 1999; Greer & LaPointe 2003; Margolis & Resnick 2000, 53-74).

The discussion in this section has highlighted both a theoretical and empirical divergence within the research field. There both optimistic and pessimistic scholarly visions, and corresponding empirical findings, concerning the internet's potential impact on the pluralistic competition for the positions of power in representative democracies. Some perceive the internet as having a significant impact on the patterns of electoral competition between political actors. Others see cause and effect in reverse order: The on-line world will not be unaffected by off-line realities, hence only serving to replicate familiar patterns of electoral competition. As will be evident from the discussion in the subsequent section, this theoretical and empirical inconclusiveness is also repeated regarding the use of on-line politics by citizens.

2.2. Citizens and the internet

It has been said that the internet has provided citizens with new opportunities for political participation (e.g. Budge 1996, 28-31). The internet could serve to engage citizens in political activity (cf. Norris 2001b, 218). Norris (1999; 2001b, 218-219) divides the visions concerning the internet's impact on citizens' political participation into two categories: the mobilization theory and reinforcement theory. These two topics concerning the political activity on the internet by citizens are further discussed in this section.

The mobilization theory recapitulates several optimistic visions regarding the internet's ability to affect citizens' political activity (e.g. Barber 1984; Budge 1996; Dahl 1989; Dertouzos 1997; Negroponte 1995; Rheingold 1993; Schwartz 1996). The theory states that the internet has the potential to: "inform, organize and engage those who are currently marginalized from the existing political system […] so that these groups will gradually become drawn into public life and civic communities" (Norris 2001b, 218). Four arguments have been put forward in favour of this view (*ibid.*): Firstly, the internet provides ample opportunity for political engagement. Secondly, the relative ease and low costs of receiving information via the internet could reduce the barriers for citizens to learn about public matters (cf. Downs 1957). Thirdly, the vast amount of information available on the internet gives citizens opportunities to become more informed about public affairs, and thus more articulate in expressing their views, and more prone to

become active concerning public matters. Fourthly, as the internet enables two-way communication, it could strengthen and enhance the links between citizens and intermediary organizations (cf. Coleman & Goetze 2001; Grossman 1995; Kamarck 1999). In sum, the internet constitutes a distinct type of opportunity for political participation which significantly diverges from traditional participation channels (Norris 1999, 72). The mobilization theory regards the internet as possessing the ability to inform, activate and engage citizens.

Some research findings have been found to support these proposals. The political on-line audience has grown considerably over time, largely due to the increased penetration of the medium, and also due to a shift of user preferences in seeking out political information (see discussion in Lusoli 2005b, 154-156). Scholars have found that the internet is increasingly becoming an especially important source of political information for young people, a group of citizens normally less politically active off-line (e.g. Boogers & Voerman 2003, 25; Gibson et al. 2005, 578; Norris 2003, 39-40). Gibson and colleagues (2005, 578) argue that their results indicate that the internet is "offering a space for political engagement among those who might not have been otherwise active". Johnson and Kaye argue that "though the Web has not yet changed the larger democratic process […] The Web politically empowers individuals and increases their feelings of self-efficacy, levels of political involvement, political interest, campaign interest and likelihood of voting" (Johnson & Kaye 2003, 28-29; cf. Kaye & Johnson 2002, 65-67). These scholars place strong faith in the internet's ability to engage citizens.

A counterargument questioning the optimism of the mobilization proponents can also be found in the literature (e.g. Davis 1999; Hill & Hughes 1998; Norris 1999; 2001b). Norris (2001b, 218-219) calls this the reinforcement theory. According to this line of thought, politics on the net will fail to politically activate and engage citizens. Essentially, this argument rests on two central observations. Firstly, access to the technological resources required to connect to the internet are unevenly divided across the world, and even socio-economically within specific countries (Norris 2001b, 221). Moreover, and arguably of greater importance in the long run, it has also been argued that on-line politics will only attract citizens already motivated, interested and engaged in off-line politics (Hill & Hughes 1998, 185-186; Norris 2001b, 220-221). Thus, both a *resource* based and *motivation* based reinforcement is conceivable. Concerning resources, there exist clear global divides between the rich countries and the developing countries (Norris 2001b, chapter 3). The poorer countries already lag behind in terms of access to traditional information sources, and the advent of the internet has not altered these patterns (Norris 2001b, 66-67). A socioeconomic divide within nations can also be found concerning citizens' internet usage. The social stratification shaping access to other sources of information and communication are being replicated on-line (Norris 2001b, 91-92).

Some further comments regarding the motivation-based reinforcement argument merit attention. First and foremost, as Djupsund and Carlson (2003, 41) observe, the internet differs from traditional mass media on one essential point: it requires activity rather than passivity from the user. Whereas television exposes the passive viewer to political content, the internet user must actively seek out the information he or she desires from a plethora of choices (cf. Hill & Hughes 1998, 183). This leads to the core argument of the motivation-based reinforcement theory: "There are a million places to go and sites to see on the Internet. Unless they stumble across political contents accidentally […] those who choose to visit political sites will probably have far higher than average civic interest" (Norris 2001b, 221). The internet would merely constitute an alternative channel for the politically motivated, active and engaged to do what they have always done (cf. Hill & Hughes 1998, 44; Norris 1999, 89). There is little reason to expect the internet to cause previously uninterested citizens to suddenly become "political animals" (Davis 1999, 8). Even if the technological resources may become evenly distributed both globally and socio-economically in the future, it would not change the preferences of the people using them.

Several scholars have presented findings which underline the importance of motivation in determining citizens' use of the internet. Largely similar socio-economic patterns to those found concerning traditional political activity and interest have been noted for political internet users (Lusoli 2005a, 262; Norris 1999, 87). Norris (2003, 39) found that political internet users were both more active users of traditional news sources as well as more involved and interested in traditional politics: "party websites tended to attract those who were already among the most aware of public affairs, as well as those with higher socio-economic status" (cf. Norris 2001b, 231). Hill and Hughes (1998, 183) stress that political use of the internet is an act of self-selection: "people go on-line to find out more information about a subject, not to be transformed". Stromer-Galley and colleagues (Stromer-Galley et al. 2001, 24) note that only a fraction of citizens seek out political information on the internet, and that an even smaller fraction is involved in more engaging forms of on-line political activity, such as taking part in political discussions (cf. Cornfield & Rainie 2003, 20; Norris 1999, 81-82; 2001b, 223; 2003, 36). Scheufele and Nisbet (2002, 69), in comparing the impact on political efficacy, knowledge and participation of both traditional and web-based communication, strongly question if the internet will have any decisive role in promoting a politically active and informed citizenry. Rather, they conclude that traditional newspapers appear to have the greatest impact.

In sum, a scholarly diversity is evident concerning citizens' political activity on-line. In fact, the theories of mobilization and reinforcement place essentially different emphasis on the internet *per se* in shaping the on-line activity of citizens. The proponents

of the mobilization theory regard the internet as causing changes in citizens' political motivation, interest and activity. The proponents of the reinforcement theory, on the contrary, regard the internet more as a new channel for the politically motivated, active and engaged citizens to take part in familiar activities. In the latter case, the users of the technology, rather than the technology itself, shape the on-line political activity.

2.3 Framework of the thesis

The discussion hitherto has served to outline the scholarly discussion and empirical findings concerning the political uses of the internet by political actors and citizens. This discussion is drawn upon and used as components of the theoretical framework of the thesis which is discussed in this section.

The theoretical discussion has highlighted two general areas of interest; the use of the internet by political actors, and the use of the political opportunities on the internet by the citizens. Upon examination of the aforementioned topics, a noticeable duality was evident. Both optimistic and pessimistic visions and findings were discovered. In the theories of normalization and equalization, two opposing theoretical views were outlined regarding the patterns of pluralistic electoral competition spurring from the use of the internet by traditional political actors (e.g. Corrado & Firestone 1997; Rash 1997; Margolis & Resnick 2000; Margolis et al. 1997; 2003; Resnick 1998). Correspondingly, a noticeable contradiction concerning citizens' use of the opportunities for political activity and participation on-line is depicted in the reinforcement and mobilization theories (e.g. Barber 1984; Budge 1996; Dahl 1989; Davis 1999; Hill & Hughes 1998; Norris 1999; 2001b; Rheingold 1993). Several scholars have, however, questioned the plausibility of these rigid visions concerning internet politics (e.g. Benoit & Benoit, 2000; Foot & Schneider 2002a; 2002b; Norris 2001b, 238-240; 2003, 42-43). They have argued that a middle-ground position regarding the internet's impact on political life is more appropriate; even if the internet is not bringing about major changes, it could nonetheless be regarded as having some impact on political life (Norris 2001b, 237-240; 2003, 43).

This leads us to the central notion of the thesis' theoretical framework; in order to provide as balanced and as accurate assessments of on-line politics as possible, the activity of political actors and citizens should not be regarded as separate from each other. Rather, they should be considered in conjunction as elements of the same political environment. In fact, they form the central aspects of modern representative democracies; pluralistic competition between parties and individuals for positions of power, and free, fair participation by citizens in the election of these representatives (Norris 2001a, 23; cf. Schumpeter 1952). The theoretical framework focuses on the need to assess both how political websites expand communication pluralism, and how they function as channels

for citizens' participation and political activity. Norris (2003, 43), for instance, concluded that the websites of political parties in the EU countries did provide preconditions for interest pluralism and equal electoral competition. However, she remarks, given the limited on-line audience, on-line politics will have little or no effect on the actual distribution of power between political actors (cf. Margolis & Resnick 2000, 73). This serves to underline the need to assess the on-line activity of both the political actors and the citizens in concert. If Norris had only studied party websites in exclusion, she would likely have been rather optimistic regarding the internet's influence on politics in general. On the other hand, if she had only studied the citizens' on-line activity, it is probable that she would have been quite pessimistic about the possible impact of on-line politics.

Other scholars have also perceived a connection between the websites of political actors, and citizens' activity on the internet. Margolis and Resnick (2000, 14) remark that political parties and candidates design their websites to influence the behaviour of those who visit their sites, and that these sites urge the visitors to take action. Foot and Schneider (2002a; 2002b) have stressed the need to combine both the political actors and the citizens in any analysis of internet politics. They perceive a conceptual connection between the "on-line structure" provided through the political websites of political actors and the "political action" these facilitate for citizens (Foot & Schneider 2002b, 4-5). In effect, these positions indicate two types of potential correlations between the websites of political actors and citizens' activity. One connection between the political actors and the citizens, in times of elections, could be described as a pull-effect. The more citizens on-line, the more likely political actors are to venture on-line to reach these potential voters. Without an on-line audience, the political actors presumably put very little effort into their websites, and focus their election campaigns towards other communication channels. Conversely, if an on-line audience for political websites exists, the political actors are logically more inclined to also emphasize their websites in their election campaigns. The second connection between the political actors and the citizens could be perceived more as a push-effect. In providing citizens with an on-line structure for political action (Foot & Schneider 2002a; 2002b), the websites also spur the activity of citizens. Without such an on-line structure, citizens would have no on-line venues for taking political action.

In summary, both the duality contained within the theoretical discussion concerning the political actors and citizens, and the need to juxtapose these dimensions against each other, are important components of the theoretical framework for this thesis. This framework can now be schematically brought together with a typology of four on-line political environments, as depicted in Figure 1.

Citizens

	Reinforcement	Mobilization
Normalization	**A**	**B**
Equalization	**C**	**D**

Political actors

Figure 1. Typology of four on-line political environments

The first scenario in Figure 1, environment A, pictures a strict 'no-change' situation: both the activity of the political actors and the citizens show little signs of altering the established patterns. If one considers this situation from the pull-perspective, this situation provides the political actors with little incentives for emphasizing their on-line campaigning. The citizens are not being mobilized to on-line politics; hence, the political actors only put minimal energy into their websites. Hypothetically, of course, this situation could also occur even if the political actors put considerable effort into their websites. As stated by the reinforcement theory, the relatively few citizens turning to political websites are most likely among the already active segments of the citizens who participate politically through the traditional parties. If so, the normalized on-line competition could be due to the major actors making some effort to catch these voters who are likely to be among their supporters in the first place. From the push-perspective, this situation could indicate that the websites of the political actors are not providing the kind of "structure for political action" citizens want. For this reason, there are no signs of mobilization (cf. Foot & Schneider 2002a; 2002b). This could also indicate that only the websites of the major political actors provide such a structure, and thus only attract those who are already active through these political organizations.

Environment B represents a situation in which the position of the major actors would arguably be even further reinforced, i.e. the citizens dimension shows signs of on-line mobilization while the major political actors dominate the on-line political arena. From the pull-perspective, this could be an indication of either a) all political actors still failing to realize the emerging "net gain" in terms of an on-line audience, and thus maintaining the *status-quo* of on-line electoral competition, or b) the political actors seeing this growing potential and the superior resources of the major actors, nonetheless, coming to show in a dominance of on-line competition. Considered from the push-perspective, environment B could also indicate that the websites of the major political actors are

providing the kind of structure for political action and activity that most citizens want, not just those already politically motivated, interested and active off-line.

In the third situation, environment C, on-line politics is not mobilizing citizens into political activity and participation, but the smaller and marginal political actors are able to compete with the major actors. In essence, this resembles the situation on the internet before the medium started its extraordinarily rapid spread to the general public. In these early days, fringe parties and other marginal political groups were the dominating presence on-line (Margolis et al. 2003, 54; Margolis & Resnick 2000, 54). Considered from the pull-perspective, this situation is quite ambiguous. The smaller actors are maintaining a web presence which equals, or surpasses, that of the major actors, even though there are no signs of on-line mobilization. The smaller political actors possibly regard the internet as an affordable outlet for their ideas compared to traditional media, and maintain a web presence, so-to-speak, just for the sake of having it. For the major actors, they are most likely relying on traditional campaigning for catching the politically active citizens, and so there appears to be little reason for making any extensive efforts on-line. From the push-perspective, the websites of the smaller actors are obviously not providing a structure for on-line political activity which is attracting citizens who are currently marginalized from mainstream off-line politics. On the contrary, the citizens who engage in on-line political activity appear to be among those politically interested and active off-line. It is possible that, even though the major parties are not dominating in terms of providing a structure for political action, the little efforts they make are nonetheless succeeding in attracting some of the citizens with high civic and political interest.

Finally, in environment D, both the political actors and the citizens show signs of the optimistic effects envisioned by the equalization and mobilization theories. Citizens not normally engaged in political activity off-line are seizing the on-line opportunities for activity and participation. There is also evidence of equal on-line competition among the political actors. From the pull-viewpoint, the smaller actors seem to be focusing their resources towards web campaigning in order to reach the growing on-line audience. The major actors apparently have not realized the existence of this web audience for politics. Hypothetically, they could also deem making any extensive efforts in catching these on-line citizens as waste of time and resources. From the push-perspective, it seems as if the websites of the smaller political actors are providing a political structure which facilitates a kind of political activity that also attracts citizens who are not normally politically active. Regardless of the causal directions, the internet could have a lasting impact on political life in this situation as the smaller political actors are able to compete with the major actors over the attention of a growing and potentially more engaged internet audience.

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This section has drawn upon the scholarly knowledge within the field and outlined a theoretical framework for the thesis. As was evident earlier, the findings of the research of on-line politics are rather diverse, varying with context and over time, concerning the activity of both the political actors and the citizens. However, most studies have focused on either the activity of the political actors or the citizens, more-or-less, separately from each other. The discussion in this section has stressed the need to take both the political actors and the citizens into account simultaneously in order to provide accurate assessments of on-line politics. A theoretical typology of on-line political environments resulting from the convergence of these two dimensions has also been presented and discussed. Naturally, even though they form the theoretical framework for this thesis, the clear-cut positions contained within the typology of four on-line political environments are regarded as ideal-type situations. These environments and the discussion of the mechanisms behind them are by necessity theoretical simplifications of reality. Some of these environments are probably quite unlikely to appear in reality and the pull- or push effects discussed in the section are often parallel mechanisms driving each other rather than appearing in exclusion. Nonetheless, this typology provides a stringent framework for analyzing the on-line political activity of both the political actors and the citizens in a given context and time frame.

3. Purpose, research questions and case of the thesis

3.1 Purpose and research questions

A preliminary purpose for the thesis was presented in the beginning of this chapter. According to this general purpose, the thesis seeks to examine the ways, if any, in which the internet is affecting the politics of representative democracies in terms of its usage by the political actors and the citizens in times of elections. The existing scholarly knowledge of politics on the internet, concerning both political actors and citizens, was discussed in the subsequent section. This discussion highlighted the theories of equalization and normalization concerning the on-line activity of political actors. Additionally, the theories of mobilization and reinforcement were presented concerning on-line activity of citizens. A typology of four on-line political environments was then constructed based on this prior knowledge. As was pointed out, there is a gap in the scholarly knowledge due to the scarcity of studies connecting the on-line activity of the political actors and the citizens. There is an apparent need for studies taking a closer look into such on-line political environments and the components shaping them. The overall purpose of this thesis can now be specified as follows:

To further examine the central components of on-line political environments and to empirically assess the ways, if any, on-line politics could come to affect the politics of representative democracies. That is, to examine whether the on-line activity of political actors shows signs of equalization or normalization and the activity of citizens shows signs of either mobilization or reinforcement.

This thesis seeks to address this purpose mainly through an empirical assessment of the on-line political environment in Finland (the choice of country will be further discussed in the next section). In order to fulfill this purpose, there is a need to address several research problems concerning on-line politics in Finland and the dimensions – the political actors and the citizens – of the Finnish on-line political environment. Specifically, drawing on the existing scholarly discussion on normalization and equalization, two aspects which need to be addressed can be identified (cf. Margolis & Resnick 2000, 53-76; Margolis et al. 2003, 58). Firstly, the potential differences in the on-line presence of different political actors, and, secondly, the sophistication of the political actors' websites. Similarly, the scholarly discussion concerning the mobilization and reinforcement theories turns the empirical attention towards what citizens are doing on-line and whether political activity on-line is in any way serving to politically inform, activate or engage citizens (cf. Norris 2001b, 218-219). An array of empirical research questions is central in fulfilling the purpose of the thesis: who are the on-line political actors in Finland, what are they communicating, what conditions influence this communication, what impact does on-line politics have on Finnish citizens, and finally, what are Finnish citizens doing on-line[1]?

3.2 The case of Finland

The empirical focus on Finland rests on two validations which make the country a most interesting and relevant case for a study of on-line politics and on-line political environments. The country is technologically developed and the off-line political environment contains elements which make the country's on-line political environment interesting to explore. The basis of these validations is further presented in the following paragraphs.

First and foremost, Finland has a relatively long history of a high level of internet penetration. The country was among the world leaders already in 1999 (Norris 2000), and

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[1] At first glance, these questions bear some resemblance to the traditional communications formula presented by Laswell (1948; cf. Braddock 1958): who says what in which channel under which circumstances with what purposes to whom and with what effects. However, the questions used in this thesis have only loosely been inspired by this traditional formula, they are not otherwise influenced by the logic of the traditional formula. Rather, they are empirical elements necessary for the purpose of this thesis.

still ranks fifth in the EU with its penetration of 62.5 percent[2]. This basic prerequisite for political actors using the internet, i.e. a potential on-line audience, has been fulfilled for a long time in Finland (cf. Bengtsson & Grönlund 2005; Borg & Moring 2005; Lusoli 2005a, 260). The high internet penetration rate in Finland also has two methodological advantages with regard to the analysis of the on-line political environment. Where political actors working in less-developed technological contexts may still be 'learning the ropes' of internet campaigning, the Finnish political actors should be relatively accustomed to the medium (cf. Gibson & Römmele 2005, 10). This reduces the risk of analyzing an on-line environment which, in a sense, is still in its infancy, and has yet to find a more stable structure (cf. Margolis et al. 2003, 54; Margolis & Resnick 2000, 54). The high internet penetration also reduces the resource-based differences between Finnish citizens in terms of internet access, even though such differences are not entirely eliminated. This turns the focus of the analysis of the citizens' on-line activity towards the motivation-based aspect. This focus is arguably essential considering the short history of the medium's diffusion to the general public. As the medium spreads, as it undoubtedly will (cf. Norris 2001b, 92), access to the technology will be less influential on citizens' on-line behaviour, thus accentuating the role of individual preferences, interests and motivation.

Secondly, some of the Finnish off-line environment's contextual characteristics make the Finnish case interesting to explore with regards to the on-line political environment. The country has an election system emphasizing individual candidates aside from the parties. Votes are cast on individual candidates rather than party lists in parliamentary elections and many individual candidates have their own support groups who organize their campaign activities (Ruostetsaari & Mattila 2002). Also, the country has a relatively commercialized media system. Finland has the longest history of commercial television among the Nordic countries (Carlson 2000, 14). Furthermore, the country has no regulations on political campaigning. There are no official campaign periods, and since the early 1990's, Finnish parties and candidates have been free to buy as much television advertising time as they desire (Moring 1995, 168). Finally, Finnish society has undergone significant structural transformations which have altered the traditional voter bases of the Finnish parties (Pekonen 1997; Toivonen 1988). This has, in turn, forced the parties to alter their traditional campaign strategies and focus on attracting the votes of a wider segment of the Finnish population. In sum, all of these characteristics correspond to conditions regarded as important in driving the continued modernization of campaign practices (Mancini & Swanson 1996, 17-21). Consequently, these contextual features are arguably also favourable conditions for political actors turning to the newest form of political campaigning – on-line campaigning.

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[2] Source: www.internetworldstats.com accessed in March 2006

Scholars have noted that some of the contextual features found in Finland bear relevance on the internet activity of political actors and are thus relevant to the on-line political environment. In particular, the partially individualistic, candidate-centred election system and corresponding campaign culture as well as the lack of restrictions regarding the purchase of campaign TV advertisments, are important to note. The fragmented multiparty system merits attention as well. Candidate-focused campaign contexts have been noted to spur innovation and dynamic use of websites by political actors (Gibson 2004). Open-media environments, where off-line campaigning often requires high amounts of resources, have been argued to provide minor and fringe actors with strong incentives for emphasizing internet campaigning (Norris 2003, 25). Since the theories of normalization and equalization have been developed and mostly tested in majoritarian two-party contexts, the highly fragmented Finnish multiparty system could provide an interesting context for further exploring these aspects (cf. Lijphart 1999, 63). Cunha and colleagues remark that multiparty systems could have implications for the on-line activity of political actors:

> "in party systems that are highly competitive […] parties will be more active in exploiting the technology in an attempt to enhance citizen political involvement than are parties in less competitive systems where, by definition, victories are on larger margins and the distribution of strength among parties is uneven". (Cunha et al. 2003, 70)

4. Five articles

Five research questions for the thesis were presented earlier in this chapter; who are the on-line political actors in Finland, what are they communicating, what conditions influence this communication, what impact does on-line politics have on Finnish citizens and what are Finnish citizens doing on-line. The questions cover several different aspects of on-line politics. Lusoli (2005b, 160-161) has stressed the need for applying broad and varying approaches in studies of on-line environments, or political web spheres, as he calls them (cf. Foot & Schneider 2002a; 2002b). Accordingly, the thesis' study of the Finnish on-line political environment rests on five articles focusing on different sub-areas of interest to the general topic. Moring (1989, 32-32) argues that using individual cases in describing a general phenomenon has two major advantages: To begin with, the general topic is highlighted from different angles resulting in a "broader experience". Also, in bringing together findings from several cases, the findings also shed new light on each other. In this section, the general topic, purpose and research problems of the articles of the thesis are briefly presented. The articles' position within the thesis' theoretical framework and research questions are also discussed. It should be noted that discussions

concerning the methods and findings of the articles are not presented here, but are instead left to the actual articles.

- The first article (Strandberg 2006b) is concerned with the settings in which normalization and equalization have been found by scholars. The purpose of the article is to identify possible sufficient methodological or context-specific conditions present in existing studies of on-line electoral competition, that are systematically related to scholars finding support for either the normalization or equalization theory. The study serves two important purposes pertaining to the overall thesis: the article takes a closer look at two external mediating conditions – national and methodological circumstances – concerning the on-line communication of political parties. The article is therefore concerned with the third research question regarding the conditions influencing on-line political communication. Furthermore, through summarizing the findings from different contexts, the study moves beyond the main empirical focus on Finland and provides a broader contextual backdrop in which to position the Finnish context.

- In the second article[3] (Carlson & Strandberg 2005), the focus is on both the political actors and citizens contained within the Finnish on-line political environment. The article examines how a wide range of Finnish political actors used the internet prior to the European Parliament elections in 2004, and how the voters responded to the political actors' use of the web. This article has several central implications regarding the overall thesis: the article addresses both dimensions of the on-line political environment, i.e. the political actors and citizens, within the same frame of time and electoral context. The article also positions the political actors – the political parties and candidates – further examined in the third and fourth articles (Strandberg 2006a; 2007), within a broader spectrum of potential political actors (cf. Foot & Schneider 2002a; 2002b). The analysis is also concerned with who the political actors in Finland are and what these different kinds of political actors communicate on-line. The article finally gives an assessment of the degree to which Finnish citizens use the internet for finding political information and what impact this information has on the citizens' voting decisions. The article sheds light on the questions relating to what the citizens do on-line and what impact this might have on them.

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[3] The article was essentially co-authored in all areas. The gathering and analysis of data, the writing of the theoretical discussion and the empirical findings as well as the concluding discussion were all carried out jointly by both authors.

- In the third article (Strandberg 2007), the focus is turned towards the websites of the Finnish parties and the parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their websites. The purpose of the article is to explore potential party patterns in the parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their website, and the actual contents of the websites, in light of several party specific characteristics. The study has an explicit explorative ambition which requires two descriptive exercises – to analyze the content of the party websites and to examine the parties' 'inside view' of their site. The study has a threefold nature in the overall thesis: one goal is to empirically assess what the political parties are communicating via their websites, therefore providing an assessment of whether there appear to be signs of normalization or equalization evident from the analysis of the party websites (cf. Margolis et al. 2003; Norris 2003). The article also addresses the question of conditions potentially influential on on-line communication. Specifically, where the first article focused on external conditions, this article is concerned with internal, actor-specific conditions.

- The fourth article (Strandberg 2006a) is concerned with the campaign websites of the Finnish political candidates running for office in the parliamentary election in 2003. The study primarily focuses on theoretically developing and empirically testing the theories of normalization and equalization on the candidate level in the candidate-centred Finnish electoral system and campaign culture (Ruostetsaari & Mattila 2002). The article thus provides an additional level to the assessment of the on-line electoral competition by political actors. The empirical analysis seeks to examine predictors of both candidate on-line campaign presence and the sophistication of the candidate sites. The article also analyzes the question of what the Finnish candidates communicate on-line in times of elections.

- The fifth article[4] (Strandberg 2005) provides a further examination of the citizens' on-line activity. The article focuses on Finnish citizens' discussions on internet discussion boards provided by the Finnish parties and one independent web-portal, prior to, during and after the parliamentary elections in 2003. The empirical analysis is carried out through content analysis of the messages posted by citizens on these forums. This article has two characteristics concerning the overall thesis which merit attention. The article takes a deeper look into the online activity of Finnish citizens. Also, through examining a form of on-line activity which requires

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[4] The article was originally published in Swedish in a refereed journal (Strandberg 2004). This original article was then later selected by the Finnish Political Science Association for inclusion in the *Encounters* journal. The article version used in this thesis is the English translation of the original article.

a relatively fair amount of effort, activity and engagement from the citizens, the article builds on the examination of the mobilization and reinforcement theories partly undertaken in article number two (Carlson & Strandberg 2005). The internet's potential impact in terms of activating and engaging citizens is in particular focus (cf. Norris 1999; 2001b, 218-21).

As indicated in these brief presentations of the thesis' articles, the articles provide the pieces for assessing the on-line political environment in Finland. Both the activity of the political actors and the citizens are addressed. The articles attend to the empirical research questions in order to provide the empirical 'data' for this analysis. The articles numbered 1-4 are, in one way or another, concerned with the 'political actors' dimension of the typology of on-line political environments. These articles are also concerned with the empirical questions of who these political actors are (article 2), what they are communicating (articles 2, 3 and 4) and the conditions that might influence this communication (articles 1 and 3). The second and fifth articles concern the 'citizens' dimension of the typology of on-line political environments. Furthermore, they address the empirical research questions regarding the degree of impact on-line politics has on Finnish citizens and what these citizens are doing on-line. It is, however, important to note that, by themselves, the articles also address several important components of on-line politics in general. This will hopefully serve to develop both the theoretical understanding of on-line politics and to provide interesting empirical findings to the scholarly field.

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This thesis now proceeds with the articles which have been briefly presented and discussed in this section. The articles' findings are thereafter summarized, discussed and related to the theoretical discussion and the typology of on-line political environments in the concluding section of the thesis.

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B. The articles

Article I

On-line Campaigning in Different Settings:

A Comparative Meta-Analysis of the Research on Party Websites and Electoral
Competition

Unpublished manuscript, resubmitted to *Party Politics*

Introduction

Two specific theories have usually been discussed regarding the on-line activity by political parties and its potential future impact on electoral competition (cf. Margolis & Resnick 2000: 14-21). The Internet, it has been argued, could serve to equalize the electoral playing field. The medium has several distinct features compared to traditional media. It is low cost, interactive and provides speed and ease of multimedia transmission. Campaign messages conveyed on the Internet also lack editorial intervention (Bimber & Davis 2003; Kamarck 1999: 114). Smaller and fringe parties could stand a better chance of keeping pace with the major parties on the Internet than in traditional political outlets and thus also potentially reach a larger audience via the net (e.g. Margolis et al. 2003: 58). This line of thought is often referred to as the *equalization* theory. The second theory concerning the impact of on-line campaigning on electoral competition perceives a 'no-change' scenario. According to this theoretical view, politics on the internet is merely an extension of off-line politics and will fail to alter established power structures (Margolis & Resnick 2000: 2; Norris 2003: 23). This would partly be due to the major parties' higher off-line visibility, which provides them with more opportunities for guiding voters to their sites. Moreover, even though Internet campaigning is more affordable than TV-advertising, the costs of skilful web designers are steadily rising (Margolis et al. 1997, 2003; Margolis & Resnick 2000: 53-74). Smaller parties without large campaign resources would still be disadvantaged on-line. This theory is usually called the *normalization* theory.

Several studies relating to party competition on-line have been conducted (e.g. Gibson et al. 2003; Gibson & Ward 2002; Greer & LaPointe 2003; Kamarck 2002; Norris 2003; Margolis et al. 1997, 2003; Margolis & Resnick 2000). These studies provide empirical evidence pointing in both directions regarding the theories. Many studies of US web campaigns support the 'no-change' situation (Norris 2003: 42). The results concerning campaigns in other countries are more inconsistent (e.g. Cunha et al. 2003; Gibson & Römmele 2003; Newell 2001). However, there have been few attempts to systematically explore the conditions in which the findings of either normalization or equalization have occurred. Some researchers note that party web campaigning seems independent from national and institutional context (e.g. Gibson et al. 2003: 66-7). Others argue that country specific conditions and institutional settings seem to influence party web campaigning (e.g. Cunha et al. 2003: 70-4; March 2003: 20; Gibson & Ward 2002: 104).

This uncertainty in the scholarly literature provides an interesting research problem. Are there any systematic differences in the country settings in which the parties

operate, traceable to findings of either normalization or equalization? Several countries with specific institutional conditions, campaign conducts, and political culture and regulations, have been studied. As such, the studies provide varied settings in which support for the theories have been found. The influence of these settings is important to further explore to gain more understanding of the theories. This is one of the main focus areas of the article. A second area of interest of the article is the ways in which scholars have studied the two theories. The studies of on-line electoral competition also provide potential variation in methodology, such as measurement and interpretations of the findings. The purpose of this article is, in general terms, to systematically explore the relationship between both country specific settings and study specific methodology – and findings of either theory. Existing studies of on-line electoral competition constitute cases for the analysis and the findings of each study are seen as the *dependent* variable for this study. Potentially, more knowledge of conditions for the findings of normalization and equalization theories can be gained through this analysis (cf. Peters 1998: 160-1).

Theoretical considerations

There is a need to theoretically assess factors relevant for the comparison in order to systematically compare studies of on-line party competition. Without the identification of such relevant variables, the comparison of the studies would suffer in validity (Peters 1998: 168). In this section, the independent variables of the article are presented and discussed.

Electoral settings

Firstly, the electoral settings within which the existing studies have been conducted are considered. These are important as the theories of normalization and equalization operate with notions of on-line electoral competition between parties of different sizes. Parallels can be drawn to the noted effects of electoral systems on off-line party competition (cf. Lijphart 1994, 1999). Plurality election systems usually lead to party systems with two or few parties. Proportional systems generally have some form of multipartyism (Lijphart 1999: 63). The party systems are also often reflected in the patterns of electoral competition. Smaller parties struggle to win seats in plurality systems (Lijphart 1994: 20), while proportional systems lower the hurdles for inclusion of smaller parties in the legislative bodies (Norris 2004). The election system has also been noted to significantly alter the strategic conduct of political parties (Norris 2004). In plurality systems, the few parties standing realistic chances at election are the ones putting the most effort into political campaigning. Candidates from a higher number of parties are elected in

proportional systems. It is therefore reasonable to expect more campaign efforts by the smaller parties in such a context. Likewise, scholars have argued that it is also reasonable to expect more Internet activity by parties in competitive party systems than in non-competitive party systems (Cunha et al. 2003: 70).

Country development

The level of country development is also interesting to consider in the study. Norris (2001b: 164-7) has regarded the level of democracy, the level of human development and the level of technological development as potential explanations for the occurrence and content of party websites. Democratic status would seem to be associated with pluralism and diversity of voices and could stimulate equalization. However, the effects of democracy on electoral competition are more a question of process than of status (Norris 2004). In countries with a long history of democracy, the status of democracy *per se* is unlikely to cause much change in patterns of electoral competition. In countries in transition or with short history of democracy, on the other hand, democratic status could indeed play a more significant role. The new opportunities for free and open competition could serve as strong incentives for smaller parties to endeavour onto the electoral arena (*ibid.*). Consequently, democratic transition and the aftermath thereafter could also stimulate Internet activity by minor and fringe parties.

Human- and technological development are also intriguing conditions. Human development is an indicator of the general socioeconomic level of a country which has also been regarded as an explanation for individual-level usage of the Internet (Norris 2001b, 68-92). The distribution and contents of party websites are also to a large degree explained by the level of technological development (Norris 2001b: 165-6). The technological environment is so-to-speak more suitable for on-line ventures by political actors in technologically advanced countries (Cunha et al. 2003: 71). Without such an environment, web activity might be sporadic and possible patterns of party competition may yet change significantly. Political parties lack incentives for launching websites if most voters lack access to the technology (Cunha et al. 2003: 70; Norris 2001b: 165).

Media environment

The importance of media in modern political campaigning is significant (e.g. Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Norris 2001a; Swanson & Mancini 1996). Thus, it seems reasonable to take the media environment into account in this study. Hallin and Mancini (2004: 66-9) acknowledge three models of media systems: the Polarized Pluralist model, the Democratic Corporatist model and the Liberal model[1]. In the Polarized Pluralist system,

the political parties retain a high degree of control over media outlets and the role of the state in controlling the media system is strong (Hallin & Mancini 2004: 66-9). One could depict this environment as a restricted media environment. The Democratic Corporatist model and the Liberal model could be regarded as non-restricted media environments. In such media systems, the media outlets are seldom under the influence of political parties and usually follow their own agenda and commercialized professional logic (cf. Altheide & Snow 1991; Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Swanson & Mancini 1996). Relating to party Internet campaigning, there appears to be incentives for on-line campaigning in both restricted and non-restricted media environments. In a restricted media system, minor parties compete with the larger parties for a place in the media spotlight in a media which is usually favourable towards the parties in power (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 73). The smaller parties might consider the web as an alternative communication channel in reaching the voters. The same could also hold true in an unrestricted media system where a place in the media spotlight is largely dependent on having the resources to pay for political advertising (cf. Norris 2003: 25). The minor parties are not able to compete with the major parties in terms of financial resources. Instead they might increasingly lean towards Internet campaigning instead of traditional campaigning (Margolis et al. 2003: 58). Alongside the off-line media settings, regulations concerning political Internet conduct might also have an impact on on-line electoral competition. Such effects have been seen in Singapore where both the regulatory framework and actual government sanctions have "succeeded in limiting the effectiveness of the Internet" (Kluver 2004: 440). In Japan, however, government regulations without actual sanctions have not had any significant impact on web campaigning (Tkach-Kawasaki 2003). Therefore, it appears as if regulations and actual sanctions in conjunction influence on-line campaigning.

Schematically, a combination of a country's off- and on-line campaign environments would yield the following scenarios (Figure 1):

<table>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td colspan="2" align="center">Off-line media environment</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td align="center">restricted</td><td align="center">unrestricted</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">On-line media environment</td><td>unrestricted</td><td>1: equalization</td><td>4: equalization or normalization?</td></tr>
<tr><td>restricted</td><td>2: normalization</td><td>3: normalization</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 1. Likely scenarios of on-line electoral competition in different media settings

Figure 1 shows four theoretical outcomes. Firstly, a restricted off-line campaign environment in coexistence with an unrestricted on-line environment might spur on-line campaign activity by minor parties. Tkach-Kawasaki (2003: 110) points out that strict

regulation of political advertising in Japan created significant incentives for the utilization of more easily-accessible forms of media. Secondly, if both environments are restricted, the *status-quo* logic of the normalization theory seems likely. Likewise, the third scenario with an unrestricted off-line environment alongside a restricted on-line environment would see the minor parties without any incentives for moving on-line (Gibson & Ward 2002: 123). Finally, the outcome of the scenario where both environments are unrestricted is uncertain. This scenario could spur equalization as minor parties would see the web as more affordable than traditional campaigning (cf. Norris 2003: 25). Nevertheless, the scenario could lead to normalization if web campaigning is regarded as turning increasingly expensive over time (Margolis et al. 2003: 58). If so, the smaller parties would continue to lag behind the larger parties.

Methodology

The methodology used in the studies of on-line party competition is also of relevance to this study. A researcher might arrive at different conclusions depending on the choice of research method. In general, there are few major differences in the methods used to study party websites and web activity. Some form of quantitative content analysis is often applied in analyzing and comparing the contents of party websites. One potentially important distinction in methodology is noteworthy: in analyzing the contents of websites, some researchers merely note the presence or absence of certain features. Others apply adapted or corresponding versions of the coding scheme proposed by Gibson and Ward (2000) in their content analyses. This scheme is based on summarized scales instead of dichotomous variables. Thus, in the former case, the researcher does not discriminate between having an e-mail address on the website and having a specific electronic feedback form. In the latter case, this difference is accounted for (cf. Kluver 2004: 451). The difference between the two procedures is subtle but could influence the findings of a study. One could say that the former method is biased towards equalization as possible differences in website contents may go unnoticed. The latter method is consequently more capable of noticing the differences between websites and more likely to find signs of normalization.

Research design

The aim of the study is to gain knowledge of the conditions for findings of normalization and equalization. The analysis is carried out through a systematic exploration of the relationship between country specific settings, study specific methods and the findings of

existing studies of on-line party competition (See Appendix B). The overall research question is:

RQ: Are there any systematic patterns in the country settings and methodology in which studies of on-line party competition have been conducted which are related to findings of either normalization or equalization?

The construction of the dependent variable has not yet been discussed in detail. This variable is based on the *findings* of either normalization or equalization in the studies of on-line party competition, as stated by the authors. The variable is not based on an objective re-analysis of the data used in the existing studies. This is necessary in order to take methodological issues into account. As a result, the dependent variable is subject to the individual interpretations made by the authors. This construction of the dependent variable is further discussed in the operationalizations section. The research process departs from these findings after which the identification of the conditions, provided by the independent variables, for these findings is conducted.

This study is, thus, explicitly designed as a secondary meta-comparison. The strength of meta-analysis lies in its ability to systematically accumulate existing findings and therefore better enable theory construction and testing (Peters 1998: 160-1). Secondary comparison is, nonetheless, not a risk-free task. Peters (*ibid*: 209) mentions that the two major issues of the method are measurement and comparability of data gathered in different political systems. However, several issues of interest in political science are understood in similar ways in most countries and therefore travel very well. Similarly, findings of normalization and equalization ought not to be understood very differently in different countries. Most of the independent variables discussed in the previous section have also seen scholarly attention before (cf. Farrell & Webb 2000; Golder 2004; Hallin & Mancini 2004; Norris 2001b) and can be measured using standardized measures[2].

Data and methods

The cases for the study are drawn from 11 studies of party Internet campaigning and on-line electoral competition (See Appendix B). The studies were selected based on two criteria: firstly, they focused (in part or in whole) on party Internet campaigning, and secondly, they either drew conclusion concerning on-line party competition, or their discussions could easily be 'translated' to fit this framework. Studies focusing on several countries were divided in the analysis so that each country is seen as a different case. Consequently, the total number of cases analyzed is 16.

Because the study is case-oriented with a low number of cases, the choice of suitable research methods is limited. Nonetheless, the design of the study is variable oriented and would require a research method which facilitates some form of variable testing. Given these restrictions, the method of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (henceforth abbreviated as QCA) is an appropriate solution. The method has the advantage of being able to retain the "wealth of case-oriented material and case-derived 'data' in political science and convert them into a form suitable for variable based research" (Peters 1998: 163; Ragin 1994: 304). Peters (1998: 160-2) merits the technique as one of *the* tools for including qualitatively-derived data in meta-analyses.

The QCA employs the technique of Boolean algebra which is basically a form of logical reasoning (for a detailed description of the technique, see Appendix A). The procedure follows a logic of 'differences can't explain similarities' in order to find multiple, logical combinations of causal variables in which the dependent variable occurs (Coverdill & Finlay 1995: 458; Ragin 1994: 312). Each case is considered holistically; the effect of one independent variable is seen as different in each case depending on the values on the other independent variables (Miethe & Drass 1999: 9-10).

The Boolean technique is not without its problems. Firstly, the method is dependent on theoretical reasoning and argumentation in determining which causal variables to include in the analysis (Peters 1998: 168). Secondly, the requirement of binary data is problematic as societal phenomena are often quite complex and difficult to simplify into a yes-no dichotomy (Jungerstam-Mulders 2003: 70-1; Peters 1998: 169-70). The third problem with the Boolean technique is the limited availability of data in existing cases. The outcomes of all possible combinations of variables are usually never tested (Jungerstam-Mulders 2003: 71). Finally, it is not uncommon to encounter contradicting cases where the same combination of values on the independent variables produces different outcomes. In part, this could be due to the selected variables not being able to discriminate between the cases. This problem is hard to overcome with QCA as the inclusion of too many variables in the analysis is difficult (*ibid*). Still, Lijphart (1971: 686) argues that deviant cases do weaken a hypothesis but are not sufficient to fully invalidate it unless they appear in frequent numbers. Therefore, a QCA may still be conducted including the settings which produce contradicting outcomes if one is aware of this throughout the process (Jungerstam-Mulders 2003: 82).

Operationalizations

The dichotomizations of the variables, both independent and dependent, are discussed in this section. As a rule of thumb, the conditions likelier to stimulate findings of

normalization are given the coding value 1, and consequently the 0-value corresponds to the conditions likelier to lead to findings of equalization.

The problem with dichotomization is, as mentioned, determining when a condition is considered present (Peters 1998: 169-70). This problem is quite evident concerning the election system. This variable is classified as present (coding value 1) if the election system is considered to be mainly plurality, and not present (coding value 0) if the election system is mainly proportional. Problems arise when considering mixed systems in which elements of both plurality and proportional systems occur. In such cases, the variable is coded according to the dominant type. In some countries, such as Germany, Russia and the Ukraine, exactly 50% of the seats are selected using the plurality formula and 50% using the proportional formula (Golder 2004). In these cases, the line between plurality and proportional systems is based on how the two parallel systems interact. If the two systems exist side by side without interconnecting mechanisms, as in Russia and the Ukraine, they are coded as plurality systems[3]. If the proportional system is used to correct the outcome of the plurality system, as in Germany, the general election type is considered to be proportional. This is because the proportional part has the slightly bigger influence on the outcome of the election.

The second independent variable – history of democracy – is classified as not present for countries in transition or with a democratic history shorter than 15 years (cf. Norris 2004). For countries with a long history of their democratic status, the variable is classified as present.

The third variable, country development in terms of both human and technological development, is considered present only if both criteria are met. The country must have both high human development according to its classification in the United Nations' human development index, and be technologically advanced at the point in time analyzed in this article. The last criterion is based on the proportion of the country's population with Internet access. A country with over 30% of its population on-line[4] is considered technologically advanced. As noted by Norris (2001b: 53-4), Internet usage is highly correlated to other forms of information infrastructure and can therefore be used as a summarizing measure.

The fourth variable, the media environment, was earlier discussed as consisting of both an off-line and an on-line dimension. In order for the variable to be considered present, one of scenarios 2, 3 or 4, presented earlier in Figure 1 should be found. In scenario 2, both the off-line and on-line media environment is restricted. In scenario 3, the off-line media environment is unrestricted while the on-line equivalent is restricted. In determining whether the on-line environment is restricted, I have taken both government regulations and actual imposed sanctions into account. This explains why Singapore's on-line environment is considered restricted while Japan's equivalent is not. As mentioned in

the discussion of the variable, the Singapore government has been active in imposing sanctions (Kluver 2004: 440). The Japanese government has threatened with sanctions but never made any official ruling on matters concerning on-line campaigning (Tkach-Kawasaki 2003). Scenario 4 is viewed as a condition for normalization[5] as web campaigning is becoming increasingly expensive and also dependent on off-line visibility in guiding voters to the web sites (Margolis et al 2003: 58). Consequently, only scenario 1 consisting of a restricted off-line media system alongside an unrestricted on-line environment, is classified as a condition for equalization.

The final independent variable, methodology, is considered present if the study in question has used some form of scaled measurement of website contents (cf. Gibson & Ward 2000), and not present if the study used some form of dichotomous measurement or assessment.

The *dependent* variable consists of findings of either normalization or equalization in existing studies. Hypothetically, this means that the variable is subject to the interpretations of the scholars who conducted the study. Therefore, it is necessary to shed light on the basis for these interpretations. This study would suffer in validity if the operationalization of the dependent variable is based on contradictory conclusions from similar data. If such discrepancies exist, the dependent variable should rather be regarded as an *independent* variable explaining findings of normalization and equalization. This would be troublesome as the inclusion of too many variables in the QCA is difficult and makes the results of the analysis uncertain (Jungerstam-Mulders 2003: 71).

Party competition on-line could be depicted as consisting of two dimensions: visibility and on-line performance in terms of website contents (c.f Margolis et al. 1997, 2003; Margolis & Resnick 2000). Without off-line visibility, the usefulness of a website is limited as the general public is unaware of its existence (Carlson & Djupsund 2001: 84-5). One explanation for possible discrepancies in conclusions could depend upon whether the authors realize and measure both visibility and performance. The operationalization and validity of the dependent variable is tested here through a brief QCA of how the authors of the studies of on-line party competition have interpreted their findings concerning visibility and website performance. The analysis of the studies finding normalization yielded the following primitive Boolean expression (where A stands for visibility and B for website performance: capital letters indicate that the condition for normalization is present):

$F = 1$ when $Ab+AB+aB$

Through Boolean reduction, these three terms combined to produce the following final expression:

F = 1 when A+B

In the studies where normalization of on-line party competition was found, either visibility *or* on-line performance was skewed in favour of the major parties. For the studies finding equalization, the QCA yielded the following primitive expressions:

F = 0 when Ab + ab

These terms could then be reduced to the term b. The on-line performance was equal between major and minor parties in the studies where equalization was found. There was, however, one primitive term present in the studies finding equalization, the term Ab, represented by cases numbered 2-5, and 10 (see Table 2); which was also present in two cases (numbered 1 and 13) where normalization was found. This would be troublesome as the dependent variable is seemingly operationalized in a way that does not discriminate between normalization and equalization. A further scrutiny of these contradictory cases reveals that the two studies, cases 1 and 13, where normalization was found (Gibson et al. 2003; Margolis et al. 2003), both measured, and revealed, an off-line visibility heavily skewed in favour of the major parties. In the contradictory cases finding equalization, off-line visibility was not measured. Consequently, through this further distinction, the operationalization of the dependent variable does sufficiently discriminate normalization and equalization (cf. Jungerstam-Mulders 2003: 71).

To summarize the discussion, the operationalizations of the variables are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Operationalizations of the variables

Independent variables	Coding values	
	Value=1	Value=0
Election system	Plurality system or system with dominant elements of a plurality election system	Proportional system or system with dominant elements of a proportional election system
Democratic age	Country with a long history of democratic status	Country in democratic transition or with relatively short history of democratic status
Country development	Country with high human development and an Internet penetration over 30%	Country with medium- or low human development and an Internet penetration below 30%
Media environment	Country with either a) a restricted media system alongside restrictions of Internet campaign conduct b)an unrestricted media system alongside a restricted on-line environment or c)an unrestricted media system and unrestricted on-line environment	Country with restricted media system alongside an unrestricted on-line campaign environment
Methods	Scaled measurement of website contents	Dichotomous measurement of website contents
Dependent variable	**Normalization**, findings of normalization in the studies of on-line party competition	**Equalization**, findings of equalization in the studies of on-line party competition

Analysis

The results of the QCA analysis are now presented. The cases are first briefly described in terms of the variables used in the study. Thereafter, the truth table for the study is constructed and two Boolean procedures are conducted; one procedure for findings of normalization and one for findings of equalization. The results of two alternative analyses using different operationalizations are also briefly presented at the end of the section.

Table 2 shows the cases viewed in light of the variables.

Table 2. Description of cases (see Appendix for a list of the studies)

Case no	Country	Year	Election system (V1)	Age (V2)	Development (V3)	Media settings (V4)	Method (V5)	Findings
1	USA	2000	Plurality	Old	High	Scenario 4	Scale	Norm.
2	Portugal	2002	Proportional	Old	High	Scenario 1	Scale	Equal.
3	Greece	2001	Proportional	Old	Medium- or low	Scenario 1	Scale	Equal.
4	Spain	2001	Proportional	Old	Medium- or low	Scenario 1	Scale	Equal.
5	Italy	2002	Plurality	Old	High	Scenario 1	Scale	Equal.
6	Mexico	2000	Plurality	Transition	Medium- or low	Scenario 4	Dichot.	Norm.
7	Ukraine	2001	Plurality	Transition	Medium- or low	Scenario 1	Dichot.	Norm.
8	Russia	2001	Plurality	Transition	Medium- or low	Scenario 1	Dichot.	Norm.
9	Russia	2003	Plurality	Transition	Medium- or low	Scenario 1	Dichot.	Norm.
10	Italy	2000	Plurality	Old	Medium- or low	Scenario 1	Scale	Equal.
11	USA	1996	Plurality	Old	Medium- or low	Scenario 4	Dichot.	Norm.
12	Japan	2000	Plurality	Old	High	Scenario 1	Scale	Equal.
13	UK	2001	Plurality	Old	High	Scenario 4	Scale	Norm.
14	Australia	2000	Plurality	Old	High	Scenario 4	Scale	Norm.
15	Singapore	2001	Plurality	Old	High	Scenario 2	Scale	Norm.
16	Germany	2002	Proportional	Old	High	Scenario 4	Scale	Norm.

Sources: Aquila 2004; Cunha et al. 2003; Freedom House 2004; Gibson et al. 2003; Gibson & Römmele 2003; Gibson & Ward 2002; Golder 2004; Kluver 2004; Kubicek 2001; Lusoli & Ward 2004; March 2003; Margolis et al. 1997, 2003; Miani 2004; Newell 2001; Semetko & Krasnoboka 2003; Tkach-Kawasaki 2003; UNDP 2004; Wallis 2001; 2003; Waits & Foot 2005

Table 2 shows a relatively good variation in the independent variables and likewise for the outcomes on the dependent variable. In ten of the 16 cases, the findings indicate normalization. In search of systematic conditions evident in these cases, the truth table is depicted in Table 3. Since the study operates with 5 independent variables, the truth table contains 32 rows of possible combinations of values of these variables. In Table 4 only the nine rows represented by actual cases are depicted.

Table 3. Truth table picturing the distribution of cases

A Election system	B Age of democracy	C Development	D Media environment	E Methodology	Findings of normalization	Case no
0	1	0	0	1	0	3,4
1	1	0	0	1	0	10
0	1	1	0	1	0	2
1	1	1	0	1	0	5,12
1	0	0	0	0	1	7,8,9
1	0	0	1	0	1	6
1	1	0	1	0	1	11
0	1	1	1	1	1	16
1	1	1	1	1	1	1,13,14,15

There were no contradicting cases found in Table 3. The information contained in Table 3 can now be analyzed using the Boolean technique. The unreduced Boolean expression for the findings of normalization reads as follows:

N=1 (Findings of normalization) when:
Abcde+AbcDe+ABcDe+aBCDE+ABCDE

The QCA now proceeds with the reduction of these five-term expressions into four-term expressions by combining expressions which only differ in one term:

Abcde combines with AbcDe to produce	Abce
AbcDe combines with ABcDe to produce	AcDe
aBCDE combines with ABCDE to produce	BCDE

In the following step, these reduced expressions would be minimized into even simpler terms. None of these expressions can, however, be combined in the manner used in the first step. This might possibly be due to the fact that not all theoretical combinations of variables were represented with actual cases (cf. Jungerstam-Mulders 2003: 81). One can, nonetheless, consider parts of the expressions Abce and AcDe redundant. Both of these expressions produce the same outcome and have the terms Ace in common. Thus, the terms b and D can be considered irrelevant to the outcome. Ace seems to be a sufficient condition for findings of normalization. The expression BCDE cannot be further reduced, and the result of the QCA would read

N=Ace+BCDE

This result indicates that the studies which have resulted in findings of normalization of on-line party competition have been studies

1. using dichotomous measurement of the party websites' contents in countries with a plurality election system and medium- or low level of development.

<div align="center">**OR**</div>

2. using scaled measurement of party website contents in countries with a long history of democratic status, high development and media environments which are unrestricted both off- and on-line.

Focus now turns towards the studies which have found equalization of on-line party competition. The information in the truth table would yield the following Boolean expression:

N=0 (Findings of equalization) when:
aBcdE+ABcdE+aBCdE+ABCdE

These terms can now be reduced to four-term expressions as follows:

aBcdE combines with ABcdE to produce	BcdE
aBcdE also combines with aBCdE to produce	aBdE
ABcdE combines with ABCdE to produce	ABdE
aBCdE combines with ABCdE to produce	BCdE

These expressions can be further minimized into three-term expressions:

BcdE combines with BCdE to produce	BdE
aBdE combines with ABdE to produce	BdE

The results of the QCA for the studies finding equalization result in the following final expression:

E=BdE

The studies of on-line party competition in which support for the equalization theory has been found have the following logical minimum conditions in common:

1. The studies have used scaled measurement of website contents in studying countries with a long history of democratic status and an unrestricted on-line media environment alongside a restricted off-line media environment.

Alternative analyses

The results of two QCAs using alternative coding values for the variables 'election system' and 'media environment' are briefly presented in this section (see Appendix C for full procedure). This serves to increase the validity of the findings in the main QCA (Jungerstam-Mulders 2003: 70-1; Peters 1998: 169-70). Put bluntly, the re-analyses were carried out in order to examine whether the findings of the study would have changed

dramatically if a different coding had been applied for cases numbered 7, 8 and 9 concerning the election system variable. Likewise concerning cases numbered 1, 6, 11, 13-14 and 16 for the media environment variable.

The result of the QCA with an alternative coding for the election system-variable produced the following final expressions:

F = 1 when abcde+BCDE+AcDe and F = 0 when BdE

These expressions contained the expressions concerning normalization, Ace+BCDE, and matched the exact expression concerning equalization, BdE, found in the main QCA analysis. Arguably, even though one new expression emerged for findings of normalization, this result increases the validity of the results from the main QCA.

The results for the QCA with an alternative coding for the media environment-variable yielded the following final solutions:

F = 1 when BCE+Acde and F = 0 when AdE+BdE

Again, either expressions, or large parts thereof, concerning normalization found in the main QCA can be traced in the findings of the alternative QCA. Regarding findings of equalization, the expression from the original QCA is exactly matched alongside one new expression. It should, however, be noted that the alternative QCA for the media environment produced two contradictory expressions where the same primitive Boolean expression had produced different outcomes.

Even so, the two alternative QCA analyses have served to strengthen the validity of the findings of the original QCA. The original conditions for findings of normalization and equalization remained as parts of the new solutions, even though different variable coding was used.

Discussion & conclusions

The purpose of this analysis was to systematically explore the conditions, both country specific and methodological, for findings of either normalization or equalization. This was carried out through a meta-analysis of existing studies of on-line party competition. Meta-analyses were previously argued to be especially well suited for theory-development (Peters 1998: 160-1). Concerning the normalization and equalization theories, then: what can be learned from the results?

Firstly, the findings could be regarded as an initial mapping of the conditions in which support for the theories have been found. As compared to the previous

understanding of the normalization and equalization theories, the findings are a step forward. Likewise, in the discussion on the operationalization of the dependent variable, the study shed light on how the findings *per se* have been constructed by different scholars. Findings interpreted as normalization were found to depend on either off- and on-line visibility, or website performance being dominated by major parties. Findings of equalization appeared mostly dependent on smaller parties staying in stride with the major parties in terms of website performance.

Thirdly, the general QCA analysis found two minimum logical conditions either of which had been present in the studies where normalization had been found. The analysis found one minimum logical condition for findings of equalization. Pertaining to the general spread of the theories, this indicates that normalization has been found in more varied conditions than equalization. Objectively speaking, equalization appears dependent on more uniform conditions than normalization. Obviously, this conclusion must be regarded as quite tentative due to the low number of cases used in the analysis.

Fourthly, the findings provide interesting information on how the *combinations* of different independent variables are linked to the dependent variable. Given that the dependent variable has been operationalized in sufficiently similar ways by scholars, this information also provides an important piece of information in understanding the causes of normalization and equalization. However, in a theoretical perspective, these findings seem somewhat surprising. For the first minimum condition linked to findings of normalization – dichotomous measurement of party websites in plurality election systems in countries with low technological development – the absence of both high technological development and scaled measurement contradicts the logic of the operationalizations of these variables. The QCA, however, views the independent variables as dependent on each other and does not give any specific information on the explanatory power of the individual independent variable. The first minimum logical condition linked to findings of normalization could, therefore, indicate that the presence of a plurality election system has resulted in findings of normalization *even though* two unfavourable conditions were present. Concerning the second logical minimum condition for findings of normalization – scaled measurement of party website contents in countries with a long history of democratic status, high technological development and unrestricted media environment – the conditions are in line with the theoretical discussion. The election system is, however, irrelevant to the outcome in this condition. It would seem that normalization occurs when the election system is plurality but no other favourable conditions are met, *or* regardless of the election system when all other conditions are favourable.

Only one minimum logical condition was found for findings of equalization: scaled measurement of party websites in countries with a long history of democratic status and a more open on-line than off-line media environment. Again, both the history

of democratic status and the usage of scaled measurement in the content analyses of party websites seem to contradict the theoretical discussion and the operationalizations. One can again reflect on whether the presence of a more open on-line media environment is decisive for the findings of equalization. If the on-line media environment is more favourable for minor parties than the off-line environment, the campaign web sphere is likelier to be equalized even though other conditions are unfavourable for equalization.

The analysis was carried out using Qualitative Comparative Analysis in order to apply systematic reasoning in the low-case analysis. The application of the QCA has brought up certain methodological issues which will be briefly discussed here. The dichotomization of the election system proved difficult regarding mixed systems, and the dichotomization of the media environment was not without problems either. However, the original results were valid even if an alternative coding for these two variables was used. The validity of the findings is therefore high. As is often the case (Jungerstam-Mulders 2003: 71), the QCA in this study also suffered from limited availability of cases. This calls for some caution when drawing generalized conclusions from the findings. Even though this study has analyzed a wide range of systems and studies, there are still many unaccounted for.

In conclusion, normalization seems more dependent on off-line than on-line conditions, while the relative openness of the on-line media environment appears most important for findings of equalization. Arguably, these findings have served to develop the knowledge of the conditions for normalization and equalization (cf. Peters 1998: 160-1). The meta-analysis shed some light on the rather complex research field concerning party campaigning on-line. In particular, the differing conceptual interpretations of the normalization and equalization theories are important to realize and take into account when conducting future research. The research field will undoubtedly continue to grow, and the number of cases available for meta-analyses will consequently rise. Therefore, future studies are called upon as there are still many uncharted settings in which party competition takes place, both off-line and on the Internet.

Notes

[1] Hallin & Mancini (2004: 67) mention the Mediterranean countries as examples of the Polarized Pluralist model, the Scandinavian and Central-European countries as examples of the Democratic Corporatist model and Britain, Ireland, USA and Canada as examples of the Liberal model.

[2] For example the Freedom House index and the UNDP human development index.

[3] In order to increase the validity of the study, the QCA analysis was also tested using the alternative coding value for Ukraine and Russia: the result of this analysis is briefly presented in the findings section. The whole reduction procedure is presented in the appendix.

[4] Source: Nua Internet surveys: http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/Europe.html

[5] In order to increase the validity of the study, the QCA analysis was also tested using the alternative coding value for Scenario 4: the result of this analysis is briefly presented in the findings section. The full reduction procedure is presented in the appendix.

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Appendix A: detailed description of the QCA technique

In practice, the QCA analysis starts with a construction of a so-called 'truth table' in which the theoretically possible combinations of the values of dichotomous independent variables are depicted along with the empirical outcomes on a dichotomous dependent variable found in the case material (see Ragin 1989: 90). The truth table contains information about the settings in which the dependent variable occurs or does not occur. In describing these settings, two logical separators are used; Boolean addition and multiplication. Addition stands for a logical *or* and multiplication stands for a logical *and*. Also, the absence of an independent variable is indicated in lower-case letters, and the presence is indicated in upper-case letters. Together the settings form a Booelan expression as follows:

F = 1 when Abc+aBc+abC+ABc+AbC+aBC+ABC

This expression is called a 'primitive' or unreduced Boolean expression. The expression shows all combinations of variables in which the dependent variable occurs. The Boolean technique then proceeds through combining expressions which only differ in *one* causal condition but produce the same outcome and reducing them into simpler expressions. For instance, Abc and ABc only differ in the B term but produce the same outcome, thus B is considered redundant for the outcome on the dependent variable, and the expression is reduced to Ac. This is repeated for all possible pairings until no further reductions are possible. In the hypothetical scenario this would result in six reduced expressions: Abc+ABc=Ac; Abc+AbC=Ab; aBc+ABc=Bc; abC+AbC=bC; ABc+ABC=AB and AbC+ABC=AC. Thereafter, the process is repeated with the reduced expressions in order to find even simpler expressions. This would result in two further reductions; Ac+AC=A and Ab+AB=A. Thus, in this hypothetical scenario, Condition A seems to be sufficient for the occurrence of the dependent variable.

Appendix B: studies associated with the analyzed cases

Case number	Study
1	Margolis et al. 2003
2	Cunha et al. 2003
3	Cunha et al. 2003
4	Cunha et al. 2003
5	Cunha et al. 2003
6	Wallis 2003
7	Semetko & Krasnoboka 2003
8	Semetko & Krasnoboka 2003
9	March 2003
10	Newell 2001
11	Margolis et al. 1997
12	Tkach-Kawasaki 2003
13	Gibson et al. 2003
14	Gibson & Ward 2002
15	Kluver 2004
16	Gibson & Römmele 2003

Appendix C: Boolean reduction procedures for variable re-codings

Re-coding of election system-variable:

F =1 when ABCDE+AbcDe+abcde+ABcDe+aBCDE

ABCDE+aBCDE = BCDE
AbcDe+ABcDe = AcDe

Final expression: F = 1 when abcde+BCDE+AcDe

F = 0 when aBCdE+aBcdE+ABCdE+ABcdE

aBcdE+aBcdE = aBdE
      +ABCdE = BCdE
aBcdE+ABcdE = BCdE
ABCdE+ABcdE = ABdE

ABdE+aBdE = BdE
BcdE+BCdE = BdE

Final expression: F = 0 when BdE

Re-coding of media environment-variable:

F = 1 when ABCdE+Abcde+ABcde+aBCdE+ABCDE

ABCde+aBCde = BCdE
      +ABCDE = ABCE
Abcde+ABcde = Acde

BCdE+ABCE = BCE

Final expression: F = 1 when BCE+Acde

F = 0 when aBCdE+aBcdE+ABCdE+ABcdE

aBCdE+aBcdE = aBdE
      +ABCdE = BCdE
aBcdE+ABcdE = BcdE
ABCdE+ABcdE = AbdE

ABdE+AbdE = AdE
BCdE+BcdE = BdE

Final expression: F = 0 when AdE+BdE

Article II

The 2004 European parliament election on the web: Finnish actor strategies and voter responses

Tom Carlson & Kim Strandberg

1. Introduction

Voter turnout in the 2004 European Parliament (EP) elections followed the downward trend experienced since the first direct elections in 1979. The all-time low turnout of 45.7 per cent suggested that the notion of the 'second-order' nature of EP elections was, by and large, still valid [1]. During recent years, different solutions have been suggested to raise European voters' engagement with the EP elections. Typically, institutional factors have been taken into account, including electronic voting [2]. However, institutional reforms are probably not enough; voters must sense that the EP elections are relevant and important to their lives. This view strongly stresses the role of mobilizing agents and the role of the news media in communicating the campaign: whereas parties, candidates and different networks (e.g. labour unions and NGOs) act as mobilizing agencies through various forms of direct communications with voters and by using 'paid media', the news media serve their mobilizing function through providing election-oriented information to the electorate [3].

In the 2004 elections, these actors had the opportunity to utilize the internet, particularly the World Wide Web (henceforth, the web), to a greater extent and probably in more effective ways than in EP elections. The general purpose of this article is to empirically explore the role of the web in the Finnish 2004 EP election. Specifically, the article has two aims. The first aim is to explore how a wide range of actors relevant to the elections employed the web during the campaign. The second objective is to assess the impact of these actors' web strategies on the voters. Hence, the focus is on both the supply side (what the actors provided on-line) and the demand side (how the voters responded to the actors' web deployments).

Two circumstances make the Finnish case interesting. First, the basic prerequisite for using the web during elections – a high level of internet penetration – was fulfilled early in Finland. Already in 1999, Scandinavia, including Finland, was the most 'wired' area in Europe [4]. In 2005, as to the internet penetration rate, Finland ranks fourth in the EU (62%) after Sweden (74%) Denmark (69%) and the Netherlands (66%).[1] Second, as compared with other European countries, the Finnish electoral system strongly emphasizes the individual candidates. In both national and EP elections, Finnish voters do not express a list preference, but they cast a vote for individual candidates representing parties or electoral alliances [5]. This system results in candidate-driven campaigning. When considering these circumstances, it may not come as a surprise that 28 per cent of

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[1] Source: www.internetworldstats.com

the Finnish candidates had independent websites already in the 1996 EP elections [6]. Since candidate-centred systems, as Gibson [7] suggests, result in individualized cyber-campaigning spurring innovations and dynamic development in web use, the early adoption of the web in Finnish EP campaigns makes the Finnish case especially interesting to explore. Thus, where the candidates – and other political actors, as well as the news media – were probably 'learning the ropes' in the 1996 campaign, the use of the web in the 2004 EP elections may have evolved considerably in terms of both quantity and quality.

2. Research questions and underpinnings

This study is explorative. Thus, we chose not to form testable, theoretically based hypotheses. Rather, two general research questions guide our exploration. First, how was the web employed by a wide range of actors during the campaign? Second, how did the electorate respond to the actors' deployment of the web?

2.1. The importance of contextual factors

In examining the Finnish case, a theoretical assumption is that contextual factors shape the production of the electoral web spheres creating opportunities for information and engagement to the voters (see also the introductory article of this theme issue). We have stressed above the importance of high internet access and the candidate-centred electoral system in Finland. In addition, it should be mentioned that the candidates usually have own support groups, consisting mostly of political amateurs, whose role is to organize campaigning activities, fundraising and generate publicity [5]. As to the candidates' view of campaign websites, a survey conducted by *Suomen Lehdistö*, The Finnish Newspapers Association's periodical, shortly before the 2004 EP elections, showed that more than one-third of the candidates regarded the web as being a very important tool in their campaigns [8]. However, another one-third deemed the web as being unimportant. These candidates nonetheless had launched their own sites because, in their words, 'it was a must' and thus followed current fashion. Overall, the candidates emphasized newspaper advertising as the single most important form of publicity.

The Finnish multi-party system, in turn, is relatively fragmented [9]. The core consists of three parties, the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, and the National Coalition Party. These capture the majority of the votes (usually around 60–70 per cent) in national parliamentary elections. Besides these major parties, there is a group of minor parties as well as numerous fringe parties. In general, the EU opposition is limited to some of these fringe parties, while the main parties are, generally, favourable to European

integration [9,10]. A study by Tiilikainen and Wass, based on interviews with party representatives, conclude that parties' campaigns activities were more vital in the 2004 elections than in the 1999 EP elections [10]. In assessing the most important campaigning forms, none of the parties underlined web-related activities however. Rather, news media coverage, public meetings and advertising in newspapers were emphasized. Nevertheless, the parties felt that their websites played a significant role in their campaigns. The substance of the parties' campaigns was colourless and had a clear national focus [10]. Moreover, the issue standpoints of the parties did not differ much, thus reflecting the consensual character of the Finnish political culture [9,10].

A final contextual circumstance concerns campaign regulations. In Finland, the individual candidates and parties can purchase as much advertising time as they want on national commercial television channels [11,12]. As noted by Norris [13], in countries where unlimited amounts can be spent on televised advertising, minor and fringe political actors, with fewer financial resources, have a good rationale to go on-line; the cost of launching a website that contains similar features to that provided by major actors may be relatively modest.

2.2. On-line politics: four scenarios

Inasmuch as the internet has the potential to offer a more affordable and manageable campaign ground for smaller political actors, scholars have argued that the internet may balance the inter-actor strengths on the electoral arena (e.g. [14]). This scenario is often referred to as the *equalization* of electoral competition on-line (e.g. [15]). However, some scholars have argued that there is no reason to expect major overhauls of electoral competition due to the web (e.g. [16]). Major parties – and other major political actors – are still better off than their smaller counterparts at making their website known to voters as they are more likely to make the news and have more money to spend on traditional campaigning [15]. Both of these factors are useful in raising voter interest and knowledge of their websites. In addition, even if web campaigning currently requires comparably little investment, there is no guarantee that the costs will remain low. Over time, the costly expertise of full-time web designers and managers could probably become an essential element of the successful on-line campaigns [17]. Hence, we refer to this no-change scenario concerning the political organizations on the supply side as the *normalization* of on-line politics.

We now turn our focus to the demand side of the political web sphere; the public. As for the theories on on-line electoral competition, scholars have envisioned the internet both to cause major and minor changes in citizens' political activity. Firstly, optimistically, the internet is claimed to politically activate increasing numbers of citizens. Accordingly,

this line of thought has been labelled the *mobilization* theory [18]. One of the core arguments is that on-line political activity differs on several important aspects from traditional political activity and might thus help to activate new types of citizens. Political activity on-line is easily accessible and relatively low-cost. Finally, when compared to traditional forms of political activity, internet activity offers more opportunities for interactivity [18]. Overall, these advantageous features could indeed raise the participation rate amongst those citizens who perceive traditional political activity as too time consuming and demanding.

However, many scholars have been sceptical about the mobilizing effects of the internet [14,18,19]. One important distinction between the internet and traditional mass media is that the former requires the user to actively seek political information whereas, for instance, television exposes the passive viewer to political information. Thus, only the politically interested citizens would search for political content on-line [14,19]. From this perspective, the internet is a new channel for the politically motivated to do what they have always done. Citizens lacking political interest would also lack the motivation to seek political websites. Another dimension of this *reinforcement* argument is based on the unequal access to the internet by the population, which follows certain socioeconomic patterns. Evidence suggest that the typical *political* internet user is a young, highly educated male with a relatively high income [19]. According to Bimber [20], the demographic characteristics of on-line politically active citizens resemble those of citizens already engaged in off-line politics – age being the notable exception.

In the light of the Finnish context, the scenarios of normalization vs. equalization of inter-organizational competition and mobilization vs. reinforcement of the citizens generate a number of questions relevant to our analysis:

– What is the significance of the fact that three major parties dominate the Finnish political stage: did these dominate the electoral web sphere, too, or did the web level the playing field for the minor and fringe parties?

– Did major party candidates utilize the web better, both in terms of quantity and quality, than the minor and fringe party candidates?

– Beyond parties and candidates, did the web provide an increased reach to smaller or less significant political groupings? Did the consensual character of the parties' issue standpoints motivate various NGOs to promote alternative views on-line?

– What is the significance of long-term high levels of internet penetration in Finland: did the electoral web sphere, due to a less skewed socio-economic distribution of internet access, attract and mobilize a new and varied strata of voters?

3. Data and methodology

Our focus on both the supply and demand side of the Finnish on-line campaign is reflected in the use of data and methodology. Supply side data concerning political organizations' websites was collected and analyzed by the authors within the Internet & Elections (IE) Project. The common set of rules and protocols involved four steps of data gathering: identification, sampling, quantitative coding, and qualitative annotation of websites (see further the introductory article of this issue). The identification of sites took place mainly between mid-April and mid-May 2004. In doing this, we followed the project's 'sleuthing guide' that provided detailed advice for the identification of sites produced by different actor types. Prior to the EP election, a random sample of 100 sites was drawn from the population of sites identified in each country, stratified across producer types to ensure inclusion of a mix of website types for coding. Quotas were set as follows: 30% for candidates sites, 20% for parties, 10% for government sites, 10% for NGOs and labour unions, and the remainder distributed across other producer types. Concerning the Finnish sample, the effective number of sites in the sample received was 94. However, since the candidates' sites dominated the Finnish web sphere, we wished to further oversample this kind of site. Such an extra oversampling would more truly reflect the deviant Finnish case and, above all, provide a sufficient number of sites to permit closer inspection of candidates' website features. Therefore, an additional sample of 25 randomly selected candidate sites was added to the original sample.

A set of 24 measures – including 12 types of information and 11 types of engagement – were employed in coding the sites, based on the project's objective to study information and engagement features provided on-line by a broad range of actors in various cultural contexts. The coding took place between two weeks and three days before the election. Additionally, we prepared systematic open-ended notes of significant features in the sites. Subsequently, in dealing with the demand side, we analyzed survey data deriving from a research project called *Changes in Finnish TV Election Campaigns* led by Professor Tom Moring, University of Helsinki. Within this project, *Gallup Finland* has conducted a series of panel surveys since 1992 measuring voter behaviour and preferences at two occasions: some weeks before an election, and immediately after the elections. The survey conducted after the 2004 Finnish EP elections, which we used in this paper, comprised 1,362 respondents aged 18–69 years, representative of the Finnish population. To some extent, however, the data exaggerates the use of internet since the respondents were equipped with home computers by *Gallup Finland* in order to facilitate participation in the panel. For the purpose of this paper, this can be considered more of an asset than a problem: the sample portrays an ideal population that makes it possible to explore how a

representative sample of voters act, taken they have internet access from their homes (cf. [21]).[2]

4. Findings[3]

4.1. Producers of the Finnish web sphere

Which types of political actors were most significant in producing the Finnish election web sphere? In the identification phase, 196 websites produced by ten political actor groups were identified. This sphere is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Producer types of the Finnish electoral web sphere.

Producer Type	Websites Identified (N)	Sampled Websites (N)	Sampled Websites Featuring Election Content (N)	(%)
Candidate	123	62	62	100
NGOs	21	10	2	20
Party	17	14	11	79
News Media	10	8	7	88
Government	9	9	7	78
Labour Union	8	8	3	38
Portal	5	5	2	40
Business	1	1	1	100
Citizen	1	1	1	100
Educational	1	1	1	100
Total	196	119	97	82

The fact that sites of candidates, parties and NGO/Labour organizations made up 87 per cent of the identified sites indicated that the Finnish on-line campaign would be dominated by the same political actors prevalent in offline campaigns. The candidates were particularly active in launching websites. In the campaign, 123 of the 227 nominated candidates set up their own websites. Concerning the provision of election-relevant content, Table 1 shows that 82 per cent of the sampled sites featured this kind of content. With caution paid to the fact that the sample sizes for most producer types are small, five observations can be made. First, the candidates dominated the electoral web sphere: they

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[2] Moreover, given the high Finnish internet penetration, the panel's representativity with respect to internet use is not a critical issue. This is especially true for the younger age groups.
[3] When statistical tests are applied, results and differences are considered statistically significant at $p<.10$

provided the bulk of the sites and, moreover, all their sampled sites carried election content. Second, many parties provided sites containing election material. Party-produced sites that lacked election content belonged to fringe parties that had no candidates running at the election. Third, the sites of the news media in particular, but also of the government, contained election content to a relatively high degree. Fourth, few sites of NGOs/Labour organizations carried election content. As to the sites of the remaining producer types, finally, the sample sizes are too small in order to draw any substantive conclusions. In Finland, therefore, the on-line campaign resembled traditional campaigns where candidates, parties and the media constitute the main actors. Obviously, this is hardly surprising as the parties and candidates were the actors with most at stake in the election.

4.2. Information provided

In examining the information provision on the sites, we initially pay attention to the number of information types provided on the sites featuring election-related content. Here, we use an additive index that assigns one point for the presence of each of the 12 information features (Appendix A). Our analysis shows that the actors did a relatively poor job in providing the voters with a wide range of information features; the mean score for all actors is 3.6. There are, nevertheless, significant differences between the groups of actors (ANOVA, $p < 0.001$). Two groups stand out from the rest, i.e., the candidates and the parties scoring 4.08 and 4.00 respectively. Concerning their size, fringe parties did a poorer job (2.75) than the minor and major parties (4.50 and 5.00 respectively).[4] The mean scores of the remaining groups ranged from 1.80 to 2.86.

What kind of electoral information did the actors offer on-line, then? Table 2 shows that there is a dividing line between, on the one hand, the parties and candidates' sites and, on the other, the sites of the other producer types.

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[4] The party size classification is based on Norris' categorization [13]: 'major parties' are those with more than 20% of all seats in the national parliament; 'minor parties' are those with more than 3% but less than 20% of the seats; 'fringe parties' are those that lack at least 3% of the elected members of the parliament.

TABLE 2. Information features by producer types. Figures are the percentage of sites including a specific feature.

Feature	Producer Type						
	Candidate (N=62)	Party (N=11)	Government (N=7)	News Media (N=7)	NGO/Labour (N=5)	Other (N=5)	All types (N=97)
Biography	95	73	57	14	60	0	77
Endorsements	5	0	0	0	0	0	3
Issue Positions	63	73	0	14	0	0	50
Speeches	42	18	0	0	0	0	29
Calendar	80	73	29	14	20	20	64
Comparison of Positions	2	0	0	0	0	0	1
Campaign Process Information	3	18	29	0	0	20	7
Voting Process Information	8	36	71	14	20	40	19
Images	98	100	100	100	100	80	98
Audio/Video	13	9	0	29	0	0	11
Privacy Policy	0	0	0	0	0	20	1
Terms of Use	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

In general, few information types were prevalent on the sites of the government, the media, the NGO/Labour organizations and the residual group. Basically, they provided: biographical information, calendars or lists with prospective election-related events, information about the voting and the campaign process. Thus, they informed and educated, albeit in a limited scope, the citizens about the upcoming election. Noteworthy, the NGO/Labour organizations did not campaign explicitly on-line.

The candidates and the parties, on the other hand, provided a richer variety of information on their sites, providing biographies, calendars and issue positions. Beyond this, the sites to a certain degree used the virtual expanse of the web by providing speeches and audio/video files. Moreover, the parties also informed the site visitors about the voting and the campaign process. The uses of endorsements and comparisons of issue positions were rare on the candidates' and parties' sites.

Finally, an additional information feature, candidate selectors, was frequently used on the websites of the news media during the election campaign. A candidate selector is a web-based tool that compares the site visiting voter's answers to a set of topical questions with those given by the candidates. The selectors then suggest to the voters a selection of candidates who are the likeliest to share their opinions. In recent Finnish elections, these tests have become very popular [21]. Our annotations showed that five of eleven sampled sites produced by the news media featured this tool in the 2004 election. These selectors attracted a substantial public during the campaign. For example, the selector provided by

YLE, the state-owned Finnish Broadcasting Company, attracted approximately 60,000 different visitors during the last week of the campaign. All in all, the selector was visited by more than 100,000 different citizens during the period 1–13 June and by more than 80,000 in May. [5] The selector provided by the largest daily, *Helsingin Sanomat*, was visited approximately 188,500 times during the campaign. [6] Moreover, the candidates were very responsive when giving their answers to the questionnaires that made up the five selectors; the answer rates ranged from 77 to 87 per cent. [7] In addition, two parties set up their own selectors on their sites allowing for a comparison between the issue views of the site visitor and the candidates of the party in question. In sum, by considering this additional feature, and its' popularity, the election-related information provided by the news media's sites in the 2004 campaign is put in a more favourable light.

4.3. Engagement opportunities provided

The provision of engagement opportunities to the voters is reported in a two-fold way. First, an additive index assigns one point for the presence of each of 11 engagement features on a site (Appendix A). Thereafter, we examine the prevalence of each engagement type on the sites by the different actors. Concerning the actors' index scores, the most striking observation is that all actors offered the voters a small range of engagement opportunities; the mean score for all actors is remarkably low (1.66). Moreover, the differences between the actors are fairly small. Yet, the parties did somewhat better (2.27) than the other actors (scores ranging from 0.80 to 1.60). Table 3 gives a detailed overview of the various engagement features provided by the actors.

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[5] The figures provided by researcher Eija Moisala at YLE's Audience Research unit. About four million citizens were entitled to vote in the 2004 elections.
[6] The figure provided by Mr. Marko Hamilo at *Helsingin Sanomat*.
[7] The figures were available at the webpages providing the candidate selectors.

TABLE 3. Engagement features by producer types. Figures are the percentage of sites including a specific feature.

Feature	Candidate (N=62)	Party (N=11)	Government (N=7)	News Media (N=7)	NGO/ Labour (N=5)	Other (N=5)	All types (N=97)
Contact Producer	84	100	100	100	100	60	88
Join/Become a Member	23	82	0	0	60	0	27
Register to Vote	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Get E-mail	7	0	0	0	0	0	4
Donate	15	9	0	0	0	0	10
Contribution to Forum	7	0	29	14	0	20	8
Offline Distribution	3	18	0	0	0	0	4
Send Links	0	18	14	0	0	0	3
Public Support Statement	15	0	0	0	0	0	9
E-Paraphernalia	2	0	0	0	0	0	1
Volunteer	18	0	0	0	0	0	11

As Table 3 shows, the only engagement feature that all producer types frequently offered is the possibility to contact the site producer, usually by e-mail. Regarding the other features, there seems to be a dividing line between, on the one hand, the parties and candidates' sites and, on the other, the sites of the other four producer types (i.e., government, news media, NGO/Labour, other). The latter group provided very few engagement features. On the parties' and, in particular, candidates' sites, a wider range of engagement features are prevalent. Thus, a vast majority of the parties' sites provided opportunities for visitors to join/become member of the organization. Moreover, the parties' sites provided features that encourage the site visitor to mobilize other voters, i.e., by enabling visitors to send a link from the site to other voters and encouraging offline distribution of campaign material. The candidates' sites, on the other hand, primarily offered engagement opportunities that enable citizens to become involved in the campaign. Hence, 23 per cent of the sites provide opportunities to join/become members of the candidates' campaign organization. Moreover, 18 per cent of the sites encourage visitors to volunteer in the candidates' campaign. Furthermore, 15 per cent of the candidates' sites enabled/encouraged visitors to donate money and to make public statements in support of the candidates.

4.4. The on-line candidates: a closer analysis

4.4.1. Finland: a deviant case

Our analysis above showed that the candidates were the most significant actors in producing the Finnish web sphere. Initially, in order to simply demonstrate the deviant Finnish case, we provide, in Table 4, a comparison of the web presence of the candidates in nine EU countries, included in the project, in the 2004 elections.

TABLE 4. Candidates on-line: a European comparison.

EU Member State	Number of Candidates[1]	Number of Candidates Having a Website[2]	% of Candidates Having a Website
Czech Republic	267	21	7.9
Finland	**227**	**123**	**54.2**
France	1906	30	1.6
Hungary	254	9	3.5
Ireland	44	7	15.9
Luxembourg	84	0	0.0
Netherlands	276	74	26.8
Slovenia	91	1	1.1
United Kingdom	682	78	11.4

[1] Source: www.elections2004.eu.int/ep-election/sites/en/yourvoice/
[2] Source: IE project country reports.

As Table 4 shows, the share of candidates on-line is considerably higher in Finland than in the other states. However, beyond the Finnish case, it is worth noticing that the Dutch and Irish candidates were on-line to a somewhat larger extent than the candidates in the other nations. Interestingly, the Finnish, the Dutch and the Irish voters had one thing in common in the 2004 elections, they voted directly for individual candidates representing parties or electoral alliances [22]. In the other six states, except for Luxembourg, variations of party list systems (ordered or closed lists) were used [22]. However, the marked difference in the candidates' web presence between Finland, on the one hand, and the Netherlands and Ireland, on the other, suggests that other nation specific factors must be taken into account, too. Tentatively, we suggest that the early reached high level of internet penetration in Finland together with the fact that all types of elections in Finland are candidate-centred, has led up to a situation where candidates are expected to have own sites.

4.4.2. Who is on-line?

Which factors, then, influenced the Finnish candidates' web presence? A logistic regression analysis, presented in Table 5, examines three central candidate characteristics: age, gender, and size of the candidate's party. Put bluntly, is on-line campaigning a concern for young, male candidates representing major parties?

TABLE 5. A Logistic regression model predicting the candidates' use of websites.

	B	S.E.	Exp(B)	Sig.
Gender	.717	.467	2.048	.125
Age				
18–24	1.393	.726	4.028	**.055**
25–34	1.284	.702	3.611	**.067**
35–49	.077	.492	1.080	.876
Party Size				
Major Party	5.745	.837	312.473	**.000**
Minor Party	3.567	.502	35.396	**.000**
Constant	–.2.900			

Cox-Snell R^2 = .487; Nagelkerke R^2 = .656; % Correct = 86.8; N = 220.
Note: The dependent variable: 0 = candidate does not have a website, 1 = candidate has a website. Gender: Male (1); Female (0). Age: reference category (0): 50 years or older. Party size: reference category (0): Fringe party.

The model presented in Table 5 shows that age[8] and party size, in particular, are significant predictors of having a website. Above all, belonging to a major party is a crucial factor. [9] Although it is likely that major parties' candidates may have obtained assistance from their parties in setting up their individual sites, we do not have empirical, interview evidence to support such claim. Neither did we note an extensive use of standard site skeletons that could have been provided by the parties. Candidates who used such templates usually run for minor and fringe parties, not major parties. Additionally, the model reveals an independent age effect; young candidates (the age groups 18–24 and 25–34) were more likely to go on-line than the older candidates.

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[8] Since age effects in internet use tend to be generation specific, we used age categories in the model.
[9] An additional cross-tabulation showed that 97% of the major party candidates, 79% of the minor party candidates and 12% of the fringe party candidates had own websites.

4.4.3. What kind of candidates did best?

Once on-line, then, were there certain types of candidates that did a better job than others? To explore this question, a two-step cluster analysis[10] of the sampled candidate sites was first carried out in order to classify the sites into homogenous subgroups according to the extent to which they provided various information and engagement features. The automatic clustering algorithm identified three clusters (Table 6).

TABLE 6. Three clusters of candidates' websites: mean scores on the information and engagement indices.

Clusters	N	Information index (0–12)	Engagement index (0–11)
Cluster I	16	2.88	1.31
Cluster II	30	4.17	1.20
Cluster III	16	5.13	3.06
Combined	62	4.08	1.71

Note: ANOVA: the clusters differ significantly on both the information index ($p < .001$) and the engagement index ($p < .001$). Pair-wise post-hoc Bonferroni tests: cluster I & II, cluster II & III and cluster I & III differ significantly on the information index ($p = .000$ in each comparison). As to the engagement index, cluster I & III and cluster II & III differ significantly ($p < .001$ in both comparisons) while cluster I & II do not differ significantly.

Table 6 reveals significant differences between the groups of sites. The most important finding is that the third cluster does a better job than the other clusters in providing information features and engagement opportunities. The question that now arises is whether the candidates whose sites belong to cluster III differ systematically from the other candidates as to certain background characteristics. In answering this question, we examined five independent variables: gender, age, the size of the candidate's party, incumbency (whether or not the candidates are MPs or MEPs) and the urbanity of the candidates' home districts. Given the small number of cases (N = 62), simple 2x2 cross-tabulations were used here. The five 2x2 contingency tables reported in Table 7 are statistically tested using the Fisher's exact test that is well suited for small samples.

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[10] Clustering criterion: the Akaike information criterion; cluster distance measure: log-likelihood.

TABLE 7. Characteristics of the candidates belonging to the clusters (percentages).

Characteristics		Cluster Membership	
		I & II (N = 46)	III (N = 16)
Gender[a]	Male	52	69
	Female	48	31
Age[b]	18–34 Years	28	6
	35+ Years	72	94
Candidate's Party[a]	Major Party	44	56
	Minor/Fringe Party	56	44
Incumbency[a]	MP or MEP	20	31
	Not MP or MEP	80	69
Urban Area[a]	Lives in an Urban Area	74	88
	Lives in a Rural/Semi-Urban Area	26	12

[a] *ns* (Fisher's exact test).
[b] $p < .10$ (Fisher's exact test).
Note: An urban area is defined according to the statistical grouping of municipalities made by the *Statistics Finland*: urban municipalities are those municipalities in which at least 90 percent of the population lives in urban settlements, or in which the population of the largest urban settlement is at least 15,000.

Bearing in mind that being young was found to be a significant predictor of the candidates' on-line presence, Table 7 yields an interesting and statistically significant result: comparing the two groups, it was not the young candidates – those one would have expected to be more web savvy – that created sites of the third cluster type in particular. Concerning the other variables, no statistically significant differences between the clusters were found. Still, with due caution to the small number of cases, the findings point in the direction of the normalization hypothesis: websites of candidates being male, belonging to a major party, being an MP or MEP, and living in urban areas are more common in the third cluster.

4.5. The impact on the voters

How did the Finnish voters respond to the election-related websites in the 2004 EP election? Two blocks of items in the survey are of interest. First, there is a series of questions asking about the respondents' use of and exposure to different information

sources during the campaign. The questions cover traditional sources and web-based sources. The latter comprise party and candidate websites and candidate selectors; thus the very web features that our analysis identified as central in the Finnish web sphere. A second group of questions deals with the importance of the different sources to the respondents. Specifically, the respondents were asked to estimate the extent the different sources gave information to support their voting decision.

As to the voters' use of election-related web sources, our analysis shows that traditional sources had an advantage over the web-based sources. Whereas 13 per cent of the respondents ($N = 1,362$) looked for information on the elections on the internet, far more followed election-oriented stories on television news and current affairs programmes (41%) and in the newspapers (36%). Likewise, whereas ten per cent of the voters visited party/candidate websites, 61 per cent observed parties' or candidates' advertising on television. Notably, however, a considerable share (24%) visited candidate selectors.

What characterizes the voters that looked for information on-line, surfed into party/candidate sites, and visited candidate selectors? The regression models presented in Table 8 answer this question. The predictors used in the models are demographical characteristics that are usually associated with political behaviour.

TABLE 8. Logistic regression models predicting the voters' web use.

	Looked for Information				Visited Party/Candidate Sites				Visited Candidate Selectors			
	B	SE	Exp(B)	Sig.	B	SE	Exp(B)	Sig.	B	SE	Exp(B)	Sig.
Gender	.496	.195	1.643	**.011**	.409	.210	1.505	**.051**	.191	.151	1.210	.208
Basic Education	1.302	.220	3.678	**.000**	1.230	.238	3.423	**.000**	1.342	.162	3.826	**.000**
Age												
18–24	1.666	.356	5.293	**.000**	1.831	.360	6.238	**.000**	1.499	.296	4.467	**.000**
25–34	1.192	.267	3.292	**.000**	1.003	.282	2.728	**.000**	.816	.202	2.262	**.000**
35–49	.264	.277	1.303	.341	.000	.302	1.000	.999	.342	.191	1.408	**.073**
Income (€)												
20,001–35,000	.393	.284	1.481	.166	.329	.297	1.389	.268	.268	.230	1.307	.245
35,001–50,000	.019	.295	1.019	.950	-.201	.319	.818	.529	.332	.228	1.393	.146
> 50,000	.144	.305	1.155	.638	.057	.322	1.059	.859	.335	.238	1.398	.160
Class	- .030	.266	.971	.911	.150	.282	1.162	.596	.267	.198	1.306	.177
Municipality type												
Urban	1.012	.338	2.750	**.003**	1.164	.389	3.203	**.003**	.746	.223	2.108	**.001**
Semi-urban	.817	.413	2.264	**.048**	1.062	.463	2.892	**.022**	.549	.280	1.732	**.050**
Constant	- 4.555				- 4.652				-3.261			
Cox-Snell R^2	.099				.092				.139			
Nagelkerke R^2	.191				.191				.207			
% Correct	88.0				90.0				78.3			
N	1,181				1,181				1,181			

Notes: The three dependent variables are dichotomies that represent the answers to the survey questions whether the respondents (a) looked for information on the internet; (b) visited party/candidate sites; (c) visited candidate selectors on the web: 1 = yes; 0 = no. Predictors: Gender: Male (1); Female (0). Basic education: General upper secondary education (1); Not general upper secondary education (0). Age: reference category (0) = 50 years or older. Income: reference category (0) = Less than 20,001 €. Class: White collar (1); Not white collar (0). Urbanity: reference category (0) = Lives in a rural municipality

By and large, the models predicting who looked for information and who visited party/candidate sites show a similar pattern. Thus, there is a bias towards an over-representation of the younger voters (18–34 years), the better educated, the ones that live in urban or semi-urban milieus, and men. In particular, we note that the party/candidate websites attract the youngest voters (18–24 years). The model predicting who visited candidate selectors shows a broadly similar picture. However, gender proved not to be of significance here. In addition, the candidate selectors attract also the middle-aged voter segment (35–49 years). Finally, neither class nor income proved significant in any of the models.

The results presented hitherto are only a first step forward in examining the role of the election oriented information; we also need to know how the voters assessed the on-line information. Our analysis shows that few voters obtained very/quite much information to support their voting decision from party sites (6%), candidate sites (9%) and candidate selectors (14%).[11] A significantly larger share stressed the importance of the information in the newspapers (26%) and in television news and current affairs programmes (28%).

What, then, characterizes the voters that attached great importance to the web sources? A regression analysis, not reported here for length reasons, showed largely similar patterns that were detected in Table 8. However, this time, gender proved not to be a significant predictor. Above all, the voters estimating that they obtained very/quite much information to support the voting decision from candidates' and parties' sites and candidate selectors tend to have an over-representation of younger voters (18–34 years) and the ones living in urban contexts. Lastly, looking more closely at the age effect, Table 9 shows to what extent different age groups estimated that they received very/quite much information to support the voting decision from party/candidate sites and candidate selectors compared to traditional media sources.

TABLE 9. The importance attached to different sources by age groups.

Source	Age Groups			
	18–24 Years	25–34 Years	35–49 Years	50–69 Years
Parties' Websites	33 %	12 %	5 %	2 %
N	(48)	(174)	(285)	(403)
Candidates' Websites	38 %	17 %	7 %	4 %
N	(48)	(175)	(285)	(405)
Web-based Candidate selectors	43 %	25 %	15 %	5 %
N	(49)	(174)	(285)	(403)
Television News/Current Affairs Programmes	31 %	33 %	22 %	29 %
N	(52)	(178)	(289)	(409)
Newspapers	27 %	23 %	23 %	30 %
N	(52)	(178)	(289)	(409)

Note: The figures are percentages of respondents that estimated that they obtained very/quite much information to support the voting decision from the source in question.

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[11] Only the respondents that reported that they had voted in the elections were asked to estimate the information value of different sources.

Table 9 shows that the share attaching great importance to the on-line information is considerably larger in the two young voter segments than in the two older age groups. Clearly, a dividing line can be observed between the two young groups and the two older groups. The most interesting finding, however, is found within the youngest age group (18–24 years): the percentage of voters in this group that assess that they obtained very/quite much information from the web sources, taken together, is larger than the share that emphasizes the value of information found in the traditional sources.

5. Conclusions

Regarding the Finnish electoral web sphere, our analysis revealed a familiar picture. The sphere was clearly dominated by traditional political actors: parties and candidates. Apparently, other groupings considered the election being of minor importance and did thus not put much effort into creating election-oriented web content. The dominance of candidate sites is, to a large extent, due to the Finnish candidate-centred election system. Since the Finnish 1996 EP elections, the share of candidates having a website has nearly doubled; from 28 per cent to 54 per cent.

However, our exploration of the information and engagement provision suggests that the internet technology was underused by most actors. In general, most sites resembled traditional brochures rather than new interactive, innovative campaign outlets. Apparently, the political actors still viewed the web as a second-order campaign medium and merely followed the current fashion of going on-line. For now, the main thing is to have a campaign site and thus maintain an image of professionalism; what is done on-line is obviously regarded less important.

Nonetheless, some findings concerning the information and engagement features give rise to optimism. First, the high prevalence of issue positions on the parties' and candidates' sites is good news considering that Finnish parties and candidates usually stress image characteristics rather than issue stances in their political advertising [11,12]. However, only a small share of the candidates and parties dared to provide comparisons of their issue positions to those of their opponents. One explanation for this may be that Finnish campaigning is consensual and polite. However – and this is also good news – the candidate selectors, in fact, provided the voters with a possibility to compare the issue standpoints of the candidates. What is more, many voters consulted the selectors. The news media's provision of this tool made them a third significant actor in the electoral web sphere. Finally, also on a positive note, the parties and candidates, to a certain degree, provided features that could engage the voters. Thus, the parties provided features encouraging the mobilization of voters while the candidates offered opportunities to

become involved in their campaigns. Apparently, the candidates' ambition to involve the voters reflects the role of candidate support groups in the Finnish campaign culture. As the support groups operate, by large, independent from the party organizations, there is a need to raise money and seek volunteers, off-line as well as on-line.

When returning to the discussion of normalization and equalization, then, what conclusion can be made? First, we note that many parties – not only the major ones – provided electoral related material. Some fringe parties' sites lacked election-related information; these parties had not fielded candidates. Regarding the range of information types provided, the fringe parties did a poorer job than the minor and major parties. Thus, our findings add some support to the normalization scenario. Considering the most important political actor type in this election, the candidates, our exploration revealed a stunning dominance by major party candidates in terms of being on-line. One explanation for this could be the Finnish EP election itself, contesting only 14 seats and using the whole country as a single district. Possibly, this circumstance reduces the number of outsiders trying their luck on-line. Furthermore, the analysis of the candidate sites providing the widest range of information and engagement features – the third cluster's sites – does not challenge the notion of 'politics as usual' either. The candidates launching these sites were not primarily running for minor or fringe parties, nor were they young or female. Beyond parties and candidates, few other political groupings were active on-line. Thus, when theoretically summarizing the supply side, our findings indicate that the web is quite 'normalized'; the traditional 'big guns' of the off-line political sphere dominate both in web presence and website features.

Regarding the demand side, then, what conclusion can be drawn? First, it should be stressed that few voters looked for election-related information and visited party/candidate sites on the web. Moreover, for the Finnish voters in general, the web is still not nearly an important source for political information as newspapers and television. Thus, these findings do not readily support the mobilization thesis.

However, looking beyond the general picture, three positive trends emerge. First, this is showed in the large interest young Finnish voters showed towards the political websites and the great importance they placed in them when pondering their voting decisions. For the youngest voters, the web even surpassed the traditional sources. Second, a considerable share of voters visited and placed emphasis on the candidate selectors. Possibly, this could indicate that the packaging of the on-line politics matters in raising the voters' interest as the more innovative selectors attracted wider audiences than the lack-lustre party and candidate sites. Third, our analysis does not confirm that a high income and being white-collar are associated with political web use. Thus, demographically, the political web users did not fully resemble the citizens known to be

politically active off-line [19,20]. Theoretically, our findings are intriguing as they, in time, could lend support to the mobilization thesis.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Abbreviated coding template

Information Types

Does the site provide:

1. a biography, history, or 'About Us' section?
2. endorsements for a candidate or party in an upcoming election?
3. a list of issues positions held by a political actor?
4. speeches by a candidate or party representatives?
5. a calendar/list with prospective election-related events?
6. comparison of issue positions of parties or candidates?
7. information about the electoral campaign process in the country studied?
8. information about the voting process in the country studied?
9. images?
10. audio or video files?
11. a privacy policy?
12. a terms of use statement?

Engagement Types

1. Does the site provide contact information for the site producer?
2. Does the site provide opportunities for visitors to join, or become members of the organization?
3. Does the site enable visitors to register to participate in the election?
4. Does the site provide an opportunity for a visitor to sign up to receive email from the site producer?
5. Are donations encouraged or enabled on or through this site?
6. Can visitors to the site participate in an online forum or other communication space?
7. Does the site encourage offline distribution of electoral campaign or election materials?
8. Is there a feature that specifically enables a site visitor to send a link from this site to a friend?
9. Is there a feature that encourages or enables a visitor to make a public statement supporting a political actor or issue?
10. Does the site enable the user to engage in digital promotion of the electoral campaign, party, organization or voting in general?
11. Does the site encourage visitors to volunteer for the electoral campaign?

Article III

It's the Inside that Counts?

- An Explorative Analysis of Finnish Parties' Opinions concerning the Importance and use of their Websites, and Website Contents, in Relation to Party Characteristics

Forthcoming, *Scandinavian Political Studies*

Introduction

Party communication has evolved in different stages over time (Farrell & Webb 2000, 103-108; Norris 2001a, 137-149; Plasser & Plasser 2002, 6). Recently, new communication technologies have given the political actors new campaign tools and communication channels (Hansen et al. 2005, 2; Norris 2001a, 120-136; Smith 2002, 175). The rise of the internet and other information and communication tools (ICTs) raised a considerable amount of scholarly attention as to its impact on party communication (see discussion in Norris 2003, 23-24).

The internet is a relatively cheap and fast communication tool; large amounts of information and multimedia can be published almost instantaneously. It also enables interactivity, two-way communication and offers an opportunity to bypass traditional mass-media in getting the political messages to the public (Kamarck 1999). Thus, the internet could enhance both the top-down and the bottom-up information currents surrounding political parties (cf. Norris 2003, 26; Römmele 2003, 9-11). The web could be used for the dissemination of top-down information such as broadcasting or narrowcasting of political messages, catch-all strategies or targeting of specific voter segments, the use of more multimedia and political sound bites. Also as Ward et al. argue (2003, 16-18), the use of ICTs could bring about a return to more traditional forms of party campaign communication in emphasising information over sound bites, personalized campaigning over catch-all strategies, interactive relationships over top-down information and decentralized campaigning over centralised.

Evidently, there is a noticeable uncertainty concerning the potential effects of the web on party communication. However, Römmele (2003, 8) has provided an insightful view on how the usage of ICTs by political parties could be considered. She argues that:

> "…new ICTs will play different roles for different parties […] The
> impact of innovations such as the Internet on political actors is in part a
> function of their inherent technical capabilities, but also a product of the
> context in which they are used" (Römmele 2003, 8)

In order to better understand how ICTs will be implemented by political parties one should take the influence of the actual users of the technology, i.e. the parties themselves, into account (Gibson et al. 2003b, 86-90). This theoretical view, which I choose to call an 'actor-contructivist' view, is also traceable in other studies as well (e.g. Löfgren 2001; Pedersen & Saglie 2005). In her study, Römmele (2003, 15) mainly considered the usage of websites by political parties in relation to their overall goals and strategies (cf. Gibson

et al. 2003b, 86-90; Löfgren 2001, 23-30). Hence, different parties would stress different dimensions of communication on their website depending on their general goals (cf. Norris 2003). However, Römmele remarks that her study;

> "…has sought to present a theoretical exposition of the ways in which parties can be expected to use the new communication tools […] Empirical studies are obviously needed to establish just how far party implementation of these tools follows the anticipated path". (Römmele 2003, 15)

Consequently, this study seeks to further explore the plausibility of this actor-constructivist view on party internet activity. The article focuses on Finnish parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their websites and also on the actual contents of these websites. The Finnish multiparty context offers much variation in numerous party-specific characteristics (Djupsund 1990, 20; Sundberg 1996, 147-152). This provides an opportunity to take several theoretically important aspects, besides party goals, into account in exploring the actor-constructivist view. Finland also has a high level of internet penetration and is among the world leading countries in terms of internet usage by political actors (Gibson & Römmele 2005, 10).

      The aim of the study is to relate both the Finnish parties' 'inside view' and website output to the parties' character in terms of several theoretically relevant aspects. The article seeks to provide an initial empirical test of the theoretical view proposed by Römmele (2003). Are the Finnish parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their websites, or the contents of their websites traceable to certain aspects of their character?

Theoretical backdrop

In this section, a theoretical backdrop is developed for the study. Drawing on the general literature on circumstances relevant to party conduct (e.g. Harmel & Janda 1994; Katz & Mair 1995; Maarek 1995; Sjöblom 1968; Strom 1990), four aspects relevant to party internet conduct, i.e. party goals, party organization, party size and resources and party voters and supporters, will be discussed and related to party websites.

Party goals

Political parties operate in three different arenas according to Sjöblom (1968); the internal arena, the electoral arena and the parliamentary arena. Political parties emphasize different goals in each of these arenas. Four different goals for party activity can be identified in the literature (e.g. Harmel & Janda 1994; Katz & Mair 1995; Strom 1990); vote maximization,

pursuit of executive office, policy-advocacy and pursuit of internal democracy, efficiency and cohesion. Some scholars (Nord 1997; Strömbäck 2002; 2005) have also recently argued for the inclusion of a fourth arena – the media arena – in this typology. The argument for this is based on the increasing importance of media in modern politics (cf. Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Swanson & Mancini 1996). According to these scholars, maximization of positive publicity would be a distinctive goal in this arena. However, one can strongly question this view. Sjöblom (1968, 30) defines party strategies as "the use of available means with the object of attaining certain goals…". Positive publicity *per se* would therefore appear much likelier to be a means for achieving the goals in the other arenas, for instance vote maximization, rather than an end goal itself.

A party seeking to *maximize its votes* places high emphasis on different forms of propaganda and campaigning (Sjöblom 1968, 206). *Office seeking* and *policy advocating* parties mainly work in the parliamentary arena. The office seeking party seeks to maximize its control of political office, while the policy advocating party aims at maximizing its influence in specific areas of public policy (Strom 1990, 567). Tailored standpoints constitute the main strategic tools for achieving influence in the parliamentary arena (Sjöblom 1968, 258). The fourth party goal – *internal democracy, efficiency and cohesion* – focuses on the participatory aspects of party communication (Römmele 2003, 13). Apart from general 'member management' strategies, bi-directional communication is relatively highly emphasised (Löfgren 2001, 30; Sjöblom 1968, 195). It is, however, necessary to realise that most parties pursue all of these goals in different degrees. As noted by Strom (1990, 570), "Pure vote seekers, office seekers, or policy seekers are unlikely to exist". The boundaries of one party may contain several goals – both internal and external – which need to be balanced (Kitchelt 2001, 276).

As mentioned earlier, several scholars (e.g. Gibson et al. 2003a, 67; 2003c; Löfgren 2001; Löfgren & Smith 2003; Römmele 2003) contemplate whether party internet activity could be linked to their overall goals. According to Römmele (2003, 12), the *vote-seeking party* would mostly use the web in the same manner that it uses traditional media to maximize its votes (cf. Gibson et al. 2003c; Löfgren 2000, 16; 2001, 31-32). Top-down information and broadcasted messages are the main uses of the internet. Interactive features are seldom used and are, as Löfgren points out (2000, 15), usually regarded as a means for monitoring public opinion rather than for promoting participation (cf. Gibson et al. 2003c; Römmele 2003, 13). *Office-maximizing parties* are also expected to mainly use the web for top-down communication. Some coalition seeking parties could also make use of targeted information in order to adjust their appearance and appear suitable for co-operation with specific parties (Römmele 2003, 13). Concerning *policy seeking parties*, Römmele (2003, 14-15) perceives the internet as mainly being used as a channel for informing the broad audience of its policy standpoints and also to target specific groups

(cf. Gibson et al. 2003c). Parties promoting *intra-party democracy, efficiency and cohesion* stress interactive, bottom-up aspects of the internet. As such, intra-party electronic debates would be used for receiving member input and also for dissemination of top-down internal messages (Gibson et al. 2003c; Löfgren 2000, 13; 2001, 29-31; Römmele 2003, 14).

Party organization

Party organization has, according to Katz and Mair (1995), evolved from traditional cadre parties, mass parties, catch-all parties (cf. Kirchheimer 1966) to the modern cartel party. The *cadre party* consisted of relatively loose groups of intellectuals and political activists with little or no structured intermediary organization (Katz & Mair 1995, 19-20). The *mass party*, on the other hand, clearly stresses the importance of the party organization and involvement of its members (Löfgren 2001, 29). Parties are seen more as the political agencies of well defined societal groups (Katz & Mair 1995, 6-7). The *catch-all party* evolved due to broad societal changes which have weakened these traditional societal groups. Instead of focusing on mobilizing its partisans and members, parties are forced to seek votes from many societal groups. The focus of party activity shifted towards its leaders and top-down communication via mass-media in appealing to the electorate at large (Katz & Mair 1995, 7-8; Swanson & Mancini 1996, 10). This trend is further amplified in the *cartel party*. In the cartel situation, all main parties know they can survive together; "they share with their competitors a mutual interest of collective survival…Stability becomes more important than triumph" (Katz & Mair 1995, 19-20, 30). Katz and Mair (*ibid.*, 5) also argue that these parties have become semi-state agencies. The parties employ state resources and professional experts rather than member input and labour. Cartel parties mainly focus on their leaders and communicate through top-down, or targeted communication aimed at the electorate rather than its members (Löfgren 2001, 31-32).

While these models of party organization provide a typology of political parties, they also provide an indication of the organizational culture or tradition within political parties (cf. Löfgren 2001, 29). In essence, viewed both as either typologies or indications of party culture and tradition, these factors have implications for the ways in which parties function (Kitchelt 2001, 289; Rohrschneider 2002, 378; Smith 2002, 177). Along these lines, Römmele (2003, 8) discusses these party typologies as linked to whether a political party emphasises top-down or bottom-up aspects in their internet communication. A party rooted in mass-party tradition would probably be more likely to promote bottom-up elements and focus on their members in their web use (Löfgren

2001, 30; Pedersen & Saglie 2005, 362; Römmele 2003, 14; Smith 2002, 177). Catch-all and cartel parties would probably focus on top-down elements (Römmele 2003, 12).

Arguably, the type of party organization and tradition can lay its mark on party activity on-line. It is, however, important to separate the models of party organization from the general party goals. Consequently, where Römmele (2003, 12) states that vote maximization can be brought together with the catch-all- and cartel-party models, I argue that such a view might be questionable. While most parties probably pursue vote maximization to some degree, especially catch-all parties, cartel-parties also focus on staying among those with power and keeping the *status quo* (Aarnio & Pekonen 1999, 192-196; Pekonen 1997). Consequently, office-maximization or maximization of policy influence is also part of the goals of a cartel-party. In sum, one type of party should be considered as pursuing several goals rather than linked to one specific goal (cf. Kitchelt 2001, 276; Strom 1990, 570).

Party size & resources

In the research of party internet activity (e.g. Cunha et al. 2003; Gibson et al. 2003a; Gibson & Ward 2002; Margolis et al. 2003; Newell 2001), a significant amount of attention has been paid to explaining differences in party internet presence and website sophistication with differences in party size and associated resource strength (Gibson et al. 2003c, 80; Norris 2003). In the theories of equalization and normalization, scholars have put forward conceptual scenarios concerning the ability of fringe, and minor parties to compete with the major parties online – both in terms of presence and performance (Margolis & Resnick 2000; Margolis et al. 2003, 57-58). In brief, the equalization theory perceives campaigning on the web to increase the smaller parties' chances of keeping up with their major counterparts. The normalization scenario paints an opposite picture. The major parties have both greater leverage in guiding voters to their sites and more resources to pour into constructing and maintaining sophisticated websites (Gibson et al. 2003a, 50; Margolis et al. 2003, 57-58). Consequently, campaigning on the internet is unlikely to cause any widespread changes in party competition and power structures.

However, even though resources may play a significant role in setting up and maintaining a party website, the linkage to the type of online communication – in terms of top-down or bottom-up – carried out by a party is yet unclear (cf. Gibson et al. 2003b, 80). Gibson et al. (2003c) noted that smaller parties place large expectations in the medium while major parties fair better in terms of web presence and website functionality and design. Party size appears to *restrain* what a party can afford to do on its website rather than *determine* what type of communication is preferred (cf. Gibson et al. 2003a, 50; Löfgren 2000, 60; Nixon et al. 2003, 240). Party size may also affect a party's general view

of the web. Gibson et al. (2003b, 102) noted that smaller parties appear to primarily use the medium for raising awareness and organization building and tend to have a quite positive view of the medium as compared to traditional media (cf. Margolis et al. 2003, 58). The 'net gain' might be more unclear for major parties, (cf. Sadow & James 1999, 5) and the verdict on the web less enthusiastic.

Party supporters and voters

The composition of the electorate is one of the main bases of a party's strategic planning (Sjöblom 1968, 208). Parties usually divide voters according to two dimensions; whether the voter is positive, uncertain or negative towards the party and whether the voter is certain or uncertain to vote (Sjöblom 1968, 236; cf. Maarek 1995). Over time, the group of uncertain voters, both in terms of party preferences and voting propensity, has widened at the expense of the reliable voters. Parties now seek votes from many different social segments and not solely from one 'reliable' segment (Kirchheimer 1966; Swanson & Mancini 1996). Maarek (1995, 39) has identified two types of party communication depending on the intended audience; maintenance and conquest communications. A party seeks to maintain its supporters, both loyal and uncertain, and to gain new voters from the uncertain voter segments and the uncertain voters of other parties (cf. Rohrschneider 2002). Sjöblom (1968, 208) calls these voter groups the "intended influence objects" towards whom parties focus their communication.

Pertaining to party internet strategies and activity, the composition of a party's supporters and potential voters can also be perceived as influencing if and how a party campaigns on-line (cf. Herrnson & Stokes 2003; Ward et al. 2005, 11). The concept of the 'digital divide' has been used to describe the uneven access to and usage of the internet by citizens (Norris 2001b). The public's internet usage tends to follow certain demographical patterns; white, young, highly educated, white-collar males use the internet at a higher rate than other citizens (Norris 2001b; 2002). A party whose "intended influence objects" do not belong to these 'wired' segments of the public, for instance a pensioners' party (cf. Gibson et al. 2003b, 102), has few incentives for moving on-line in catching uncertain voters. It seems likely that such a party puts little planning and effort into a party website (Nixon et al. 2003, 241). Other parties, such as the Greens (Ward et al. 2005, 6), have their target audience amongst those social groups who use the internet most frequently and have strong incentives for making the most of their website. Of course, it is also necessary to realize that party websites may be used for maintenance communication as well; one of the potentially important functions of a party website would therefore also be to strengthen the internal organization (Gibson et al. 2003b, 87; Römmele 2003, 9). A party lacking a primary on-line audience in terms of potential voters may still put planning

and efforts into using the web for internal maintenance communication with local branches and its members.

Research questions and design

Moving towards the empirical part of the study, this section will outline the overall design of the study along with the study's research questions. First and foremost, the study has an explicit explorative ambition – to explore potential party patterns found in the Finnish parties' opinions regarding the importance and use of their websites and actual website content in light of several party related traits. Additionally, the study has a secondary, descriptive, ambition to study the Finnish parties' own view of the importance of the party website and their use of it, and the actual content of their websites. The parties' actual behaviour as well as their motives for this behaviour is examined. This dual approach is motivated in order to provide a better understanding of party internet behaviour. Rohrschneider (2002, 380) remarks that: "…analysts may misinterpret the behaviour of parties without knowing the rationale for parties' campaign decisions".

A theoretical discussion of aspects relevant to party conduct in general, and party internet conduct in specific, has been presented in the previous sections. It should be noted here that this theoretical discussion will not be used for forming empirically testable hypotheses but rather as a theoretical backdrop – a conceptual chart – towards which the descriptive findings will be related. The analysis does not seek to provide any final answer concerning the relationship between any of these circumstances and the parties' view of the web and website contents. Rather, the purpose of this study is explicitly explorative; the study seeks to explore the plausibility of the actor-constructivist view through examining the influence of *several* theoretical circumstances on party internet behaviour. The following overall research questions will be explored in the study:

RQ1a: Are there any patterns in the parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their website which are traceable to the parties' character in terms of party goals, organization, size or composition of primary supporters?

RQ1b: Are there any patterns in the contents of the parties' websites which are traceable to the parties' character in terms of party goals, organization, size or composition of primary supporters?

In order to answer the overall research questions, two descriptive questions need to be answered:

RQ2a: What are the Finnish parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their website?

RQ2b: What do the Finnish parties' websites look like as to the actual content of the site?

In sum, the study's empirical part is designed as a two-step analysis in which the Finnish parties' internet motives and strategies along with the contents of their websites are firstly explored. The results of the descriptive parts are thereafter used as starting points for exploring potential party patterns in light of the theoretical backdrop.

Data and methods

The study focuses on all Finnish parties found on-line, in total 15 parties. As the purpose is to explore the actor-constructivist viewpoint, the study necessarily focuses on one single country. This eliminates the inference of macro-level aspects in the analysis. Circumstances such as variations in party systems, electoral systems, media system and other institutional factors also influence party behaviour (Rohrschneider 2002, 378). Focusing on one country isolates the inter-party variations relevant to the study.

When seeking to study inter-party variations in party ICT conduct and its potential connection to variations in several party characteristics, one needs to analyze a country which *a priori* appears to have sufficient variation of political parties (cf. Hansen et al. 2005, 3-4). The Finnish multiparty context[1] without any single dominating party, with parties of different sizes and a history of ideological cleavages and different types of voters (Djupsund 1990, 20; Sundberg 1996, 147-152) arguably meets this criterion. Moreover, Finland is a suitable case for studies of internet activity, as the country has a relatively high level of internet penetration[2]. The country is also among the world leading countries in terms of internet usage by political actors (Gibson & Römmele 2005, 10). Furthermore, the relatively high level of internet penetration has long been fulfilled (cf. Norris 2000) and signs of an emerging 'web electorate' are evident (Bengtsson & Grönlund 2005; Borg & Moring 2005; Moring 2003). Hence, the Finnish political parties are relatively familiar with the web compared to countries where political parties are so-to-say still 'learning the ropes' of political internet use.

In order to asses the parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their website, a self-completion questionnaire was sent to the parties' information official (cf. Gibson et al. 2003b, 90). In total, the official from 11 of the 15 parties with websites responded. The questionnaire's items centred around six scales of interest concerning the parties' website (See Appendix A); firstly, *labour input*, secondly, *central planning of website*, thirdly, *importance of the website* in different areas compared to other communication channels, fourthly, *general opinion* of party websites, fifthly, *informative communication*, and

finally, *engaging communication*[3]. The contents of the party websites were established using a coding scheme employing the features used in the scheme developed by Gibson and Ward (2000; 2002). In this study, these specific features of party websites were categorized into four modified index scales (See Appendix B)[4]: firstly, *internal administration and information*, secondly, *campaigning and general information*, thirdly, *participation and bottom-up communication*, and fourthly, *presentation and sophistication*[5].

In the explorative part of the study, the findings concerning the questionnaire and the website content analysis are explored for potential patterns using a two-step cluster analysis. The clusters found through this analysis are then related to the circumstances outlined in the theoretical backdrop.

Findings

Party questionnaire

The findings regarding the Finnish parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their website are presented in this section. The presentation departs with the descriptive findings of the self-completion questionnaire, presented in Table 1. As a second step, potential party patterns in these findings are explored through a cluster analysis.

Table 1. Party questionnaire index scores

Party	Labour input (0-n)	Central planning (0-21p)	Importance of website (0-16p)	General Opinion (-1 - 1p)	Informative Comm. (0-68p)	Engaging Comm. (0-48p)
Social Democratic Party	6	10	10	-.10	47	21
Centre Party	8	10	13	.26	63	34
National Coalition Party	11	5	13	.17	53	26
Swedish People's Party	2	4	8	.05	45	18
Christian Democrats	3	5	11	.27	48	24
Green League	5	5	10	.58	53	37
Left-Wing Alliance	5	7	16	.25	62	38
True Finns	3	13	15	.68	60	37
Alternative People	0	5	6	.43	27	10
Union for free Finland	2	12	12	.36	59	28
For the Poor	0	20	8	.28	51	34
Mean:	4.09	8.73	11.09	0.29	51.64	27.91

Initially, the findings in Table 1 show that the Finnish parties do not have large pools, nor hire externally, expertise personnel devoted to the construction and maintenance of their

websites. Many parties, e.g. the Alternative People and For the Poor did not even have any central office personnel working with the site and the Union for Free Finland only had two volunteers working with the website. Several parties did, however, state that their local branches were assigned to maintain their own sections on the party server. The actual number of people working with parts of the websites is thus probably higher than the figure reported here. Nevertheless, some parties, especially the NCP, appear to have a quite large pool of central personnel working with the party website. It should be noted that the NCP's information official stated that all of the people working with the website were not chiefly assigned with the task. Pertaining to the degree of central planning, Table 1 shows that, on average, the parties have decentralized planning and formation of strategies concerning their websites [mean=8.73 equals 42% of the index total]. Unsurprisingly, the fringe For the Poor-party, with the central office consisting of practically one person, is the only party scoring near the maximum for the index. Interestingly, not even the parties perceived to be hierarchical (Sundberg 1996, 74; Zilliacus 2001, 39), i.e. the NCP, Centre Party, SDP and Christian Democrats, score especially high on the central planning index.

Turning to the remaining indexes, the Finnish parties appear to have a relatively positive view of the web. The mean [0.29] for the general opinion index is clearly on the positive side. The parties appear to perceive the advantages of the party websites to be greater than the drawbacks. The SDP, however, found the drawbacks to be slightly greater then the advantages. Particularly, the party's information official stated that the main problem with the website was that the party's core supporters could not be reached through it. Interestingly, the three major parties in Finland, i.e. the SDP, Centre and NCP, are less enthusiastic about the web than the three fringe parties, the Alternative People, Union for Free Finland and For the Poor, included in the analysis. Possibly, the 'net gain' is more unclear for the major parties than the fringe parties (cf. Sadow & James 1999, 5). The Green League and the True Finns also have a very positive general opinion of party websites. The information official of both of these parties rated all of the advantages very highly while the problems were not regarded as especially significant. Concerning the importance of the website compared to other communication channels, the Finnish parties also rank their websites relatively highly. The mean [11.09] for the index equals 69 per cent of the possible index maximum score. As to the individual parties, especially the Alternative People, but also For the Poor and the SPP, scored low on this index. Surprisingly, the fringe Alternative People and For the Poor parties ranked the website lowly compared to traditional communication channels, both in terms of internal and external communication. The fringe parties in Finland do not appear to have a favourable view of their websites as compared to other communication channels (cf. Gibson et al. 2003b, 102).

Finally, concerning the informative- and engaging communication scales, the Finnish parties appear to rate information over engagement. Seen as percentages of the index total, no single party scores relatively higher on the engagement than on the information index. The mean scores for the indexes [51.64 information and 27.91 engagement] correspond to 76 and 58 per cent respectively of the index totals. The Centre Party, The Left-Wing Alliance and the True Finns score near the maximum on the informative communication index. Interestingly, though, both the Left-Wing Alliance and the Green League rate engagement highly. This could possibly be a reflection of these parties' egalitarian nature (Sundberg 1996, 74; Römmele 2003, 15; Zilliacus 2001, 39). Still, also the True Finns, Centre Party and For the Poor score quite highly on the engagement index suggesting that no single organization type appears to be linked to high scores on the engagement index.

In order to explore whether there are any party patterns traceable to the theoretical backdrop, a two-step cluster analysis[6] was run for the scores on the questionnaire indexes. The results of the automatic clustering algorithm are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Two clusters of parties: mean scores on the questionnaire indexes

Clusters	N	Labour input (0-n)	Central planning (0-21p)	Importance of website (0-16p)	General Opinion (-1 - 1p)	Informative Comm. (0-68p)	Engaging Comm. (0-48p)
Cluster I	7	4.86	10.29	12.43	.367	57.29	33.43
Cluster II	4	2.75	6.00	8.75	.16	41.75	18.25
Combined	11	4.09	8.72	11.09	.29	51.64	10.25

Note: T-test: the clusters differ significantly on the importance of website (t=2.264 df=9 p.<.05), informative communication (t=3.560 df=9 p.<.05) and engaging communication index (t=4.685 df=9 p.<.05)

The cluster analysis found two groups of parties based on their questionnaire index scores. The mean scores in cluster I are significantly higher than in cluster II for the importance of website, informative- and engaging communication indexes. The Finnish parties in the first cluster deem the website more important and rate the medium's informative and engaging potential higher than the parties in the second cluster. The mean scores for the remaining three indexes were also, but not statistically significant, higher in cluster I than in cluster II. The parties belonging to the two clusters are presented in Table 3 in order to further explore the clusters in light of the theoretical backdrop.

Table 3. Party questionnaire clusters: the associated parties

Party	Clusters	
	I	**II**
Social Democratic Party		X
Centre Party	X	
National Coalition Party	X	
Swedish People's Party		X
Christian Democrats		X
Green League	X	
Left-Wing Alliance	X	
True Finns	X	
Alternative People		X
Union for free Finland	X	
For the Poor	X	

Four circumstances concerning political parties, – i.e. party goals, organizational culture and tradition, size and resources and type of voters – were discussed in the theoretical backdrop. Could the party clusters presented in Table 3 be traced to any of these party-related circumstances?

Put bluntly, the answer to the question appears to be no. The parties in cluster I appear to have no common denominator in any of the theoretically derived circumstances. Obviously, party goals are very difficult to establish objectively, one party usually contains several goals (cf. Kitchelt 2001, 276; Strom 1990, 570). Tentatively, though, the patterns in cluster I do not seem to have appeared due to any specific party goal. Arguably, all modern Finnish parties stress vote maximization (Nousiainen 1998, 59). Nonetheless, the parties in cluster I show variations in their other goals. Even though the Centre Party and NCP are likely to primarily stress vote maximization, they have often been part of the government 'cartel' and also emphasize office maximization (cf. Katz & Mair 1995, 5; Sundberg 1996, 16). The Green League and the LWA stress internal democracy and cohesion (Zilliacus 2001, 39). Also, even though little is known concerning the goals of the remaining three parties in cluster I, the Union for Free Finland and For the Poor, appear to be policy-driven parties focusing on an anti-EU and social policy agenda respectively.

The parties in cluster I also display a mix of party organization, ranging from the Centre Party with a history of mass-party organization, to the NCP which has a cadre-like tradition (cf. Sundberg 1996, 16-9; Nousiainen 1998, 59-60; Zilliacus 2001, 28-30). Measured in share of votes in the last election (cf. Norris 2003, 28), a fair enough measure of party size in Finland as the parties receive part of their organizational funding on the basis of their electoral success (Djupsund 1990, 20; Sundberg 1996, 150), the parties in cluster I also differ very much in size and resource strength. Furthermore, historically, these parties have very different types of voters (Pesonen & Sänkiaho 1979, 120-125;

Nousiainen 1998, 55-59; Sundberg 1996, 209-210). Obviously, as elsewhere, the boundaries between the Finnish parties' target voters have become more fluid over time (cf. Maarek 1995; Swanson & Mancini 1996). Scholars have nonetheless argued that the role of the old 'class-parties' can be traced in the new voter bases of the Finnish parties (Sundberg 1996, 212-3; Zilliacus 2001, 32).

Concerning the four parties included in cluster II – the SDP, SPP, Christian Democrats and Alternative People – common denominators are also hard to find in the theoretical backdrop. Regarding the type of voters, one could tentatively argue that none of these parties have potential voters clearly resembling the socio-economic traits of the typical internet user (cf. Norris 2001b, 78; Sundberg 1996, 118, 209-210). Even so, such parties were also found in the first cluster, which indicates that the type of voters did not discriminate between the two clusters. Regarding party goals, organization type and size, these four parties represent the whole spectrum. The SDP is primarily a vote-maximizing party but has a strong office-seeking agenda as well. The SPP is often part of the Finnish government, possibly partly due to an emphasis on office-maximization. However, in representing the Swedish speaking minority population, the party is mainly a policy-driven party (Nousiainen 1998, 34-35; Sundberg 1996, 16). Similarly, the Alternative People focuses specifically on anti-EU policy while the Christian Democrats mainly promotes Christian values (Nousiainen 1998, 58). The Alternative People is hard to assess in terms of organizational type. Nonetheless, the remaining parties display a mix of organization types. The SDP has a mass-party background typical for socialist parties in western countries but has over time evolved into a cartel party (cf. Löfgren 2001, 29; Nousiainen 1998, 34; Sundberg 1996, 16). The SPP is also often part of the governmental 'cartel'. Historically, though, the party has a cadre-like history as it sprang from several smaller fractions coming together under one central organization (cf. Katz & Mair 1995, 19-20; Nousiainen 1998, 34-35, 59-60; Sundberg 1996, 18). The Christian Democrats have a hierarchical organization focused on strong leadership (cf. Zilliacus 2001, 39; Sundberg 1996, 75), which is one trait typical for catch-all parties (cf. Katz & Mair 1995, 7-8). In terms of size, the SDP is one of the 'big three' in Finnish politics, the SPP and Christian Democrats are minor parliamentary parties and the Alternative People is a fringe party.

In sum, with regard to the two party clusters found in the party questionnaire, none of the four party traits seem to have any noticeable influence on the Finnish parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their websites. Nonetheless, certain findings for individual parties – for example the Green League scoring highly on engagement or the fringe parties being more positive towards the website than the major parties – may still seem theoretically reasonable. In general, though, no theoretic circumstance appears applicable in explaining the Finnish parties' 'inside view' on their websites.

Contents of party websites

Focus is now turned to the findings concerning the contents of the Finnish parties' websites. The descriptive findings of the website content analysis are firstly presented after which the finding of a cluster analysis based on the findings is presented. The scores for the website content indexes are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Contents of the Finnish parties' websites: index scores

Party	Internal administration & information (0-23p)	Campaigning & General information (0-19p)	Participation & Bottom-up communication (0-13p)	Presentation & Sophistication (0-33p)
Social Democratic Party	19	11	6	22
Centre Party	18	17	8	20
National Coalition Party	18	14	8	20
Swedish People's Party	14	12	4	12
Christian Democrats	19	14	11	19
Green League	18	13	11	12
Left-Wing Alliance	14	13	6	17
True Finns	12	14	7	18
Alternative People	5	10	4	9
Union of free Finland	13	4	2	9
Liberals	13	4	5	7
For the Poor	4	1	4	2
Finnish People's Blue-whites	9	4	2	6
Communist Party of Finland	16	9	5	11
Communist Worker's Party	8	2	2	7
Mean:	13.33	9.47	5.67	12.73

The results in Table 4 show that, on average, the Finnish parties' websites focus slightly more on internal administration and information than on the other areas. Expressed as percentages of the maximum total, the mean, 13.33, for the internal administration and information index reaches 58%. The means for campaigning and general information [9.47] and participation and bottom-up communication [5.67] are around half of the total maximum [50% and 44% respectively]. The presentation and sophistication mean score [12.73] reaches 39% of the possible total score for the index. Thus, in general, the Finnish parties appear to use their websites for internal administration and different types of information, i.e. internal information and campaign related general information. Some specific party scores do, however, merit some special attention. Firstly, the Green League was one of two parties scoring highly on the participation and bottom-up index. The party's egalitarian organizational structure could be one explanation for these findings (Nousiainen 1998, 89; Römmele 2003, 15; Zilliacus 2001, 39). Secondly, all three major parties, i.e. the SDP, Centre and NCP, scored the highest on the presentation and

sophistication index. These parties seem to have put more resources into constructing and maintaining their websites (cf. Gibson et al. 2003a, 50; Margolis et al. 2003, 57-58). Correspondingly, these parties were also earlier found to be the ones putting the most labour input into their websites (Table 1)[7].

Still, are there any party patterns in the finding concerning the website contents traceable to the circumstances outlined in the theoretical backdrop? In Table 5, the result of a two-step cluster analysis for the website indexes is presented. As Table 5 reveals, the automatic clustering algorithm found two party clusters on the basis of the website content indexes.

Table 5. Two clusters of party websites: mean scores on the website content indexes.

Clusters	N	Internal administration & information (0-23)	Campaigning & General information (0-19)	Participation & Bottom-up communication (0-13)	Presentation & Sophistication (0-33)
Cluster I	9	16.44	13.00	7.33	16.78
Cluster II	6	8.67	4.17	3.17	6.67
Combined	15	13.33	9.467	5.67	12.73

Note: Independent samples T-test: the clusters differ significantly on the internal efficiency (t=4.749 df=13 p.=.000), electioneering (t=6.411 df=13 p.=.000), participation (t=3.781 df=13 p.<.005) and delivery index (t=5.454 df=13 p.=.000)

In essence, as to all four index scales, there is a distinct cleavage between the party websites of the two clusters. The gaps between the website of the clusters are both large and statistically significant for all indexes. The parties in cluster I have more functions promoting internal administration and information on their websites than the parties in cluster II. Additionally, they have more campaign-related information and content and provide more opportunities for user participation than the party websites in cluster II. Finally, the party websites in the first cluster are more sophisticated than the websites in the second cluster. As a next step, the parties associated with the websites of the two clusters are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Party website clusters: the associated parties

Party	Clusters	
	I	**II**
Social Democratic Party	X	
Centre Party	X	
National Coalition Party	X	
Swedish People's Party	X	
Christian Democrats	X	
Green League	X	
Left-Wing Alliance	X	
True Finns	X	
Alternative People		X
Union of free Finland		X
Liberals		X
For the Poor		X
Finnish People's Blue-whites		X
Communist Party of Finland	X	
Communist Worker's Party		X

Pertaining to the theoretical backdrop, with the exception of the Communist Party of Finland, the interpretation of these findings is rather clear. All of the party websites in cluster I belong to parliamentary parties and all of the websites in cluster II belong to non-parliamentary parties. Hence, as Finnish parties rely on direct state funding which is mainly based on the share of parliamentary seats and membership fees (Djupsund 1990, 20; Nousiainen 1998, 72-73; Sundberg 1996, 150-151), it appears as if size and resources play a significant part in determining the content of the party websites (cf. Margolis et al. 2003, 57-58). Obviously, resources are not everything as the website of the Communist Party of Finland breaks the pattern. As shown in Table 4 earlier, the CPF site scored especially high on the internal administration and information index. Possibly, this internal focus could be a reflection of the communist mass-party tradition having an impact on the website contents (cf. Löfgren 2001, 29; Römmele 2003, 14).

Apart from this exception, the patterns in Table 6 are not easily traceable to any of the other areas of interest outlined in the theoretical section. The parties in cluster I come from different traditions in terms of party organization and culture (Djupsund 1990, 15-17; Nousiainen 1998 chapter 2; Sundberg 1996, 16-19). Furthermore, they also have different types of supporters and potential voters (cf. Nousiainen 1998, 55-59; Sundberg 1996, 118, 209-210). Concerning the parties in cluster II, even though these parties lack scholarly attention, the cluster seems to be very heterogenic regarding party organizational tradition and voter bases.

Pertaining to the view that general party goals influence party website content (cf. Gibson et al. 2003a; 2003c; Löfgren 2001; Römmele 2003), the findings in Table 6 are uncertain. Rigid classifications of party goals are very hard to apply in empirical research

(cf. Strom 1990, 570), and consequently, the findings are quite difficult to interpret. Even though all three Finnish parties competing for the main part of all votes in modern Finnish elections (cf. Moring 2003; Nousiainen 1998, 49), i.e. the SDP, Centre and NCP, are contained within cluster I, the parties in cluster I are quite varied in terms of their other party goals. The major parties also have an office-seeking agenda (Sundberg 1996, 16). The SPP is often included in the Finnish governmental cartel but is also a policy advocating minority party (Nousiainen 1998, 34-35; Sundberg 1996, 16). The Greens and the LWA both emphasize goals on the internal arena (Nousiainen 1998, 78, 89; Zilliacus 2001, 50-51). Again, concerning the parties in cluster II, there is little scholarly knowledge of their general goals. Tentatively though, the agendas of these parties appear very different, ranging from policy-advocating parties (Alternative People, Union of free Finland; For the Poor, Finnish People's Blue-whites) to parties focusing more on the internal arena (CPF and CWP).

In sum, relating to the two party clusters found concerning the contents of the Finnish parties' websites, party size and resources seems to be related to higher index scores. Again, as for the cluster found from the party questionnaire, certain specific party website scores also seem explainable in light of other theoretical circumstances – such as the Green League scoring relatively highly on participation and the CPF emphasizing internal communication – but, in general, party size seems to have the most evident influence on the Finnish parties' website contents.

Summary of descriptive findings

The findings concerning the descriptive research questions are summarized in this section. The study's main explorative questions are therafter examined in the concluding section.

Regarding the first descriptive research question – what are the Finnish parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their website? – some of the findings merit attention here. Firstly, in general, the Finnish parties do not appear to have a high degree of central planning of their websites, nor employ large amounts of internal or external personnel in maintaining the sites. Many parties stated that the local branches were responsible for several sections of their websites and that the people working with their website have other more important responsibilities. Secondly, the Finnish parties nonetheless perceive their website to be an important communication tool compared to traditional communication channels. Surprisingly, though, some fringe parties ranked the website lower than traditional communication channels (cf. Gibson et al. 2003b, 102). The Finnish parties' general opinion of political websites was also positive. Most of the party information officials felt that there are more advantages than drawbacks with having

a website. The officials of the three major parties were, however, slightly less enthusiastic than the officials from smaller parties. Thirdly, both on average and for all individual parties, the Finnish parties preferred to use the website for information dissemination above engaging the users. Engagement was not, however, regarded as unimportant as several parties scored highly on both the informative- and engaging communication index.

Turning to the second descriptive research question – what do the Finnish parties' websites look like as to the actual content of the site? – the content analysis revealed some noteworthy findings. Firstly, the Finnish parties generally use their websites for different types of top-down information. The parties mostly used their sites for internal administration and information. Additionally, website features related to general information and campaigning were quite common on the websites. The websites of the Christian Democrats and the Green League were the only sites scoring near the maximum on the participation and bottom-up communication index. Secondly, concerning website presentation and sophistication, the findings revealed a significant gap between the major and fringe parties. In fact, the three major parties were the ones scoring the highest on the index.

Discussion

The ambition of this study was explicitly explorative; the plausibility of the actor-constructivist view on party use of websites (Römmele 2003) would be further explored. In order to carry out this task, a theoretical backdrop consisting of four circumstances: party goals, party organization, party size and party voters, was developed. Thereafter, the findings regarding the Finnish parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their websites, as well as the contents of their actual websites, were exploratively assessed in light of this theoretical backdrop. Pertaining to this theoretical framework and the explorative ambition, what conclusions can be drawn from this study?

One crucial conclusion from this study is that the view which I have called "actor-constructivist" in this article is very difficult to study empirically. Concepts such as party goals and organization, for instance, are hard to operationalize in a readily measurable manner. Consequently, most of the analyses and conclusions to be drawn are explicitly explorative and tentative in nature; i.e. they give some indicative results and direction for future research but can not be regarded as providing any decisive answers. Regarding the first explorative research question – are there any patterns in the parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their website which are traceable to the parties' character in terms of party goals, organization size or composition of primary supporters? – the answer provided in this study is negative. The automatic clustering algorithm

identified two groups of parties on the basis of their answers to the party questionnaire. One cluster scored significantly higher on how important they ranked the website compared to other communication channels, and how highly they rated informative- and engaging communication via their websites. These two clusters were hard to explain, or differentiate from each other, in light of the theoretical backdrop. Thus, the Finnish parties' view of their website use is seemingly not influenced by any specific party trait. The Finnish parties appear to have an impromptu approach to their websites. Consequently, in determining how political parties look upon their own use of party websites, the character of the parties is seemingly not generally decisive (cf. Gibson et al. 2003b, 86-90; Löfgren 2001, 23-30; Römmele 2003). Obviously, Römmele's view (2003, 8) that the parties themselves play a large role in determining what role party websites have for them is still valid. In fact, some findings in this study concerning individual parties even followed the paths described by Römmele (2003, 14). Nonetheless, the findings here have highlighted the problems of testing the 'actor-constructivist' view and the difficulty of linking specific party traits to the parties' 'inside view' regarding their websites.

Concerning the second explorative research question – are there any patterns in the contents of the parties' websites which are traceable to the parties' character in terms of party goals, organization, size or composition of primary supporters? – the findings in this article were rather clear. The automatic clustering algorithm found two clusters based on the scores on the party website content indexes. The party websites belonging to the first of these clusters scored significantly higher than the sites in the second cluster on all four measured indexes; internal administration and information, campaigning and general information, participation and bottom-up communication and website presentation and sophistication. Apart from one exception, a dividing line between the two clusters was found due to party size and resources. All websites in the first cluster belonged to the parties with representation in the Finnish parliament (major and minor), while all parties in the second clusters were fringe parties outside of parliament. Consequently, since Finnish parties, to a large extent, rely on direct state funding based on the share of seats in parliament (Djupsund 1990, 20; Nousiainen 1998, 72-73; Sundberg 1996, 150-151), both the size and associated resources seem to have an influence in determining the content of the Finnish parties' websites (cf. Margolis et al. 2003, 57-58). Certain findings concerning individual parties in this study do support the anticipated role of party goals in determining their style of communication on their website (cf. Römmele 2003, 14). This influence was, however, overshadowed by the influence of party size. Nevertheless, this finding does indicate that the parties themselves play an important part in determining the contents of their websites, but this influence appears to be due to having sufficient resources available for the construction of the website rather than due to specific party

goals, organization types or target voters. This is further indicated through the noted significant correlations between scoring highly on the labour input scale and higher scores in three out of four website content scales. Taking the inconclusive findings concerning the influence of party traits on their opinions concerning the importance and use of their website into consideration, this finding is interesting. Even if party size did not appear to influence the parties' 'inside view' of their website, it nonetheless appears to *restrain* what the parties do with their website (cf. Gibson et al. 2003a, 50; Löfgren 2000, 60; Nixon et al. 2003, 240).

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In conclusion, what are the lessons learnt form this study regarding the plausibility of the so-called actor constructivist view and the role of the political parties in shaping their use of party websites? First and foremost, the article has served to demonstrate that systematic empirical test of how the character of political parties are linked to how they look upon and use their websites are hard to conduct. Many of the theoretical circumstances usually regarded as important to party conduct are complicated concepts which are hard to operationalize for empirical research. Consequently, the knowledge gained through such analyses must be regarded as tentative, as providing indications rather than final answers. Secondly, while some of the Finnish parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their websites, and also the actual content of the websites, can be traced to party characteristics, the study has demonstrated the difficulty of generalizing from such specific findings. Thus, to better understand how ICTs will be implemented by political parties, one *should* indeed take the influence of the users of the technology into account (Gibson et al. 2003b, 86-90; Löfgren 2001, 23-30), but one *should not* assume that the findings concerning one party are *per se* applicable to other comparable parties. Thirdly, in influencing the content of party websites, it appears as if size and associated resources play an important role. In light of this finding, money seemingly does 'talk' when it comes to party websites (cf. Gibson et al. 2003a, 50; Margolis et al. 2003, 57-58). Therefore, in conclusion, the actor-constructivist view appears to be very *actor-specific* when it comes to the parties' opinions regarding their websites, and quite *resource-dependent* when it comes to the construction of party websites.

Notes:

[1] As of November 16th 2005, 19 registered parties exist, source: the election website of the Finnish ministry of justice: www.vaalit.fi

[2] Source: http://www.internetworldstats.com

[3] The Cronbach's alphas for the scales are; labour input α=.70; central planning of website α=.90; importance of the website α=.85; general opinion of party website α=.64; informative communication α=.89; and engaging communication α=.90.

[4] The Chronbach's alphas for the scales are; internal administration and information α=.69; campaigning and general information α=.89; participation and bottom-up communication α=.57; and presentation and sophistication α=.76.

[5] The scales were checked for inter-coder reliability using the formula suggested by Holsti (1969). The result was a highly satisfactory .88.

[6] Clustering criterion: Akaike Information Criterion; cluster distance measure: log-likelihood.

[7] A further examination of the correlations (Pearson) between the questionnaire index scores and the website content index scores revealed that the labour input index was significantly positively correlated to higher scores on internal administration & information (P = .75 p <.01), campaigning & general information (P = .67 p <.01) and presentation & sophistication (P = .75 p <.01). Among the other indexes only one significant correlation was found: the importance of website index was positively correlated (P = .61 p <.05) to the presentation & sophistication index.

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Appendix: Questionnaire scales

Labour input (0-n points)
Measures the resources the party puts into the website with one count and one scale:
The number of employees working with the website (0-n)
The extent of outsourcing the website construction and maintenance to experts (0-4)

Central planning of website (0-21 points)
Measures the degree of central planning and strategy in constructing the website with one scale (0-21)

Importance of the website in different communication arenas (0-16 points)
Measures the relative importance of communication via the party website compared to other forms of communication, e.g. newspapers, TV, mail, radio, party press etc., in four areas of party communication:
Internal communication (0-4p)
Communication with media (0-4p)
Communication with the public (0-4p)
Communication with other parties (0-4p)

General opinion of party websites (-1 -1 points)
Measures the party's general opinion of web-based communication. The scale is constructed by means of deducting the party's score on a standardized general drawbacks' scale from their score on a standardized 'general advantages' scale:
General advantages of web based communication (0-1p)
General drawbacks of web based communication (0-1p)

Informative communication (0-68 points)
Measures how highly the party ranks different questionnaire items concerning top-down, information-based communication. Consists of 17 items each scoring 0-4 points.

Engaging communication (0-48 points)
Measures how highly the party ranks different questionnaire items concerning bottom-up, engaging communication. Consists of 12 items each scoring 0-4 points.

Appendix: Website coding scheme (cf. Gibson & Ward 2000, 2002)

Internal administration and information index (0-23 points)
Additive index (0-9 points), 1 point assigned for each of the following information features present on the party website:

History
Structure
Values & ideological ethos
Rules & constitution
Specific policy programs
Who's who section
Leader profile
Articles section/archive
Extranet for members

Cumulative index (0-9 points) consisting of three ordinal indexes:
(1) Donation index 0 - 3
(2) Merchandise index 0 – 3
(3) Membership index 0 – 3
For each index (1) reference made and postal address listed (2) download form and post (3) specific e-mail or online form or online transaction (0) no references made.

Cumulative index (0-5 points) of the number of *internal links*, i.e., links to own party, local party organizations, MP's/MEPs, international branches, other candidates in the same party, organizations that are supportive of the party's goals:
(0) = no links
(1) = 1-10 links
(2) = 11- 20 links
(3) = 21- 50 links
(4) = 51-100 links
(5) = > 100 links

Campaigning & general information index (0-19 points)
Additive index (0-14 points), 1 point assigned for each of the following information features present on the party website:

Newsletter
Candidate profiles
Election information
Events calendar
Frequently asked questions
Election section
Negative campaign messages
Credits and merits of party

Targeting of specific voter segments
Cookies (gather user information)
Opportunity to join e-mail update list
Opportunity to enrol for campaign work
Download party leaflet or similar
Download party logo

Cumulative index (0-5 points) for the number of *external links,* i.e., all other links than the internal ones; inter alia, commercial links and links to neutral or news/educational sites such as news broadcasters, newspapers, parliamentary/governmental sites, national libraries.
 (0) = no links
 (1) = 1-10 links
 (2) = 11- 20 links
 (3) = 21- 50 links
 (4) = 51-100 links
 (5) = > 100 links

Participation and bottom-up communication index (0-13 points)
1 point assigned if the website features user polls

Cumulative index (0-12 p) consisting of three ordinal indexes:

Openness, i.e. count of e-mail contacts listed on site.
 (0) = no e-mails listed
 (1) = 1-10 e-mails
 (2) = 11- 20 e-mails
 (3) = 21- 50 e-mails
 (4) = 51-100 e-mails
 (5) = > 100 e-mails

Feedback index (0–3) (1) e-mail address on the site; (2) e-mail address explicitly focused on soliciting comments; (3) an online form to submit views offered.

Interaction index (0-4) Ordinal (1) games/gimmicks to play; (2) bulletin board or guest book to post views; (3) chat room for real-time discussion; (4) opportunity for online debate with leader/senior organization employees.

Presentation and sophistication index (0-33 points)
Additive index (0-18 points), 1 point assigned for each of the following information features present on the party website:

Graphics
Frames, (or similar, e.g. flash)
Moving icons

Pictures
Sound
Video files
Live streaming video
No-frames option (or similar, e.g. no flash-option)
Text-only option
Text-only print option
Different language option
Option to enlarge website fonts for blind/visually impaired
Option to view the site via WAP, GPRS or similar cellular phone platforms
Navigation tips
Search engine
Homepage icon on all pages of website
Fixed menu on all pages of website
Site map

Cumulative index (0-7 points) of the frequency of *website updates*;
No information given (0); + 6 months (1); 1-6 months (2); monthly (3); every two weeks (4); 3-7 days (5); 1-2 days (6); Updated daily (7).

Article IV

On-line Campaigning – An Opening for the Outsiders?
An Analysis of the Finnish Parliamentary Candidates' Websites in the 2003 Election
Campaign

Introduction

> "A seeming beneficiary of internet-based campaigning would be the resource-poor candidate. Since, theoretically, access to all candidates' sites by the user is on an equal footing, and the cost for posting a home page is minimal, the internet would appear to have the potential of serving as an equalizing medium for all candidates, both major and minor parties, both well known and obscure" (Davis 1999: 89)

Political communication experienced significant changes during the 20th century. Two noticeable changes for political parties and candidates were the decline in voter partisanship (Dalton 2000) accompanied by increasing dependence on the media when communicating campaign messages to the public (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995). The traditional ties between voter and party have significantly eroded (Dalton 2000; Swanson & Mancini 1996b: 7-12). As a result, instead of simply mobilizing partisan voters, political parties and candidates are required to 'catch' all segments of voters in order to secure electoral success (cf. Wattenberg 2000). The most efficient way to communicate a campaign message to the masses is through media, therefore resulting in a 'key' role for mass media in modern political communication (Swanson & Mancini 1996a: 251).

In the modern media system (see Norris 2001a: 147-9) political actors find themselves in the hands of reporters and editors who serve as filters between them and the public (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995: 3). This editorial process usually follows commercialized media logic (Altheide & Snow 1991). This trend has been especially troublesome for certain political actors. Fringe parties and candidates often fail to break the news threshold (Margolis et al. 2003) and lack financial resources to attain public awareness through other channels, for instance via paid TV-advertisements (Carlson 2000: 19). It comes as no surprise, then, that the advent of the internet was looked upon with great enthusiasm by most political actors (Bimber & Davis 2003: 20). The internet is cheap, interactive, enables fast and large quantities of information and multimedia dissemination and provides political actors with a direct communication channel to the electorate (Bimber & Davis 2003). Consequently, as compared to traditional media, communicating via the internet could help the smaller parties to stay in stride with the major parties in the electoral arena (see discussion in Margolis et al. 2003: 58; Norris 2003: 25). The major parties' advantage in traditional media coverage and campaign budgets could, however, eventually give them the upper hand on the internet (cf. Margolis & Resnick 2000: 72-4).

Patterns of *candidate* on-line electoral competition in the campaign prior to the Finnish parliamentary election 2003 are examined in this study. The study uses comprehensive candidate-level data from the election websites used in the 2003 Finnish parliamentary election campaign. Finland provides a suitable context in which to explore patterns of candidate level on-line electoral competition. A high level of internet penetration has long been fulfilled in Finland (Norris 2000), and the country is among the world leaders in terms of candidates having websites (Gibson & Römmele 2005: 10). There are also three circumstances which would suggest that Finland might pose a challenge to the dominance of major parties and their candidates (cf. Gibson 2004; Norris 2003: 25): the party system is highly fragmented (Raunio 2002, the Finnish campaigns strongly emphasize the individual candidates rather than the parties (Ruostetsaari & Mattila 2002; Sundberg 1997: 72), and candidates and parties are free to purchase as much advertising time as they desire on national commercial TV channels (Carlson 2001; Moring 1995). Consequently, this study explores patterns of candidate level on-line electoral competition in an interesting institutional context where candidates are very important in political campaigns. Two general research questions are asked in this study; **firstly**, which variables are important factors influencing candidates' on-line presence? **Secondly**, which variables are important factors influencing the functions which are featured on candidate websites and similarly, which variables influence how sophisticated candidates' websites are?

The internet and electoral competition – different theories

Margolis and Resnick (2000, 8-21) envisage three types of internet politics: politics within the internet, politics that affect the internet, and political uses of the internet. As this article is concerned with electoral competition between candidates, the discussion in this section will focus on the political use of the internet, and its implications for electoral competition.

Could the internet be 'the great equalizer'? Initially, seen as an 'outsider's medium', the web was predicted to enhance democracy (Bimber & Davis 2003; Davis 1999). Enabling new kinds of participation, the web could widen the pool of political participants (Budge 1996; Rheingold 1993; Schwartz 1996). The medium has several potentially advantageous features, compared to traditional media, for marginal political actors. Minor and fringe parties should have an outlet for their ideas where they too can retain control over the communicated message. Compared to mainstream media, and traditional campaigning, this can be achieved far easier and at lower costs (see discussion in Margolis et al. 2003: 58). The political parties should be on a more equal footing when campaigning on the web compared to campaigning through traditional mass media, in

regards to giving the outsiders an affordable outlet for their ideas and better prospects in comunicating their message to the public (Davis 1999; Gibson & Ward 1998). This is perceived to level the electoral playing field, both on- and off-line. Scholars often use the term **equalization** of on-line electoral competition when referring to these visions concerning inter-party competition and the internet (e.g. Cunha et al. 2003: 72-4; Ward et al. 2003: 22).

The political reality online might, however, eventually be something quite different from the scenario predicted by the equalization theory. In the perspective often referred to as the **normalization** of cyberspace, a status quo scenario concerning the internet's effect on the political uses of the web is envisioned (Margolis & Resnick 2000: 53-76). As internet campaigning comes of age, politics on-line will come to resemble its offline counterpart, hence producing nothing more than politics as usual (*ibid.*: 15-9; Ward et al. 2003: 23). The major parties' off-line advantages will provide them with advantages in on-line campaigning. One of the most important aspects of on-line campaigning is arguably making your website known to voters. In this regard major parties have a much greater chance of making their sites known. This is due to the fact that they gain more media exposure, and that they have more money to spend on traditional campaigning; two factors which can potentially assist in raising voters' interest in their website (Margolis et al. 2003: 58). Furthermore, over time, sophisticated campaign websites will not come cheap. Full-time web designers and managers could very well be an essential element of the on-line campaigns' success (Gibson et al. 2003: 50). As Margolis and Resnick (2000, 16) state: "If we ask which political parties and candidates are likely to provide sophisticated Web sites, the answer is clear: those who command the resources to hire the talent to produce them". All in all, these trends might only serve to further marginalize the marginalized and fail to upset established patterns of electoral competition.

A less clear-cut position concerning the internet's effects on politics is also stated in scholarly literature (e.g. Foot & Schneider 2002: Norris 2001b: 233-9; 2003). According to this so-called 'cyber-sceptic' view, the internet will neither cause major changes, nor will it cause no changes at all, concerning political life. The effects might rather be something in between the rigid scenarios envisioned by the equalization and normalization theories. Even though the web has little chance of causing major overhauls of traditional politics, it could still play a significant part if adapted by transnational advocacy networks and other non-traditional social movements (Norris 2001b: 238-9). The internet's real potential might subsist in new forms of on-line political engagement (cf. Foot & Schneider 2002). Hence, political websites could be viewed as part of larger online environments. If so, even if the party websites and other areas of traditional politics on-line, resemble 'politics as usual', the on-line arena could, nonetheless, include

elements of interest pluralism (cf. Bimber 1999) and opportunities for alternative voices to be heard.

Electoral competition on the candidate level

How could electoral competition be looked at on the candidate level? What candidate related circumstances could be relevant to candidate-level electoral competition on the internet? In the following section, theoretical considerations concerning candidate-level electoral competition on the internet will be made in order to further develop a conceptual framework for the study.

The picture concerning electoral competition is somewhat more unclear on the candidate level as compared to the party level. In single-member district, First Past the Post, or similar plurality-majority election systems, the size of a candidate's party should be highly influential in determining whether and how strongly a candidate campaigns, also on-line. Since only two parties usually have a realistic chance at winning the election (cf. Lijphart 1994: 20), the candidates of the minor and fringe parties will not put much effort or money into developing websites. Several studies conducted on election campaigns in single-member districts, i.e. plurality-majority election contexts, have to some extent examined the effects of party size on the candidate level from this **inter-party** perspective (e.g. Davis 1999; Greer & LaPointe 2003; Herrnson & Stokes 2003; Kamarck 1999; 2002; Margolis et al. 2003; Sadow & James 1999). The results of these studies point in both directions vis-à-vis the patterns of electoral competition; some have noticed that minor party candidates tend to use the web at a somewhat higher rate than major party candidates (cf. Herrnson & Stokes 2003; Sadow & James 1999). Other findings point in the opposite direction (cf. Gibson & MacAllister 2003; Greer & LaPointe 2003; Kamarck 2002). In most studies conducted, however, major party candidates outperform their rivals in terms of website sophistication (cf. Davis 1999; Greer & LaPointe 2003; Margolis et al 1997; Margolis & Resnick 2000: 53-74). The latter results possibly indicate that there is a need for full time staff in order to produce and manage a stylish website (Margolis & Resnick 2000: 16). Some exceptions to this overall pattern have however been noticed in Green parties and, in some cases, Liberal parties who are keeping equal pace in terms of website sophistication, suggesting party ideological ethos might have an influence on web campaigning (Gibson & McAllister 2003; Gibson & Römmele 2003).

What about other election systems? Is it also plausible to *a priori* assume that all candidates of, for instance, a major party are competing on equal footing in a system where each party nominates several candidates in each district? In Finland, mainly due to the mechanics of the d'Hondt formula (Taagapera & Shugart 1989: 31-2), many candidates nominated by each party act as supplementary candidates in order to add votes

to the party total and usually stand without any realistic chance of being elected themselves. Both the party and the candidate ought to be aware of this fact; hence such a candidate would neither receive adequate support from the party nor find it worthwhile to spend much time, effort and money on an internet campaign (Davis 1999: 94). As Herrnson and Stokes (2003: 11) remark, candidates who are involved in hard-fought contests are more desperate to seize every possible vote (cf. Kamarck 2002: 86-7). The opposite ought to hold true for candidates who from the outset of the campaign feel that they are not seriously involved in the contest. Electoral competition on the candidate level could thus be a mixture of both **intra-party** and the aforementioned, **inter-party** differences. Even though major parties have more resources at their disposal than minor and fringe parties (inter-party differences), they might not spend these resources equally on all of their candidates (intra-party differences).

Another perspective on intra-party electoral competition is the difference between incumbents and challenging candidates. Challengers would arguably have more to gain from web-campaigning than incumbents, as incumbents can, to a larger extent, rely on other traditional communication channels in their campaign than challengers (Margolis & Resnick 2000: 66; Sadow & James 1999: 5). However, incumbents, regardless of what party they represent, do still do have some advantages over challengers with regards to web campaigning. As noted by Davis (1999: 94-5), incumbents are most likely better-known than challengers. While challengers struggle to make their sites known, incumbents already have some name recognition, which increases media and public interest in their campaign and campaign website. Also, incumbents usually boast large traditional campaigns which, through meta-campaigning, could provide them with an important means for guiding voters to their website (cf. Carlson & Djupsund 2001: 85). Finally, incumbents could draw on their name recognition and use their official parliamentary websites as platforms for their campaigns and, for instance, provide hyperlinks to their campaign website from their parliament site (Davis 1999: 93-4; Gibson 2004: 17; Margolis & Resnick 2000: 67). Challengers launch, advertise and maintain their own sites and can only hope for party support in the form of a presentation on the party's website or free space for their website on the party's domain server. In sum, the incumbents' advantages in name recognition and traditional advertising could give them the on-line edge over challengers.

To summarize the discussion thus far, two important aspects have been considered as being possibly influential concerning the candidates' on-line campaigning and patterns of electoral competition. Firstly, **inter-party** variation with regards to the ideological ethos and especially the size of a candidate's party and, secondly, **intra-party** variations between competitive and non-competitive candidates as well as incumbents and challengers.

The Finnish context

As was briefly mentioned in the introduction, Finland has several important characteristics to keep in mind when studying candidate level electoral competition on the internet. These characteristics are discussed in detail in the following section.

The basic prerequisite for web campaigning during elections – a high level of internet penetration – has long been fulfilled in Finland (cf. Norris 2000). In 1999, roughly one third of the 5.2 million population was on-line, a share which by mid 2002 had risen to 52 per cent[1]. Where parties and candidates in many countries are still so-to-speak 'learning the ropes' of internet campaigning, the Finnish political actors should be relatively familiar with the medium. In fact, as stated by Gibson and Römmele (2005: 10), Finland, alongside the USA and Germany, is a world-leader in terms of internet use by political candidates. Concerning voter impact, research findings suggest that there seems to be a growing potential for catching the next generation of Finnish voters (e.g. Bengtsson & Grönlund 2005; Borg & Moring 2005; Moring 2003). The share of young voters (18-34 years) – a voter segment *all* Finnish parties regard as a part of their target groups (Moring 2003: 18) – ranking internet sources as most important in making their voting decision has already risen from 10 per cent in the 1999 parliamentary election to over 30 per cent in the 2003 election. In 2003, internet sources were even ranked above traditional sources for election information, such as TV and newspapers by the same young voters (*ibid.*: 18-9). The internet is starting to move beyond the status of a 'second order campaign medium' when considering its impact on the elections in Finland.

The 200 seats of the parliament are contested once every four years in the Finnish parliamentary elections. The MPs are elected from 15 districts where the district magnitude is based on the population size in each district. Consequently, more seats in parliament are allocated to the larger districts. The districts are quite different in nature, ranging from the highly urbanized and crowded Helsinki area to the rural and sparsely populated northern and eastern parts of the country. The MP seats are distributed between the parties using the d'Hondt system[2] of party list proportional representation (Sundberg 1997; Taagapera & Shugart 1989: 31-2). Furthermore, compared to other European countries, and of special interest in studying candidate campaigning, the Finnish elections are candidate-centred, as votes are cast for the candidates and not the party (Carlson 2006; Ruostetsaari & Mattila 2002). The elections are not only a competition between parties but a competition between individual candidates (Sundberg 1997: 72). Many candidates also have their own support groups which organize campaign activities, raise funds and try to increase publicity for the candidate (Ruostetsaari & Mattila 2002). According to Gibson (2004), such candidate-centred systems spur individual innovation and dynamic use of political websites. Candidates and parties are

also free to purchase as much advertising time as they desire on national commercial TV-channels (Carlson 2001; Moring 1995). This media environment contains characteristics which have been noted to give minor and fringe political actors strong incentives for emphasizing web campaigning (Norris 2003: 25).

In the 2003 election, 18 parties nominated a total of 2,013 candidates. Three major parties – the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party and the National Coalition Party – have dominated all Finnish parliamentary elections in modern times (cf. Moring 2003). In the 2003 election, the 679 candidates of these parties received a total share of 67.8 per cent of the votes. These were followed by a group of minor parties – the Left Alliance, The Green League, The Christian Democrats, the Swedish Peoples' Party and the True Finns – whose 885 candidates received 29.4 per cent of the total votes. Ten fringe parties, running 449 candidates, gathered a total of 2.8 per cent of the votes. As is evident from the aforementioned, the Finnish party system is quite highly fragmented (Raunio 2002).

In sum, studying candidate-level electoral competition on the internet in the Finnish context could prove especially interesting due to several specific features of the political environment in Finland. The features mentioned here indicate that Finland could be a country in which the patterns of inter-candidate electoral competition could be different from those noted when studying inter-party competition in other contexts. The institutional settings also contain characteristics which, *a priori*, suggest that minor and fringe parties' candidates might make more campaign efforts, both off- and on-line, than in other contexts.

Research questions and design of the study

The previous sections of the study have pointed at several circumstances as being potentially influential toward the on-line campaign practices of political candidates. The Finnish context was also described and argued to be especially interesting to explore in a study of candidate internet campaigning. Against this theoretical backdrop, the research questions and the overall design of the study are presented in this section.

Two types of independent variables have been considered especially important in the theoretical discussion. **Firstly**, inter-party variables such as the size and, to some extent, ideological position of a candidate's party which were regarded as related to a candidate's internet campaigning. **Secondly**, intra-party variations were also seen as potentially important concerning candidate web campaigning. Specifically, a candidate's competitiveness and the electoral status as either incumbent or challenger were considered. Keeping the discussion of the Finnish context in mind, the research questions presented in the introduction can now be specified as follows:

RQ1: How much predicting power do inter- and intra-party variables have in determining whether or not a candidate will have a campaign website?

RQ2: How much predictive power do inter- and intra-party variables have in determining 1) the functions of the candidate websites and 2) the quality of the website's delivery?

In terms of overall design, the inter- and intra-party variables are entered into a conceptual model. Also included in this model are two additional sets of variables, constituency-, and candidate demographics. These sets of variables have been considered as potentially influential toward candidates' internet campaigning by several scholars (e.g. Herrnson & Stokes 2003; Gibson & McAllister 2003; Gibson & Römmele 2003). They serve as important controlling variables in the study's conceptual model. Visually, the model could be illustrated as follows (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Theoretical model outlining candidate-related factors linked to each candidate's internet campaigning.

Political websites – functions and delivery

In pursuing their overall goals, i.e. vote- and office maximization, pursuit of policy influence and internal efficiency and cohesion (Katz & Mair 1995; Sjöblom 1968), political parties often rely on mass media to inform, persuade and mobilize public support (Norris 2003; Gibson & Ward 2000). According to Norris (2003: 26), the new media does

not alter the underlying party- and candidate goals but it does, however, provide the political actors with an additional means of achieving them.

Several web-specific features – such as information volume, speed of information dissemination, the ability to use more multimedia, interactivity and control of the conveyed message – are symptomatic of this new communication media. Considering both the goals of political actors and the specific features of the internet, Gibson and Ward (2000: 304-6) perceive five functions to be central to the use of political websites (cf. Römmele 2003); *information provision* which is enhanced through the volume and speed of data transmission on-line, the internet also provides *campaigning* activities with the added-value of multimedia, interactivity and control of information. Furthermore, *resource generation* is facilitated through the interactive features of the web, thus enabling immediate transactions and recruitment via e-mail. Additionally, the authors stress that *networking* on-line is made easy by the hyperlink system inherent in the technology. Finally, citizen *participation* could be eased through interactive feedback function and discussion boards. In summary, the internet adds more tools in achieving party goals but does not alter the underlying purposes of political activity.

The quality of a website's delivery is also an important aspect of political websites. This aspect concerns the quality and effectiveness of the political websites' presentation (cf. Cunha et al. 2003: 73-4). Gibson and Ward (2000: 308) use the term 'sophistication' in describing this aspect. Features such as multimedia, images and frames all enhance the overall experience of using a website. The delivery aspect is also important to consider since many possible differences between candidates of major and minor parties might be more visible in the delivery and sophistication of the websites than in the functions (Gibson & Ward 2002: 107-8). Launching a website is relatively cheap, but maintaining, updating and visually enhancing it requires more resources in terms of costly web designers and managers. Such resources are usually readily available to the candidates of major – not minor and fringe – parties (Margolis & Resnick 2000: 16).

Data & Methods

The data for the empirical analysis was collected prior to the Finnish parliamentary election in March 2003. A total of 2,013 candidates ran for office, hence the size of the research data should provide sufficient diversity in the study's variables. In order to analyze the first research question (RQ1), each candidate's web presence was checked using candidate listings on the parties' websites. Web presence was double-checked using internet search engines (*google.fi* and *altavista.fi*). A campaign website was defined as a candidate site that clearly mentioned the upcoming election (cf. Ward & Gibson 2003: 194). A total of 874 sites were found using this definition[4]. The sites were accessed and

stored locally two weeks prior to the elections in order to provide a 'snapshot in time' of the on-line campaigns. Publicly-available data on the candidates was also collected[5] for the purpose of analyzing the causal effects of the independent variables on candidate web presence. The characteristics of the on-line candidates were established and compared to the characteristics of the off-line candidates. Logistical regression analysis was opted for as the analytical tool since the design of the study required that the inter- and intra-party variables were controlled against the candidate- and constituency demographics for their independent effects on the dichotomous dependent variable web presence.

In order to analyze the second research question (RQ2), focus was turned to the websites of the 874 candidates who campaigned on-line. As a first step, in finding a means for defining and measuring website functions and delivery, quantitative content analysis was opted for. The methodology for analyzing political websites proposed by Gibson and Ward (2000) proved useful in this regard. The main rationale for opting for this scheme was that it included the delivery aspect of political websites. Since this article concerns patterns of electoral competition in candidate on-line campaigning, both functions and delivery need to be empirically addressed (cf. Gibson & Ward 2002: 107-8). The scheme was initially developed from, and makes use of, many features used in existing research (e.g. Cunha et al. 2003; Kamarck 1999; Newell 2001; Norris 2003). The scheme both summarizes and standardizes the existing methods for content analysis of political websites. Through explanatory and confirmatory factor analysis, Gibson and Ward categorized website features into ordinal indices mainly centred on two aspects of websites; namely *functions* and *delivery*. The indices are either sum-variables, with fixed maximum values, of dichotomous variables noting the presence or absence of certain features, or sum-variables, with no set maximum value, mixing dichotomous variables with counts. A modified version[6] of this coding scheme (see Appendix) was used in this study. The functions of each candidate website were coded[7] into five index scales; information provision, resource generation, networking, participation and campaigning. The delivery of the websites was similarly coded into five index scales; multimedia, accessibility, navigability, freshness and visibility. Then, the index scales were thereafter entered as dependent variables into the conceptual model, after which their dependency on the independent variables was checked. The analysis was conducted using two separate OLS multiple regression models.

Some of the variables' categorizations need to be presented before turning to the findings. Party size is categorized similarly to Norris' (2003: 28) criteria; major parties are those with over 20% of all seats in the parliament; minor parties are the remainder of the parties with parliamentary representation and fringe parties are parties outside the parliament. Next, competitiveness was initially established based on common knowledge of candidates' seriousness with their campaign. In difficult cases (N=1352) judgments

made by party personnel in each election district were relied upon. The respondents were given a list of their party's candidates and asked to identify the candidates who they felt strongly believed in their chances of election and who also put significant amounts of money and efforts into their campaigns. The candidates were then coded as competitive or non-competitive based on this judgment. However, the competitiveness of some candidates (N=973) was established based on their number of votes received in the actual election as not all party personnel responded to the questionnaire. Although not a fully satisfactory indicator, the total number of votes proved highly correlated (R=.85 p.<.001) with the judgments made by party personnel and could thus still be used for approximation of competitiveness.

The size of the candidates' party will be used as a basis for exploring the research questions in the presentation of the study's findings. It is, however, noteworthy that the size of the candidates' party is not *a priori* considered more influential than other factors on candidate web campaigning.

Findings

The on-line presence of the candidates

As shown in Table 1, the candidates' on-line campaign presence is skewed according to the size of each candidate's party. Major party candidates used the web at a significantly higher rate than their minor and fringe counterparts [74.1% compared to 42.7% and 10.9% respectively].

Table 1. The size of each candidate's party and the use of candidate sites on the web.

	Web presence		
Party size	Yes	No	*N*
Fringe party candidate	10.9%	89.1%	596
Minor party candidate	42.7%	57.3%	738
Major party candidate	74.1%	25.9%	679
Overall	43.9%	56.1%	2013

χ^2=515.088 (df=2) p<.001

To further explore the factors influencing the candidates' web presence, a logistical regression model is presented in Table 2. The model tests the independent effects on candidate campaign web presence of inter-party variables and intra-party variables, while controlling for candidate-[8] and constituency demographics[9].

Table 2. Logistical regression model predicting the campaign web presence of the candidates

	B	S.E.	Exp(B)	Sig.
	Use of website			
Inter-party effects				
Party size (1)	**2.334**	.188	10.322	.000
Party size (2)	**1.021**	.152	2.777	.000
Ideology (1)	-.151	.134	.860	.258
Ideology (2)	**1.255**	.185	3.509	.000
Ideology (3)	.298	.213	1.348	.162
Intra-party effects				
Competitiveness (1)	**1.671**	.174	5.316	.000
Status (1)	-.327	.244	.721	.179
Candidate demographics				
Gender (1)	.065	.116	1.067	.575
Age	**-.031**	.005	.970	.000
Constituency demographics				
District urbanization	**.017**	.004	1.017	.000
Constant	-1.741			
Cox-Snell R^2	.326			
Nagelkerke R^2	.437			
% Correct	77.0			
N	2,013			

Note: The dependent variable: 0=candidate does not have a website 1=candidate has a website. Predictors (the last category is used as reference category): **Party size:** 1=Major, 2=Minor, 3= Fringe; **Ideology:** 1=Left-wing, 2=Green (ecological), 3=Center (rural), 4=Right-wing (conservative); **Competitiveness:** 1= competitive candidate, 2=Non-competitive candidate; **Status:** 1=Incumbent 2=Challenger; **Gender:** 1=Female, 2=Male; **Age:** years; **District urbanization:** average degree of urbanization (continuous).

All predictors except candidate gender and status are significant in predicting candidate web presence. The strongest predictor is running for a major party [*B*=2.334, Exp(*B*)=10.322]. As such, this finding replicates findings concerning the Finnish candidates running for the European Parliament in 2004 (Carlson & Strandberg 2005). In this study, party size was followed by being a competitive candidate [*B*=1.671, Exp(*B*)=5.316] and, thereafter, running for a green/ecological party [*B*=1.255, Exp(*B*)=3.509]. The strong effect of candidate competitiveness indicates that intra-party variations are also important in influencing candidate web presence. Only weak effects were found concerning the controlling variables. Younger age and running in a more urbanized district were weak but significant predictors of candidate web presence. The

weak effect for younger age found here is noteworthy. Prior to the 1999 Finnish parliamentary election, Carlson and Djupsund (2001: 73-4) found that younger candidates had campaign websites at a significantly higher rate than the older candidates. In the 2004 EP election, Carlson and Strandberg (2005) also found a significant independent effect for younger candidate age.

Focus is now turned solely to major-party candidates in order to further illustrate the intra-party variations. The effects of candidate competitiveness are further explored in Table 3. Even though, as revealed by a separate analysis not reported at length here, most competitive candidates run for major parties (72.6% χ^2=504.667 (df=2) p<.001) the results in Table 3 show noticeable intra-party variation. Almost 85 percent of the competitive major party candidates had a website as opposed to around 63 percent of the non-competitive major party candidates.

Table 3. Competitiveness and web presence of major party candidates (N=679).

Competitiveness	Web presence		
	No	Yes	Total
Non-competitive (N=323)	37,5 %	62,5 %	100 %
Competitive (N=356)	15,4 %	84,6 %	100 %
Total N=679			

χ^2=42.732 (df=1) p.<.001

Candidate campaigning on the web: site functions and delivery

What are the 874 on-line candidates doing on their websites? More specifically: what site functions are the candidates offering and how well are they delivering them? The mean scores for website functions and delivery for the on-line candidates' websites are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Candidate website functions and delivery according to the size of each candidate's party (*N*=874).

	Fringe party candidates (*N*=66)		Minor party candidates (*N*=309)		Major party candidates (*N*=499)		
	Mean	*Std.Dev*	*Mean*	*Std.Dev.*	*Mean*	*Std.Dev*	*Sig.**
Functions indexes							
Information provision (0-12)	3.197	1.730	4.932	1.812	5.477	1.735	**.000**
Resource generation (0-12)	.318	.931	1.094	1.736	1.367	1.729	**.000**
Networking (0-n)	5.773	12.924	6.938	11.818	6.607	12.822	.781
Participation (0-n)	2.485	1.850	3.799	4.371	4.291	4.449	**.004**
Campaigning (0-9)	1.515	.996	1.676	.983	1.742	.998	.189
Delivery indexes							
Multimedia (0-n)	4.727	5.529	9.945	10.228	12.834	13.670	**.000**
Accessibility (0-6)	.046	.210	.288	.488	.112	.322	**.000**
Navigability (0-5)	.849	.846	1.430	.845	1.579	.714	**.000**
Freshness (0-7)	1.212	1.810	1.867	2.204	2.419	2.417	**.000**
Visibility (0-n)	6.091	45.046	.929	3.503	.637	1.825	**.004**

* One-way Anova tested for differences between group means

The findings in Table 4 reveal two interesting findings; almost all the candidates' websites scored low in the indices for functions and delivery. These findings largely resemble those found in other countries, such as Australia, Germany, USA and UK (e.g. Gibson & Ward 2002: 112, 121; Gibson et al. 2003: 55-62; Gibson & Römmele 2003: 97-9). Moreover, although not directly comparable, these findings resemble those found concerning the 1999 Finnish parliamentary and 2004 EP-parliament candidates' campaign websites (Carlson & Djupsund 2001: 78-83; Carlson & Strandberg 2005). Concerning information provision, resource generation, campaigning, accessibility, navigability and freshness, the mean scores in table 4 are, at best, around 40% of the possible index total. Additionally, major party candidates tend to outscore their minor and fringe party rivals. They provide more information on their websites [mean=5.477 compared to 4.932 and 3.197 respectively], and offer more functions promoting resource generation [mean=1.367 compared to 1.094 and .318] and participation [mean=4.9291 compared to 3.799 and 2.485] than the minor and fringe parties. The major party candidates also use multimedia to a higher extent than their minor- and fringe party rivals [mean=12.834 compared to 10.228 and 4.727 respectively]. Their sites are also easier to navigate [mean=1,579 compared to 1.430 and .849] and updated more often [mean=2.419 compared to 1.867 and 1.212]. The only striking exception to this pattern is the visibility index in which the fringe candidates outscored the two other groups of candidates [mean score=6.091 compared to .929 and .637 for minor and major party candidates respectively]. Some

caution is due in interpreting this finding as the standard deviation of the mean for fringe candidates is exceptionally high. In total, though, these findings indicate that the size of each candidate's party seemingly affects the functions and delivery of the campaign websites.

Predicting candidate website functions and delivery

How strong is the independent effect of the size of a candidate's party, and are there other significant variables influencing each candidate's website functions and delivery? These questions are fleshed out in turn in this section. Table 5 presents the results of an OLS multiple regression model predicting the mean scores for website functions. The independent variables were entered as predictors in the model along with the two sets of control variables. Concerning these, candidate demographics, the level of education and SES were possible to establish for 695 on-line candidates. The model is tested on this somewhat reduced census.

Table 5. OLS multiple regression model predicting campaign website functions (*N*=695).

	Information provision (0-12)		Resource generation (0-12)		Networking (0-n)		Participation (0-n)		Campaigning (0-9)	
	B	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E*	*B*	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E.*
Inter-party effects										
Party size (1)	**1.640****	.314	**.744***	.326	-1.828	2.583	1.728	.893	-.159	.183
Party size (2)	**1.333****	.318	.482	.330	-2.460	2.617	1.674	.905	.041	.185
Ideology (1)	.158	.163	-.058	.169	1.521	1.337	.253	.462	-0.68	.094
Ideology (2)	.368	.218	-.239	.226	3.125	1.789	-.612	.618	-.214	.126
Ideology (3)	.224	.184	.141	.191	.543	1.511	-.193	.522	.204	.107
Intra-party-effects										
Competitive-ness (1)	**.909****	.147	**.524****	.152	-.683	1.209	**.934***	.418	**.305****	.085
Status (1)	**.646****	.194	-.115	.201	**7.474****	1.593	.436	.550	**.502****	.113
Candidate demographics										
Gender (1)	.033	.128	-.019	.132	**-2.120***	1.048	-.517	.362	-.119	.074
Age	**-.024****	.006	**-.033****	.007	**-.114***	.052	**-.036***	.018	**-.012****	.004
Education (1)	.154	.258	.041	.268	-1.106	2.123	.826	.734	-.140	.150
Education (2)	-.144	.258	-.322	.267	-1.690	2.119	-009	.732	-.248	.150
SES (1)	-.055	.323	.182	.335	.343	2.659	-.031	.919	-.072	.188
SES (2)	-.422	.402	-.064	.417	1.318	3.308	-.745	.1.143	-.082	.234
SES (3)	.000	.355	-.090	.368	-.808	2.916	.061	.1.008	-.105	.206
Constituency demographics District urbanization	.007	.005	**.016****	.005	.023	.039	-.002	.013	**.007****	.003
R²	.207		.101		.053		.043		.112	
Valid *N*	695		695		695		695		695	

* p <.05
** p <.01
Note: Predictors (the last category is used as reference category): **Party size:** 1=Major, 2=Minor, 3= Fringe; **Ideology:** 1=Left-wing, 2=Green (ecological), 3=Center (rural), 4=Right-wing (conservative); **Competitiveness:** 1= competitive candidate, 2=Non-competitive candidate; **Status:** 1=Incumbent 2=Challenger; **Gender:** 1=Female, 2=Male; **Age:** years; **Education:** 1=Tertiary 2=Secondary 3=Primary; **SES:** 1=High SES 2= Student 3=Low SES 4=Not working; **District urbanization:** average degree of urbanization (continuous).

With due caution paid to the rather weak explanatory powers in the regressions, the findings show that running for a major party is a significant predictor of higher mean scores in information provision [*B*=1.640] and resource generation [*B*=.744]. It is also noteworthy that the effect on the participation index [*B*=1.728] was almost significant [p.=.053]. Similar findings were also reported by Carlson and Strandberg (2005) concerning the 2004 Finnish EP-parliament candidates' websites. In that election

campaign, the most information-rich and engaging websites had, to a larger extent, been provided by major-, rather than minor- and fringe party candidates. Moreover, in this study, being a competitive candidate was a significant predictor of information provision [*B*=.909], resource generation [*B*=.524], participation [*B*=.934], and campaigning [*B*=.305]. Incumbent status was significant in predicting the index scores in information provision [*B*=.646], networking [*B*=7.474] and campaigning [*B*=.502]. Both inter- and intra-party variables seem to be quite consistent groups of predictors. Regarding the effect of inter-party variables, the patterns found in several other studies of *party* websites are, by and large, replicated in this study of *candidate* websites (cf. Gibson & Ward 2002: 112, 121; Gibson et al. 2003: 55-62; Gibson & Römmele 2003: 97-9). Lower candidate age seems to be a weak but consistent predictor of all indices amongst the controlling variables (cf. Carlson & Djupsund 2001: 74).

Focus is now turned to the delivery of the websites. Which factors predict high mean scores on the delivery indices? The two sets of independent variables are again entered as predictors in an OLS multiple regression model along with the two sets of controlling variables. The results are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. OLS multiple regression model predicting campaign website delivery (*N*= 695)

	Multimedia (0-n)		Accessibility (0-6)		Navigability (0-5)		Freshness (0-7)		Visibility (0-n)	
	B	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E*	*B*	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E.*
Inter-party effects										
Party size (1)	**6.190****	2.389	.066	.075	**.585****	.148	**.895***	.436	-.681	.517
Party size (2)	3.073	2.420	**.246****	.076	**.590****	.150	.530	.442	-.035	.524
Ideology (1)	.096	1.233	**-.092***	.039	**.164***	.076	.092	.225	-.187	.267
Ideology (2)	1.710	1.652	-.083	.052	-.122	.102	.129	.302	-.473	.358
Ideology (3)	-2.029	1.394	**-.097***	..044	.030	..086	-.140	.255	-.442	.302
Intra-party-effects										
Competitive-ness (1)	**4.982****	1.118	.068	.035	.091	.069	**.409***	.204	**.787****	.242
Status (1)	.142	1.470	.014	.046	.145	.091	**1.290****	.268	**.846****	.318
Candidate demographics										
Gender (1)	.349	.968	-.009	.031	.014	.060	-.029	.177	-.378	.210
Age	-.090	.048	-.001	.002	-.001	.003	**-.019***	.009	-.015	.010
Education (1)	-1.110	1.945	**.143***	.061	.159	.120	.191	.355	.421	.421
Education (2)	-1.338	1.934	.113	.061	.122	.120	.068	.353	-.123	.419
SES (1)	-.975	2.461	.011	.078	-.050	.152	.062	.450	**-2.549****	.533
SES (2)	-2.376	3.048	.120	.096	-.017	.189	-.551	.557	**-2.578****	.660
SES (3)	.793	2.695	.058	.085	.070	.167	.084	.492	**-2.155****	.584
Constituency demographics										
District urbanization	-.036	.036	**.004****	.001	-.000	.002	-.011	.007	**.021****	.008
R²	.072		.109		.055		.092		.101	
Valid *N*	695		695		695		695		695	

* p <.05
** p <.01
Note: Predictors (the last category is used as reference category): **Party size:** 1=Major, 2=Minor, 3= Fringe; **Ideology:** 1=Left-wing, 2=Green (ecological), 3=Center (rural), 4=Right-wing (conservative); **Competitiveness:** 1= competitive candidate, 2=Non-competitive candidate; **Status:** 1=Incumbent 2=Challenger; **Gender:** 1=Female, 2=Male; **Age:** years; **Education:** 1=Tertiary 2=Secondary 3=Primary; **SES:** 1=High SES 2= Student 3=Low SES 4=Not working; **District urbanization:** average degree of urbanization (continuous).

With caution heeded due to the quite weak explanatory power of the regressions, the results show significant effects for running for a major party [*B*=6.190] and being a competitive candidate [*B*=4.982] in predicting the use of multimedia. Running for a major party is also significant in predicting navigability [*B*=0.585] and freshness [*B*=.895]. Concerning party size, these findings bear similarity to findings concerning party- and candidate websites in other countries (e.g. Gibson et al 2003a, 2003b). Being a

competitive candidate was also a significant predictor of freshness [*B*=.409] and visibility [*B*=.787]. Incumbency status was significant in predicting freshness [*B*=1.290] and visibility [*B*=.846]. Quite surprisingly though, running for a minor party was a stronger predictor of candidate website accessibility [*B*=.246] than running for a major party [no significance]. Concerning candidate and constituency demographics, no consistent patterns can be found. Regarding visibility, however, candidates outside the working population surprisingly outscored candidates belonging to higher SES segments. Website delivery nonetheless seems mostly dependent on inter-party and intra-party variables.

Summary of findings

The empirical findings of the study can now be summarized. Regarding on-line campaign presence, major party candidates have a higher web presence than their minor and fringe party counterparts. The size of a candidate's party is also the strongest predictor of campaign web presence. Candidate competitiveness and a green ideology of the candidate's party are also significant predictors. The findings moreover show that most candidates scored low in the indices for website functions and delivery (cf. Carlson & Strandberg 2005; Gibson & Ward 2002; Newell 2001). The Finnish candidates display a relatively low utilization of the opportunities inherent in the new communication medium. It is, however, noteworthy that major party candidates tend to outscore their rivals in several of the measured indices. The size of a candidate's party also proved a strong significant predictor of website functions. Interestingly, candidate competitiveness and status as incumbent also had quite strong effects in predicting website functions. Turning to website delivery, the size of each candidate's party proved a strong predictor for several delivery scores. Candidate competitiveness and status of incumbency were also significant in predicting some website delivery indices. The effects of other predictors were either weak or inconsistent.

Conclusions

Returning to the theoretical framework and research questions, then, what conclusions can be drawn? Concerning the first research question – how much predicting power do the inter- and intra-party variables have in determining whether or not a candidate will have a campaign website? Two findings merit attention; noteworthy inter-party effects were found as major party candidates are significantly more likely to have an on-line campaign. These candidates possibly receive financial support, technical assistance or aid in attracting voters to the candidate sites from their parties (c.f. Margolis et al. 2003: 58). This has not been empirically tested in this study, but the strong predictive power of the

affiliated party, even in the candidate-centred Finnish election context (cf. Gibson 2004), seemingly points in that direction. The other significant finding is that, in focusing on candidate web campaigning in the Finnish context, some interesting intra-party effects were discovered. Competitive candidates were found to be more likely to have a web presence than non-competitive. There seems to be more to candidate-level on-line electoral competition than merely the size of a candidate's party. Both the support of the affiliated party and the sense of competitiveness seemingly stimulate candidate web presence. In addition, one must not overlook the fact that green party candidates are more likely to use a campaign website than candidates with other ideological outlooks (cf. Gibson & McAllister 2003; Gibson & Römmele 2003b).

Turning to website functions and delivery, the on-line candidates were far from utilizing the new campaign communication channel to its full potential. The sites were mainly used for downwards information provision and for networking through hyperlinks (cf. Gibson & Ward 2002; Newell 2001; Ward & Gibson 2003). The Finnish candidates do not promote up-down interactivity and voter participation on their campaign sites. In correspondence with Carlson and Djupsund's study of the 1999 Finnish parliament election (Carlson & Djupsund 2001: 79-80), and Carlson and Strandberg's study (2005) prior to the 2004 EP election, these findings show that the sites still mostly resemble 'electronic brochures' (cf. Kamark 1999: 108). Turning to the delivery of the websites, the candidates were seemingly not making full use the potential of the internet. Even though multimedia was used, especially by major party candidates, the websites scored low on the other indices. The on-line campaigns seemed static as the websites were seldom updated. The campaign sites also lacked accessibility and navigability and, in most cases, visibility. It is noteworthy that visibility here only refers to on-line visibility, leaving the off-line back pointers used in traditional campaigns unexplored in this study.

Concerning the second research question – how much predictive power do inter- and intra-party variables have in determining 1) the functions of the candidate websites and 2) the quality of the website's delivery? – some findings should be stressed. Both inter- and intra-party effects proved significant predictors of website functions and delivery. Running for a major party predicted higher index scores on some functions and several delivery indices. This pattern was only broken once as minor party candidates scored slightly better in accessibility. This finding is especially interesting in light of the candidate-centred campaign environment in Finland (Carlson 2006; Ruostetsaari & Mattila 2002). As the candidates of the major parties seem to outperform the minor and fringe party candidates in terms of website functions and delivery, this could indicate that the major parties are supporting their candidates to a higher degree. It is conceivable that major parties provide some sort of professional technical support to their candidates (as discussed by Gibson et al. 2003; Margolis et al 2003). These finding also serve to

underline the view stated by Margolis and Resnick (2000: 16) that the parties and candidates most likely to produce the most sophisticated websites are those with sufficient resources. These should be the major parties, since Finnish parties rely heavily on direct state funding mostly based on the share of parliamentary seats (Djupsund 1989: 20; Sundberg 1996: 150).

Concerning intra-party variables, both candidate competitiveness and incumbency status proved significant predictors of both website functions and delivery. One can argue that all significant intra-party effects lend more support a no-change scenario concerning the internet's effect on candidate on-line competition. As competitiveness and incumbency consistently predict higher mean scores, the non-competitive and challenging candidates seemingly do not put the same effort into their campaign web sites. Possibly due to their slim chances of election, these candidates might not find it worthwhile to invest extensive amounts of money and effort in their general campaigns (cf. Davis 1999: 94; Herrnson & Stokes 2003: 11). Their internet campaigns are lagging behind as well. It is also interesting to note that the incumbents and competitive candidates are putting significantly more effort into their campaign sites. These candidates possibly incorporate their sites more fully into their overall campaign strategies because they are more compelled to seize every possible vote (Kamarck 2002: 86-7). Incumbents who are more likely known to the public (Davis 1999: 94-5) might also have credibility to lose in boasting a relatively lack-lustre website. Overall, although again adding some intra-party depth to the discussion on electoral competition on the internet, these findings still mostly point in a 'no-change' direction. This conclusion is obviously not *per se* transferable to all areas of internet politics. The article has, for instance, not addressed the challenge to the no-change scenario possibly posed by new social movements and transnational movements embracing the technology (cf. Foot & Schneider 2002: Norris 2001b: 233-9; 2003).

In sum, what are the major patterns found in this study, and what summarizing conclusions can be drawn? Firstly, the study has shown that most candidates did not campaign on-line, and the majority of those who did had websites which did not make full use of the possibilities of the new communication technology. The study has moreover served to shed more light on the ways in which candidate-level electoral competition works on the internet. Evidently, even though the Finnish context contains elements which would suggest otherwise, party size is nonetheless highly influential on candidates' web campaigning. Both launching and further developing functions and delivery aspects of campaign websites is more likely for major party candidates. These findings lend some support to a no-change scenario vis-à-vis the internet's impact on candidate-level electoral competition (cf. Margolis & Resnick 2000: 54). Major parties, and their candidates, should, in theory, control more financial and organizational resources

than their rivals (Margolis et al. 2003: 58; Margolis & Resnick 2000: 16), which seemingly has resulted in a higher campaign web presence and more advanced websites by major party candidates. The study has also helped to deepen and bring more nuances to the general knowledge concerning on-line electoral competition. The recurring significant effects for the intra-party factors, i.e. incumbency and competitiveness, merit attention. Electoral competition between candidates on the internet does not necessarily exist only between candidates of different parties, but can also appear within the boundaries of one party. Tentatively, it appears as if both the party and the candidates find it pointless to invest extensive time, effort, and money into on-line campaigns for candidates without any chance of election. This should only serve to further strengthen the *status quo* concerning electoral competition on the candidate level, both on- and off-line. All things considered, then, on-line campaigning is still not a 'chance for the outsiders', on the contrary, it is still mostly a question of 'politics as usual'.

Notes

[1] Source: http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/europe.html, accessed September 2004.

[2] The comparison figure (d'Hondt) is calculated based on the party's total number of votes in each district. The candidate who ranks number one in votes within the party receives the party's total votes as his/her comparison figure. The second in rank receives the party's total divided by two as his/her comparison figure, etc. In each district a fixed number of seats, based upon the population in the district, are "up for grabs". The candidates of all parties are ranked according to their comparison figures and those ranking above the district's margin for election are elected.

[3] Source: the election website of the Finnish ministry of justice: www.vaalit.fi, accessed September 2004.

[4] In all, 734 of these websites were located on independent URL-domains. Moreover, 96 candidate sites were linked to from the party's websites and located under the party's domain. A total of 40 incumbent MPs linked their campaign site from their section on the parliament's official site. Candidates receiving a brief presentation in the election section on their party's website were excluded from the sample.

[5] The election website of the Finnish Ministry of Justice (www.vaalit.fi) and the website of Statistics Finland (www.stat.fi) proved useful in determining the independent variables. Many thanks to Ph.D. Tom Carlson who collected the data required for most of the independent variables.

[6] Changes made were mainly done in order to bring the scheme up-to-date. Moreover, some of the dichotomous variables were changed into counts in order to better capture differences between candidate sites.

[7] As several coders were involved in the content coding, inter-coder reliability was checked according to the formula suggested by Holsti (1969: 140), resulting in a very satisfactory average reliability of R=.89. Many thanks to the students who assisted in the content coding.

[8] Unfortunately, as candidate education and SES could not be established for a large enough census of candidates, the two variables were excluded from the model in Table 2.

[9] Initial tests revealed strong correlations (average r=.809) between the district's average degree of urbanization and other constituency level demographical variables (age- and educational structure). As including all three variables had an adverse effect on the regression model's explanatory power, the degree of urbanization was chosen as a single indicator for constituency demographics.

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Appendix: The coding/scoring scheme for site functions and delivery

Functions:

Information Provision
Additive index: 1 point assigned for each item present (0–12)
Values/ideology
Policies
Documents (i.e. manifesto, constitution)
Newsletters
Media releases (i.e. speeches, statements, interview transcripts, conferences)
People/Who's Who
Candidate profiles
Electoral Information (statistics, information on past performance)
Event Calendar (prospective or retrospective)
Frequently Asked Questions
Privacy Policy
Article Archive or Library

Resource Generation
Cumulative index (0-12) Three ordinal indices:
(1) Donation index 0 - 4
(2) Merchandise index 0 – 4
(3) Membership index 0 – 4
For each index (1) reference made and postal address listed (2) download form and post (3) online enquiry (specific email or online form) (4) online transaction (0) no references made.

Networking
Cumulative index 0 – n (two counts)
The number of *internal links*, i.e., links to own party, local party organizations, MP's/MEPs, international branches, other candidates in the same party, organizations that are supportive of the party's goals, etc.
The number of *external links*, i.e., all other links than the internal ones; inter alia, commercial links and links to neutral or news/educational sites such as news broadcasters, newspapers, parliamentary/government sites, national libraries etc.
Extranet available from site or members only pages 1 = present 0 = absent

Participation
Cumulative index 0 – n (2 ordinal indices and two counts)
0penness (0 - n) Count of email contacts listed on site. Each address = 1
Feedback index (0–3) Ordinal (1) email address on the site; (2) email address explicitly focused on soliciting comments; (3) an online form to submit views offered.
Opinion Poll (0 - n) Number of opinion polls offered.
Interaction index (0-4) Ordinal (1) games/gimmicks to play; (2) bulletin board or guest book to post views; (3) chat room for real-time discussion; (4) opportunity for online debate with leader/senior organization figures.

Campaigning
Additive index: 1 point assigned for each item present (0–9)
Election site
Negative campaigning (banner, pop-up ad etc. on home page)
Targeting marginal constituency/swing voter (explicit effort)
Cookie
Join an email update list
Become online campaigner
Information on merits and achievements
Download logo
Download offline leaflets/propaganda

Delivery:

Presentation/Appearance
Homepage design index, **cumulative index 0 – n (2 ordinal indices and five counts):**
Graphics
Frames
Number of moving icons
Number of photographs
Number of sound files
Number of video files
Number of live streaming files

Access
1 point for each item present (0-6)
No frames option
Text only option (entire site)
Text only documents to download and print
WAP/PDA 'wireless' enabled
foreign language translation
blind/visually impaired software

Navigability
Additive index - 1 point for each item present (0 – 5)
Navigation tips
Search engine(s)
Home page icon on lower level pages
Fixed menu bar on lower level pages
Site map/index

Freshness
Ordinal index (0-7)

No information given (0); + 6 months (1); 1-6 months (2); monthly (3); every two weeks (4); 3-7 days (5); 1-2 days (6); Updated daily (7).

Visibility
Number of links in to the site (calculated with search engine, e.g. *google.fi* and *altavista.fi*)

Article V

"Town Hall" Meetings for the Masses or "Social Clubs" for the Motivated?
- A Study of Citizens' Discussions on the Internet

Introduction

> "Thus for the first time we have an opportunity to create artificial town meetings among populations that could not otherwise communicate" (Barber, 1984: 274)

During the 20th century, political communication experienced major changes. The modernization of society weakened the links between political parties and voters and increased the importance of the media in political communication. Where political parties previously relied upon mass meetings and partisan press to communicate with voters, they are now increasingly channeling their messages through private media outlets (e.g. Norris, 2001a; Salokangas, 1999; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Journalists have developed an independent professional identity and apply professional techniques in their everyday profession (Altheide and Snow, 1979; 1991; Asp, 1986; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Carlson, 2000; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). The parties seek votes from all segments of voters (Kirchheimer, 1966) and the citizens are finding it hard to separate party messages from each other. The number of uncertain voters is increasing which, in turn, has resulted in decreasing party membership figures and electoral turnout (Djupsund and Carlson, 2003: 40; Dalton, 2000: 19-36; Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Scarrow, 2000: 79-101; Sundberg, 1996: 236).

The rise of the internet in the 1990s raised hopes of a revival of the weakened political communication and democracy (e.g. Berman and Witzner, 1997: 1313-1321; Dahl, 1989: 519-522; Norris, 1999a: 2-3). Compared to the traditional political outlets, the internet has several theoretical advantages. The web is cheap and fast to use, multimedia transmissions are easily achieved and publishing is not subject to editorial intervention. In addition, the internet could arguably be regarded as the first fully interactive communication channel (Bimber, 1999: 412; Coleman and Goetze, 2001: 5; Kamarck, 1999: 114; Stromer-Galley, 2000: 112).

Political discussion boards on the web have, from the viewpoint of participatory democracy, been considered the modern equivalents of political 'town hall' meetings (e.g. Budge, 1996: 28-31; Dahl, 1989: 519). The discussion boards resemble arenas in which all citizens can discuss, debate and express their opinions on public matters (Bentivegna, 1998: 2-3; Hill and Hughes, 1998: 2-3; Norris, 1999b: 72; Rheingold, 1993: xxx). These debates have the potential to increase the citizens' political knowledge, political interest and social capital (Barber 1984; Harwood & Lay, 2001; Shah et al., 2001).

However, there is still much uncertainty whether the theoretical assumptions regarding the potential inherent in discussion boards will ever be realized in reality.

Hence, one must question whether these boards are really used by citizens. In this study, this central question will be answered through a quantitative investigation of Finnish discussion boards. In previous research, scholars have noted that politics on the internet, first and foremost, activates the already politically motivated citizens (see discussion below and e.g. Davis, 1999; Norris, 1999a; 1999b; 2001d). Does this also seem to be the case in Finland, a country with one of the highest internet penetration rates in the world (Norris, 2001c: 26)? Are there signs of political mass meetings or are the discussion boards merely 'social clubs' for the motivated?

1. Electronic discussion boards - two theories

Concerning the citizens' participation in electronic politics, two differing theoretical scenarios are usually discussed; the mobilization- and reinforcement theories (Norris, 1999b). In the following section, these theories are discussed against the contextual background provided by electronic discussion boards.

In essence, according to proponents of the mobilization theory, political activity on the internet constitutes a new, easily accessible, form of political participation. The internet lowers several barriers to citizens' political participation. According to the proponents of the theory, easy access to the internet would result in attracting increasing numbers of citizens into political activity. Citizens who were previously motivated but perceived the step into political activity as too large and demanding have now found the ideal entrance into political life. This would be due to virtually zero costs associated with participation, the relative unimportance of time and spatial distance, in addition to the interactive opportunities available on-line (Coleman and Goetze, 2001: 5; Gibson et al., 2002; Norris, 1999a: 2-3; 1999b: 72; 2001d: 3). Moreover, the internet provides a communication channel through which the sender of a political message retains full control of the message, meaning that editorial intervention can thus be avoided (Berman and Witzner, 1997: 1313-1321; Djupsund and Carlson, 2003: 39-40; Gibson and Ward, 1998: 15).

The interest of this study, i.e. electronic debates, has also been considered from the point of view of mobilizing agents. Electronic discussion boards provide all citizens with an opportunity to engage in political discussions, anywhere and anytime (Bentivegna, 1998: 8; Dahl, 1989: 519). Barber (1984: 151) states that the core of what he calls strong democracy is political participation through, among others, citizens' discussions. Likewise, Budge argues that electronic debates are comparable to all other forms of political conversation. Budge states that electronic debates are one form of direct democracy (1996: 30):

"Not only does this form of participation have greater educative effects for the individual, it also strengthens the social and personal links without which democracy becomes simply a set of purely formal procedures. In turn social ties strengthen a willingness to compromise and strengthen the ability to offer alternatives on policies […] In short, face-to-face contact produces `rich talk´ rather than formal debate, which is a highly desirable outcome. […] Surely, though, popular debate and discussion, however conducted, have certain characteristics in common which make them recognizably the same. […] Both electronic and face-to-face debates can be regarded therefore as variants of direct democracy…" (Budge, 1996: 29-30)

As a counterweight to the optimistic mobilization theory, an essentially opposite point of view regarding internet politics has emerged. This cautious, sometimes even pessimistic, approach is called the reinforcement theory. The basic argument inherent in the reinforcement theory is that the revival of political participation through the web, argued by the proponents of the mobilization theory, is highly questionable (Davis, 1999: 2; Norris, 1999b: 72-73; Norris, 2001b: 217- 219). Politics on the internet will more likely only attract the politically 'converted' citizens (e.g. Norris, 2001d).

Generally, there are many reasons to be cautious when considering the implications of a possible shift into electronic politics. Pessimistically, Bimber (2000: 332) writes that the increasing flow of information and political outlets provided by the web, are in no way guaranteed to save democracy. On the contrary, it is very plausible that citizens' participation is further fragmented into small communities with little in common (c.f. Barber, 1998). Dahl (1989: 520) also calls for caution regarding the electronic discussion boards. Concerning these, he states, there are no guarantees that electronic participation increases citizens' political knowledge. Moreover, he points out that the new technology might even be abused by those in power, and thus works in contradiction to the ideal of direct democracy. In addition, Budge mentions that there still remains much uncertainty concerning the quality of electronic debates, an uncertainty which makes direct comparisons with physical conversations impossible. Strandberg (2003) found indications of poor discussion quality in electronic debates; on some discussion boards the debates are negative in tone, if not even antagonistic (c.f. Bentivegna, 1998; Löfgren, 2001). Thus, one can question the discussion boards' ability to create "strong democratic conversations" as Barber (1984) hopes for.

Concerning the citizens' on-line activity, further objections to the visions of the mobilization theory can be put forth. Regarding this, proponents of the reinforcement theory have pointed at two causes for the internet's failure to mobilize the masses. Firstly, the technological resources required for internet usage are unevenly divided. Globally there exists a divide in internet penetration between the rich industrialized nations of the northern hemisphere and the poor developing countries of the southern hemisphere

(Coleman and Goetze, 2001: 16; Norris, 2001b). Likewise, in European countries, a similar divide is evident. Thus, Southern European countries have a significantly lower internet penetration rate than the Scandinavian and other Northern European countries (Norris, 2000). Therefore, only the citizens in certain countries, including Finland, have thus far had the necessary resources to facilitate political activity on-line.

Nationally, a socioeconomic divide in the distribution of internet resources is also evident. Frequent internet users generally display similar demographic traits. Hence, the typical political internet user is a young, highly educated male with relatively high income (Gibson et al., 2002; Norris, 2001b). The extent of women's internet usage is on a slight rise and, in the long run, the previously noted gender divide might erode (Gibson and Ward 1999; Gibson et al. 2002). Nonetheless, according to Bimber (1999: 411-412), these demographic characteristics resemble those of citizens already engaged in off-line politics. All in all, then, the technological resources are unevenly distributed both between and within nations. There exists a resource-based reinforcement (c.f. Strandberg, 2003: 21-24). There is a divide between those with access to on-line political information and those without this access.

Secondly, assuming that the technological resources were evenly divided, proponents of the reinforcement scenario argue that on-line politics would still only attract those already politically interested (Gibson and Ward, 1999: 33; Hill and Hughes, 1998: 185-186; Norris, 1999a: 9-10; 1999b; 2001b). Thus, this version of the reinforcement theory states that internet usage will neither improve nor diminish the existing political participation (e.g. Norris, 2001b: 98). Djupsund and Carlson mention that the internet differs from traditional mass media on one significant aspect: the internet requires that the user actively seeks the information he or she wants while, for example, television exposes the passive viewer to the political messages (Djupsund and Carlson, 2003: 41). Likewise, Hill and Hughes (1998: 186) state the following concerning the internet: "People can tune into any 'channel' *they* desire, and choose *their* level of interactivity". Norris (2001b: 219-228) mentions that, in such a situation, the citizens' previous knowledge, trust and interest for politics guide their choices between the numerous outlets on the internet. This version of the reinforcement theory could be called the motivation-based reinforcement theory (c.f. Strandberg, 2003: 25-25). Davis excellently summarizes the core of this argument:

> "However, the mere existence of communication technology does not transform people into political animals. Similarly, the internet does not cause people to suddenly become politically active or even interested. Rather political behavior will remain essentially the same regardless of technological innovations designed to disseminate more political information." (Davis, 1999: 8)

Therefore, the internet is merely a new means for the politically motivated citizens to engage in traditional political activity (Norris, 1999a: 9-10; 1999b).

The findings in previous studies support the notions of this motivation-based reinforcement theory, especially regarding demanding forms of on-line political activity such as political discussions (Cornfield et al., 2003: 20; Norris, 1999b). Norris (1999b) found that only four percent of the American internet users had participated in an on-line political discussion prior to the 1996 and 1998 elections. Recently the figure has risen to seven percent (Cornfield et al., 2003: 20). Nonetheless, the citizens' interest in this form of electronic political participation still remains very small. In the study mentioned above, Norris (1999b: 88-89) found that those using the web were already among the most politically motivated, interested and informed citizens. In the same manner, Gibson and Ward (1999: 14) stress that the driving force behind European internet users' interest in electronic political debates was their prior interest in off-line debates.

2. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of the study is:

To assess which of either the mobilization- or the reinforcement theory mostly corresponds to the reality in a Finnish context.

Globally, Finland is among the leading nations in internet penetration. In May 2002, 51.9 % of the population had access to the internet[1]. Moreover, Finland has been among the world leaders in internet access for several years (e.g. Norris, 2001c), and therefore one can expect that Finnish internet users are relatively familiar with the options available on-line. Hence, the political outlets ought not to be entirely unknown to Finnish internet users. Thus, conceptually speaking, the resource-based divide in internet access in Finland is amongst the smallest in the world. Therefore, the Finnish context provides a suitable testing ground for the motivation-based mobilization- and reinforcement theories. The main research question of the study is:

RQ1: *What indications of either the mobilization- or the reinforcement theory can be found in the citizens' activity on Finnish electronic discussion boards?*

Are the electronic 'town-hall' meetings really engaging the masses, or are there only a few citizens attending? On-line discussion boards are generally regarded as one of the more demanding forms of political participation (Gibson and Ward, 1999; Norris, 1999b).

Barber mentions that it is only when the masses get involved in discussions and begin debating public matters that they stop being masses and become citizens (Barber, 1984: 155). In studying these forums, we receive indications of whether the Finnish internet users are willing to leap into 'electronic citizenship'.

Electronic debates can increase the citizens' political knowledge, interest and social capital (Harwood and Lay, 2001; Shah et al., 2001). In order to achieve this, however, discussions are required to actually take place. Even though many citizens post messages to electronic discussion boards and discussion threads consist of hundreds of messages, the crucial issue is whether the citizens are talking *with* each other and not *at* each other (e.g. Löfgren, 2001: 87; Wilhelm, 1999: 160). Barber (1984) mentions the strong political talk as one of the most important elements of his vision of strong democracy:

> "Strong democratic talk, then, always involves listening as well as speaking, feeling as well as thinking, and acting as well as reflecting" (Barber, 1984: 178)

Without this exchange of ideas, electronic debates are not able to create the positive effects predicted by proponents of the mobilization theory. Hence, the following question is also asked in the study:

RQ2: *Are there traits of debates and exchange of opinions evident in the Finnish discussion boards, or do discussions generally consist of 'monologues'?*

Finally, one must also consider the fact that, in spite of the long history of internet technology, the rapid entrance into common knowledge and usage is no more than roughly ten years old (Hill and Hughes, 1998). The development has been explosive and in Finland the number of internet users has multiplied fivefold since 1997[2]. These trends are likely to continue and eventually also affect the political activity of citizens on-line. Candidates and political parties will increasingly advertise their websites through meta-campaigning in concurrence with traditional campaigning (Carlson and Djupsund, 2001: 85). Thus, internet politics gains more exposure in traditional mass media, which ought to increase citizens' awareness of the new technology. A third research question, accompanied by a follow-up question, is asked:

RQ3: *How has the quantity of citizens' activity on the electronic discussion boards evolved over time, and is the trend towards increased mobilization or reinforcement?*

RQ3a: *Are there differences in the activity on the discussion boards in different electoral contexts, and how is the increased political activity and media coverage prior to elections (Asp, 1986: 108) reflected on the forums?*

3. Methods and data

The data for the study was collected on six Finnish discussion boards. Four of these forums are associated with a political party and two are independent 'web portals'. The Centre Party is represented by two discussion boards; one board open to all citizens and one exclusively for party members. An exclusive member forum could theoretically restrict the number of potential users. However, as the number of members in the Centre Party is 200,000[4] the potential audience should still be around 100,000[5] users. By including the member board in the analysis, one can examine the on-line activity of politically interested citizens. Do party members engage in the opportunities for internal debate offered on the discussion board? In addition to the two discussion boards of the Centre Party, the discussion board of the National Coalition Party's website was included. This board is open to all citizens but registration is required before gaining access. The discussion board of the Green League was included as the fourth and final board associated with a political party. This forum is open to all citizens after registration. The discussion boards associated with political parties were selected mainly based on their accessibility. Thus, the discussion board of the largest party, the Social Democratic Party, was excluded as it was shut down during the period of analysis. Moreover, only the forums of relatively large parties were included in order to keep the potential number of users as high as possible. Concerning this, the National Coalition Party and the Centre Party are obvious choices as they are both among the top three parties in voter support[6]. The discussion board of the Green League was included, disregarding the party's smaller shares of votes, as the supporters of the party generally belong to the demographic groups of the population who use the internet at a high rate (Norris, 2001b: 158). Thus, a large share of the Green League's supporters ought to have access to internet resources.

The data is further supplemented by two discussion boards not associated with any political party. These boards are both hosted on an independent web portal called jippii.fi[7]. A political and a non-political discussion board are coded for the same variables as the forums associated with political parties. Since some citizens might not find their way around to the parties' discussion forums, the inclusion of independent forums seems necessary in order to provide a more holistic picture of the electronic debates. Moreover, as both independent discussion boards are hosted in the same context (the portal jippii.fi), a quantitative comparison of the activity on the discussion boards provides an indication

of user preferences. If internet politics is 'preaching to the converted', the activity on the political forum ought to be lower than on its non-political counterpart.

The research method of this study is quantitative. The activity on all selected discussion boards was examined through the 'discussion threads'. A thread is constructed as a network of messages concerning the same topic, posted to a discussion board. In essence, a thread is a written transcript of the electronic debate. The threads can consist of different numbers of messages on different levels of the debate. Hence, some messages are replies to the thread's initiating message while others are replies to other replies. Each discussion thread was coded for length (number of individual messages in thread), depth (number of discussion levels, i.e. the extent of replies to replies) and debaters (the number of citizens participating in the thread). However, whether a quantitative method is the most appropriate method for answering the research questions of the study is somewhat questionable. Hence, the validity of the findings and alternative methodological approaches are further discussed in the concluding section of the article.

In order to analyze the data, several indices measuring the activity on the discussion boards were constructed. The coding procedure was divided into three time periods in order to answer research questions RQ3 and RQ3a. Thus, the activity on the forums was first coded in a period of 'electoral peace' between the 11th March 2002 and 24th March 2002 (this period is referred to as T1 in the rest of the paper). Secondly, the forums were revisited prior to the Finnish parliamentary election[8] between the 3rd of March 2003 and the 16th of March 2003 (referred to as T2 henceforth). Finally, the activity on the forums was coded between the 26th of May 2003 and the 8th of June 2003 (Henceforth T3), in order to control for eventual election-effects in the previous time period (T2) and to provide a wider picture of longitudinal development of the electronic debates in Finland. The two boards on the web portal jippii.fi were only coded in the first coding period as the web portal has introduced registration of users since then. In coding the activity, a delay of two days[9] was applied in order to allow the debates to develop.

4. Findings

4.1. Activity on the discussion boards

In total, 2,847 discussion threads were coded during the three coding periods. A comparison of the activity on the different discussion forums reveals that the activity on the board of the National Coalition Party (NCP) dominated the total activity. Table 1 pictures the spread of discussion threads.

Table 1. The distribution (number and share) of discussion threads for the party-associated discussion boards at all coding periods

Discussion board	Coding period								
	T1		T2		T3		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Centre Party	34	6.6 %	227	15.0 %	113	13.8 %	**374**	**11.8 %**
CP member	0	0.0 %	18	1.2 %	19	2.3 %	**37**	**1.2 %**
NCP	412	79.4 %	1132	75.0 %	600	73.3 %	**2144**	**75.9 %**
Green League	73	14.1 %	132	8.7 %	87	10.6 %	**292**	**11.1 %**
Total:	**519**	**100 %**	**1509**	**100 %**	**819**	**100 %**	**2847**	**100 %**

At all time periods, the activity was highest on the NCP board. In all, the total activity was highest during the second coding period (T2) prior to the parliamentary election. This might possibly be due to the increased off-line political activity in general, including meta campaigning by the parties (Asp, 1986: 108; Carlson and Djupsund, 2001: 85). The marginal activity on the restricted member-forum of the Centre Party (CP) is also noteworthy. The spread of the discussion threads points at quite a significant amount of debates on certain discussion boards. In the following, the quality of the discussions on the forums is further examined.

4.2. Liveliness and intensity

According to Barber (1984: 178), strong democratic conversation always requires debates with continuous exchanges of ideas, thoughts and views. It involves listening as well as talking. Thus, the discussions are required to be both lively and intense. In the following section these two aspects of the Finnish discussion boards are fleshed out.

Bentivegna (1998: 5) measures debate liveliness by the relationship between the first, original message of the thread and the follow-up replies. The measure is calculated according to the following formula:

$$1-(O/\Sigma m)$$

where   O = the original message

Σm = the total number of messages in each discussion thread.

Hence, the better the liveliness in the debate, the closer to 1 will be the value of the measure. In Table 2 below, the liveliness of the Finnish discussion boards, associated with a political party, is depicted using the measure suggested by Bentivegna.

Table 2. Average degree of liveliness for the party-associated discussion boards at all coding periods

Discussion board	Coding period					
	T1 a)		**T2** b)		**T3** c)	
	N	**Liveliness**	**N**	**Liveliness**	**N**	**Liveliness**
		$\overline{X}$		$\overline{X}$		$\overline{X}$
Centre Party	34	0.36	227	0.48	113	0.50
CP member	missing	missing	18	0.22	19	0.32
NCP	412	0.75	1132	0.72	600	0.74
Green League d)	73	0.19	132	0.29	87	0.40
Total & average	**519**	**0.57**	**1509**	**0.43**	**819**	**0.49**

a)   The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=143.771 (df=2) p=.000
b)   The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=106.285 (df=3) p=.000
c)   The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=47.238 (df=3) p=.000
d)   The differences over time are significant for the Green League board F=6.154 (df=3) p=.000
     For the other discussion boards, statistical significance was not achieved

Overall, the liveliness of the discussion forums is relatively weak; at best the average total was only 0.57 (at T1) which in essence means that nearly half of all threads consist of only two messages. However, the forum of the NCP shows a somewhat better liveliness than the other party-associated forums. Through all coding periods, the green League's (GL) discussion board has the lowest liveliness, even though there is a statistically significant increase over time. Likewise, the overall trend concerning all discussion boards, points at a slight increase in liveliness, even though statistical significance was not achieved. Nonetheless, it seems as though the debates on three out of four forums are very short. The context prior to the 2003 election (T2) did not significantly alter the liveliness, even though Table 1 revealed a high overall activity during that period.

The intensity of debates can be measured in several ways. Hill and Hughes (1998: 56), for instance, use the length of the thread as a measure of intensity. However, this operationalization seems questionable as this measure does not capture the depth of the debate. A long thread might nonetheless only consist of messages responding to the original message and thus the intensity is quite limited. Instead, an intensive thread should have messages responding to other replies and thus involve more citizens in the discussion. Thus, intensity should be measured with a tool which combines both the length of the thread and depth (number of levels of reply messages) of the thread. Therefore, the intensity of debates is measured using the following formula;

$$\Sigma m * \Sigma l$$

where Σm = the total number of individual messages in the thread
          Σl = the total number of reply-levels

The logic of the measure is quite simple; the higher the value the better the intensity of the debate. It is noteworthy, however, that this measure is sensitive to differences between different discussion boards, and should not be considered an absolute figure but rather seen as a tool for comparison. Table 3 shows the intensity of the debates on the party-associated discussion boards for the three coding periods.

Table 3. Average degree of intensity for the party-associated discussion boards at all coding periods

Discussion board	Coding period					
	T1 a)		**T2** b)		**T3** c)	
	N	**Intensity**	**N**	**Intensity**	**N**	**Intensity**
		$\overline{X}$		$\overline{X}$		$\overline{X}$
Centre Party d)	34	6.32	227	13.86	113	22.25
CP member	0	missing	18	5.23	19	4.47
NCP e)	412	118.31	1132	87.73	600	119.75
Green League f)	73	6.15	132	5.17	87	11.17
Total & average	**519**	**32.70**	**1509**	**28.00**	**819**	**39.41**

a)   The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=10.390 (df=2) p=.000
b)   The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=19.187 (df=3) p=.000
c)   The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=13.627 (df=3) p=.000
d)   The differences over time are significant F=4.565 (df=2) p<.05
e)   The differences over time are significant F=5.395 (df=2) p<.01
f)   The differences over time are significant F=3.355 (df=2) p<.05

The NCP forum displays the highest average intensity at all coding periods. On the other discussion boards, however, the intensity is generally very low. Over time, on the other hand, there are some significant steps towards better intensity. For instance, the unrestricted CP forum boasts a quadrupled intensity between the first and second coding period. As for the liveliness, there are no real effects of the upcoming elections at T2. In fact, there is even a slight decrease in intensity, except on the GL forum, during that period.

The findings concerning liveliness and intensity revealed that only the NCP forum displayed traits of the 'strong democratic talk' called for by Barber (1984: 178). The NCP discussion board has a statistically significant better liveliness and intensity than the discussion boards of the other parties. Thus, it seems that a forum with high liveliness also displays a high level of intensity[10]. Overall, there is a lack of both liveliness and intensity on the other party-associated forums. However, some significant improvements over time were found, hence indicating a positive trend. Nonetheless, the general impression is that the concerns and disbeliefs regarding the quality of electronic debates (c.f. Budge, 1996: 31-32; Dahl, 1989: 520) are, thus far, fulfilled.

5. Citizen Participation in the debates

In the following section, focus is turned towards the citizens using the discussion boards. Indications of either mobilization or reinforcement are sought after through an examination of the activity on the forums.

Two aspects of the citizens' activity are highlighted; the average number of debaters in each thread and the degree of monopolization of the threads. The average number of debaters[11] ought to provide an indication of the interest in the electronic debates. Are there signs of political 'town-hall' meetings or 'social clubs' for the motivated? The degree of monopolization describes the average number of messages posted by each debater. The formula for the measure is

$$\Sigma m / \Sigma d$$

where Σm = the total number of individual messages in the discussion thread
             Σd = the total number of citizens posting messages to the thread

According to Bentivegna (1998: 6), a high level of monopolization indicates that a relatively small number of citizens participate frequently in the debates while others are left out in the cold. In such a case, a mobilization scenario seems highly unlikely. Table 4 shows the average number of users and the degree of monopolization for the party-associated discussion boards.

Table 4. Average number of debaters and average degree of monopolization for the party-associated discussion boards at all coding periods

Discussion board	Coding period								
	T1			**T2**			**T3**		
	N	Debaters a)	Monop. b)	N	Debaters c)	Monop. d)	N	Debaters e)	Monop. f)
		$\overline{X}$	$\overline{X}$		$\overline{X}$	$\overline{X}$		$\overline{X}$	$\overline{X}$
Centre Party g)	34	1.74	1.25	227	2.48	1.28	113	2.50	1.43
CP member	0	missing	missing	18	1.39	1.22	19	1.58	1.23
NCP h)	412	4.87	2.07	1132	4.42	1.96	600	5.04	2.07
Green League i)	73	1.58	1.10	132	1.80	1.21	87	2.59	1.19
Total & average	**519**	**2.05**	**1.11**	**1509**	**2.52**	**1.42**	**819**	**2.93**	**1.48**

a) The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=70.862 (df=2) p=.000
b) The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=20.973 (df=2) p=.000
c) The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=76.721 (df=3) p=.000
d) The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=34.373 (df=3) p=.000
e) The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=45.452 (df=3) p=.000
f) The differences between the discussion boards are significant F=19.859 (df=3) p=.000
g) The differences over time for the number of debaters are significant F=2.784 (df=3) p<.05
h) The differences over time for the number of debaters are significant F=6.882 (df=3) p=.000
i) The differences over time for the number of debaters are significant F=7.011 (df=3) p=.000

Once again, the NCP discussion board stands out; the number of users as well as the degree of monopolization is significantly higher compared to the other forums. In general, though, all discussion boards show little signs of monopolization despite the low number of average debaters. Hence, the discussion threads are not dominated by a few citizens and there is a rather egalitarian atmosphere about the debates.

Nonetheless, the findings in Table 4 are dismal concerning the prospects of an electronic mobilization. The average number of users on the discussion boards is extraordinarily low, hence, indication of 'town-hall' meetings are yet to be found on the Finnish discussion boards. This notion is further supported through an examination of the threads with the highest number of debaters. Out of a total of 2,847 threads, the thread with the highest number of users, a mere 18, was found on the NCP forum. Obviously, this finding appears quite inspiring compared to the findings in Table 4. However, in general terms one would have expected a much lager number of users. In total, a maximum of eight citizens participated in 91.7 % of all threads indicating a poor interest in political debating on the internet in Finland.

However, some caution in interpreting the findings in Table 4 is due. Even though the average number of debaters is probably a suitable measure of mobilization, the measure nonetheless fails to identify the citizens who passively follow the debates without posting messages themselves. In order to correctly assess the citizens' interest in electronic debating, data on these so-called 'lurkers' (Hill & Hughes, 1998) is required.

Over time, there is also a slight, but significant, increase in the average number of users on three of the discussion boards. Thus, in the very long run, the mobilization of citizens through internet politics might still take place.

6. Politics or music – the citizens' choice?

In this section, the findings of the study are concluded by the examination of the two discussion boards on the web portal jippii.fi. The portal offers several discussion boards of different topics. Hence, the choices made by the users of the portal are not made based on accessibility as all forums are hosted on the same website. Rather, their choice of topic is based on experience, preferences and motivation. Concerning this, parallels can be drawn to the motivation-based reinforcement theory previously discussed in this paper. In general, in accordance with Norris (2001b: 219-228), these are the same mechanisms guiding internet users' choices amongst the massive array of websites on the internet. The liveliness, intensity, number of debaters and the degree of monopolization are checked for both forums on the web portal. How does a political discussion board fare against a forum for a different topic when the citizens are given the opportunity to choose?

A discussion board about music in general was opted for as the non-political forum for comparison with the political equivalent. The choice of a music discussion board was made in order to find a topic which, in theory, would not significantly restrict the potential audience. Concerning this, there is, however, some reason for caution as music might have a slightly younger appeal than politics and hence skew the findings to a certain degree. Nonetheless, music seemed the least troublesome choice as the other topics usually had an obvious gender bias[12]. Table 5 depicts the findings of the comparison between the political and non-political discussion board. It is noteworthy that the comparison was only made during the first coding period (T1) as the web portal had imposed restricted user access thereafter.

Table 5. Comparison of average number of debaters, degree of monopolization and average degree of intensity and liveliness for the discussion boards on the web

Aspect	Topic	
	Politics	Music
	$\overline{X}$	$\overline{X}$
Liveliness a)	0.63	0.71
Intensity b)	14.61	30.80
Debaters c)	3.08	4.20
Monopol. d)	1.31	1.54
N	**567**	**859**

a) The differences are significant t=5.975 (df=1241) p=.000
b) The differences are significant t=-9.378 (df=1236) p=.000
c) The differences are significant t=-9.381 (df=1406) p=.000
d) The differences are significant t=-6.651 (df=1391) p=.000

The non-political forum achieved significantly higher scores on most indicators. A higher share of the web portal's users preferred music over politics, as indicated by the average number of debaters in Table 5. A further examination revealed that the highest number of users in any thread was eleven for the political forum and 23 for the music forum. Moreover, the debates on the music discussion board have a higher liveliness and intensity than the debates on the political forum. Concerning the degree of monopolization, however, the political forum is somewhat less monopolized. In general, though, both discussion boards have a low level of monopolization. In total, the number of discussion threads on the political discussion board amounts to merely 66 % of the number of threads on the non-political forum. The findings in Table 5 thus indicate that, given the same level of accessibility, more citizens chose music over politics. Moreover, the non-political debates are livelier and more intense than the political debate. In conceptual terms, these findings add support to the motivation-based reinforcement theory.

7. Summary and conclusions

In this study, different aspects of electronic discussion boards have been quantitatively examined. Two schools of thought, the mobilization theory and reinforcement theory, have been fleshed out both conceptually and empirically. However, in retrospect, the quantitative approach used in the study is associated with certain problems of validity. Hence, individual-level changes in political engagement have not been studied. With the applied method, one cannot prove that a previously politically inactive citizen has become active on-line. Consequently, the findings must be regarded as tentative, as they provide only an initial mapping of the on-line activity. In future research, survey- or interview data

would significantly enhance our understanding of the individual-level effects of on-line political activity.

The results of the study generally support the reinforcement theory. The activity on three out of four party-associated discussion boards is exceptionally low. However, the National Coalition Party forum boasts a higher level of activity than the other party forums. Keeping the optimistic visions inherent in the mobilization scenario in mind, the marginal activity noted on the Centre Party's member forum is clearly worrisome. Although the supporters of the Centre Party are not probably the most active internet users in Finland, it still comes as quite a surprise that not even these politically interested party members are participating in on-line discussions. Likewise, it also comes as a surprise that the socialist parties with a history as mass-parties, i.e. the Social Democratic Party and the Left Alliance, lack on-line discussion boards altogether. Concerning this, one plausible explanation is that the parties are wary of electronic discussions as these might not necessarily present a positive picture of the party. For instance, Strandberg (2003: 82) found that the messages posted to the now shut-down SDP forum, in general, were negative and critical towards the party and its politicians.

The findings concerning the discussions' liveliness and intensity generally add more support to the pessimistic views of electronic politics. Even though the NCP forum displayed debates that were livelier and more intense than on the other parties' forums, the overall levels of liveliness and intensity were exceptionally low. There were little, or virtually no traits of debates with interaction and exchange of ideas between many debaters. Seemingly, then, the electronic debates' ability to inspire and deepen citizens' political engagement seems limited.

The examination of the number of debaters on the discussion boards provided more indications of reinforcement, or lack of mobilization, on all party-associated forums. There seems to be little interest for electronic political debates among the Finnish citizens, as evident from the fact that a mere maximum of eight citizens participated in 91.7 % of all discussion threads. However, one must bear in mind that the scope of this study is nonetheless limited. Hence, several arenas for electronic political discussion, besides those of political parties, have not been studied. In theory, the majority of on-line political discussion in Finland might take place in completely different areas than expected. Thus, the conclusions of this study should not be over-interpreted. The study did, however, provide an insight into one political discussion board not associated with any of the political parties. The findings of the comparison between this political forum and a non-political counterpart on the web portal jippi.fi, generally support the reinforcement theory. A greater number of citizens were engaged in livelier and more intense discussions on the non-political discussion board than on the political discussion board. Since the surrounding context for the two forums is identical, the findings indicate

that politics is not the topic of choice for a majority of e-citizens. In future research, however, a comparison of a greater number of both political and non-political discussion boards would provide further insight into the preferences of internet users.

Even though most of the findings in the study provide little support for the mobilizing effects of internet politics, a small glimmer of hope was found. In general, a slim but significant improvement over time was found for most of the aspects studied in the article. Arguably, the most noteworthy is the 0.87 increase in average number of debaters between the first and last coding period. Nonetheless, the increase is small and could possibly be due to a general increase in internet access and usage in Finland, rather than due to an increase in political use of the internet. Hence, any mobilizing effects of the internet are seemingly not forthcoming in the foreseeable future and perhaps not coming at all. Not even prior to the Finnish parliamentary election in 2003 (T2) could any major changes in the activity on the discussion boards be found. In particular, the average number of debaters did not soar high despite the electoral context. Hence, the increased media focus and general interest in off-line politics in election times (Asp, 1986: 108), was not mirrored on the discussion boards. Seemingly, then, on-line political discussion is independent of off-line political context. In general, the same citizens only debate more lively and more intensely during election times.

In conclusion, the major findings of the study can be summarized as follows; in the specific form studied here, electronic politics has failed to mobilize the masses. The overall activity on the discussion boards is very low, and on the NCP forum, with a relatively high level of activity, an average of only five citizens participate in each discussion thread. The liveliness and intensity of the debates are poor on all but the NCP forum. Moreover, a greater number of citizens preferred music over politics in the examination of discussion boards on the web portal jippii.fi. Hence, the Finnish on-line political debates are few and the existing debates are by no means comparable to 'town-hall' meetings for the masses, but rather they resemble 'social clubs' for the politically motivated.
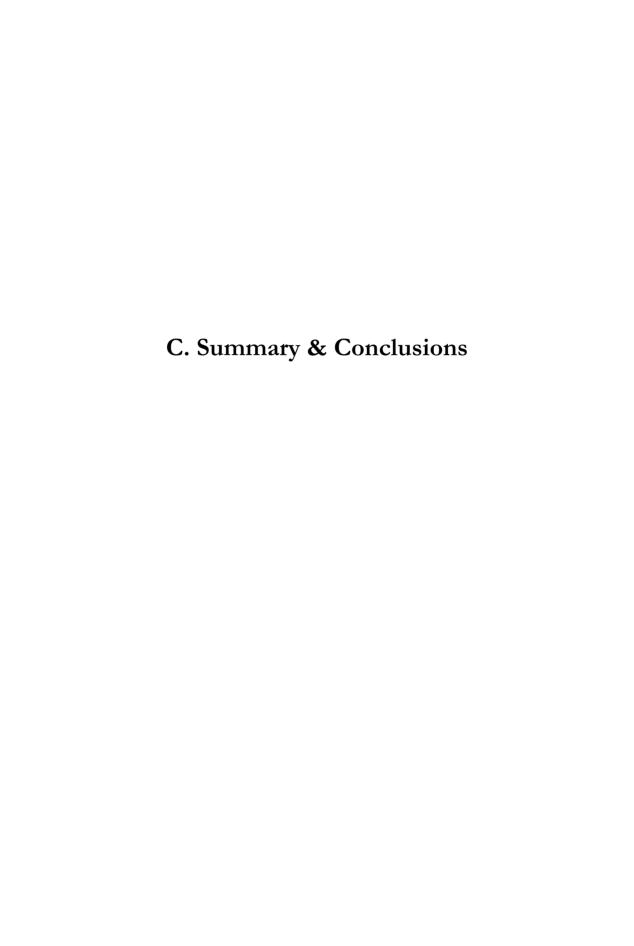
Notes

[1] According to the Nua Internet Surveys website;
URL: http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/europe.html accessed June 2003.

[2] According to the Nua Internet Surveys website;
URL: http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/europe.html accessed June 2003.

[3] I was able to gain access to the discussion board only after I signed up for membership in the Centre Party.

[4] According to the Centre Party website; URL: http://www.keskusta.fi/keskusta/jasenyys accessed June 2003.

[5] Since the strongholds of the Centre Party are in the rural parts of Finland where internet penetration amounts to roughly 50 %. Source: Nordic information Society Statistics 2002. Available on-line: URL: http://www.stat.fi/tk/yr/tietoyhteiskunta/nordic_iss_02.pdf

[6] According to the election statistics of Statistics Finland:
URL:http://www.stat.fi/tk/he/vaalit/vaalit2003/vaalit2003_vaalitilastot_aspuoluekannatus.html accessed June 2003.

[7] According to Alexa web rankings URL: http://www.alexa.com, accessed June 2003, the web portal jippii.fi had the highest number of users of all web portals in Finland during the first six months of the year 2003. Hence, the potential number of users is high.

[8] A special thank you to graduate student Tom Sörhannus who coded the data for this period. The inter-coder reliability was tested according to the formula suggested by Holsti (1969: 140), the result was a highly satisfactory r=.91.

[9] The open forum of the Centre Party was coded with one day's delay due to technical problems. Some uncertainty in the comparisons with other forums are thus apparent. Intra-forum longitudinal comparisons are not affected.

[10] Obviously, this is hardly surprising as both the measure for liveliness and the equivalent for intensity are based on the total number of individual messages in each thread. The correlation between the two measures was R=.351 p<.000

[11] Concerning this, the identification of debaters is sometimes problematic as most discussion boards are based on the usage of pseudonyms. Hence, in theory, the same citizen could debate under several different pseudonyms. However, this problem is extremely difficult to overcome and therefore needs to be kept in mind in the presentation of the findings.

[12] Examples of other topics are: ice hockey, weddings, soccer, house & garden, cars, family, His, Her, and so forth.

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C. Summary & Conclusions

C. Summary and conclusions

A discussion concerning on-line political activity by political actors and citizens was carried out in the introduction to this thesis. Drawing on that discussion, a theoretical framework containing a typology of four on-line political environments in which these two dimensions were considered in conjunction was also constructed. Building on this framework, a purpose and five empirical research questions were constructed for the thesis. The thesis' construction consisting of five articles was perceived as having two advantages: it ought to provide a "broad experience" of the phenomenon of interest, and the findings of the individual parts should shed light on each other when analyzed as parts of a common context (Moring 1989, 31-32). With these potential advantages in mind, the findings of the individual studies will now be summarized and discussed in relation to the empirical research questions, the theoretical framework and the typology of four on-line political environments presented in the introduction. The Finnish case will first be revisited in light of certain circumstances brought to attention by the thesis' articles.

1. The Finnish case revisited

Studies which are mainly concerned with only one country have an apparent problem according to Peters (1998, 5-6):

> "the more an approach takes into account […] one political system […] the less capable that research strategy will be of producing generalizations […] The understanding developed through the extended analysis of the single case becomes almost intuitive, so that conveying it to others may become very difficult" (Peters 1998 5-6)

The Finnish case will now be revisited in order to position the thesis within a broader context, and to address the problem of this 'particularistic pitfall'. The discussion in this section arguably bears some relevance to the "generalizability" of the thesis.

A meta-analysis of the research field concerning on-line electoral competition was conducted in the first of the thesis' articles (Strandberg 2006b). Specifically, scholarly findings of either normalization or equalization were tested for logical dependence on several contextual and one methodological variable. Four contextual variables, i.e. the election system, the length of the country's status as a democracy, the country's human- and technological development and the media environment, were considered as being potentially influential on the findings of either normalization or equalization.

Furthermore, the method used in assessing the internet websites of political parties, i.e. either scaled content analysis or dichotomous content analysis, was examined for its influence on scholarly findings supportive of either theory. The thesis *per se* provides an additional case for this analysis. Regarding the contextual variables, the Finnish case and the methodology used in this thesis, correspond to one of the minimum logical conditions – studies using scaled measurement of party website content in countries with a long history of democratic status, high country development and a media environment which is unrestricted both off- and on-line – found for the noted occurrence of normalization of on-line competition between parties.

As the findings of the articles in this thesis lend support to the normalization theory, as will be discussed later, the Finnish case basically fits the patterns outlined in the first article. Pertaining to the thesis' 'generalizability', the potential problem of analyzing a very particular and deviant case – without any strong argument for this case putting the theories of interest to the most critical test possible (cf. Flyvbjerg 2003, 189-193; Peters 1998, 62-65) – appears less of a problem in this thesis. Finland is also more of a frontrunner rather than a follower in terms of campaign evolution and on-line campaigning (cf. Gibson & Römmele 2005; Lusoli 2005a; Mancini & Swanson 1996), the findings from the Finnish case can be argued to have relevance beyond the national context. The results found from studying the Finnish on-line political environment could, in time, come to show in other, less developed national contexts as well.

2. Concluding discussion

The findings of the thesis' articles will now be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and the components of the typology of four on-line political environments presented in the introduction. The disposition of the discussion follows the main components of the theoretical discussion presented in the thesis' introduction: firstly, the findings concerning the political actors are summarized and discussed. Secondly, the findings concerning citizens are summed up and discussed. Finally, the findings of the articles are brought together, discussed, and positioned within the typology of four on-line political environments.

2.1 Political actors and the internet

The on-line activity of the political actors has been assessed from several points of view in the thesis' articles. The studies have shed light on who the main on-line political actors in Finland are, what they are doing with their websites, and what conditions – both actor-specific and external – influence this communication. What is more, in a theoretical

perspective, the articles have been concerned with the relative strengths of different political actors in the on-line political environment as described in the theories of normalization and equalization (Margolis & Resnick 2000, 53-76). The order of presentation in this section is structured according to the empirical research questions. The findings of the individual articles are, however, mainly summarized and discussed with reference to the theories of normalization and equalization.

2.1.1 The on-line political actors in Finland

Three of the thesis' articles, numbered two, three and four, have provided an assessment of the Finnish parties' and candidates' on-line presence. The political activity on-line of a wide array of different political actors – i.e. parties, candidates, NGOs, the news media, government, labour unions, web portals, business organizations, citizens, educational organizations – prior to the 2004 election for European Parliament was examined in the second article (Carlson & Strandberg 2005). The article gave a broad overview of the political actors dimension. As for the question of who the political actors of the Finnish on-line political environment are, this study provided a rather clear cut answer: the traditional off-line political actors, i.e. political parties and candidates, made up the bulk of the electoral web sphere. These were followed by governmental- and media websites. The noticeable focus on parties and candidates in this thesis thus appears valid as they apparently are the dominating Finnish on-line political actors in terms of having websites.

The third and fourth articles (Strandberg 2006a; 2007) further scrutinized the web presence of the Finnish parties prior to the 2006 presidential election and the candidates prior to the 2003 Parliamentary election. These studies revealed findings quite similar to the second article in regards to "who" the on-line political actors in Finland are. Firstly, all major and minor Finnish parties have party websites while several fringe parties lack websites. Secondly, the dominance of the major parties is also replicated in terms of the web presence of the Finnish candidates. A larger share of the major party candidates were on-line than those of minor and fringe parties. Belonging to a major party was likewise the strongest predictor of candidate web presence when entered as one of several predictors in a logistic regression model. Both of these empirical observations lend support to the normalization theory. The major parties, and their candidates, have a dominant presence in the on-line political environment in Finland.

In summary, concerning *who* the on-line political actors in Finland are, the current on-line political environment in Finland is seemingly dominated by traditional political actors, i.e. the parties and candidates. Among these, there is a noticeable dominance by the larger parties and their candidates. This influence of the major traditional political actors is interesting, seeing as Finland has several contextual circumstances which could

spur innovative and lively on-line activity beyond the major parties and candidates (cf. Cunha et al. 2003, 70; Gibson 2004; Norris 2003). Among these, both the fragmented multiparty system (Raunio 2002), the open media environment (Moring 1995) as well as the campaign culture which stresses the role of the individual candidates (Ruostetsaari & Mattila 2002), was mentioned in the introduction to the thesis. Regardless of these, the findings of the articles indicate that the on-line political environment in Finland could tentatively be described by the prediction of Margolis and Resnick (2000, 74): "mainstream politics are likely to dominate the WWW".

2.1.2. What the political actors are doing with their websites

The websites of the Finnish parties prior to the 2006 Presidential election were analyzed in the third of this thesis' articles (Strandberg 2007). Concerning websites, both the top-down and bottom-up communication potential of the internet was stressed in the introduction to the thesis. Additionally, as mentioned, Finland's internet penetration rate and several contextual features were argued to be favourable to a dynamic and innovative use of political websites. The findings of the third article generally showed that the Finnish parties did not make full use of the internet's potential, and mainly used their websites for top-down information dissemination. These findings are quite similar to those reported in other countries (e.g. Kamarck 1999). It appears as if the Finnish actors mainly use the internet to supplement other forms of campaigning. The parties focused on internal information and general campaign information. They provided website users with few opportunities for bottom-up communication. The article also yielded an interesting result pertaining to the theories of normalization and equalization; compared to parties outside the parliament, the parties *in* parliament provided significantly more internal and external information, and more opportunities for user participation, in a more sophisticated website package. Thus, as Finnish parties, to a significant degree, receive organizational funding based on their share of the seats in parliament (Nousiainen 1998, 72-73), this arguably gives support to the normalization theory (cf. Margolis & Resnick 2000, 16; Margolis et al. 2003, 58). The Finnish parties with more resources are edging in front of those with fewer resources, both on- and off-line.

Corresponding findings were brought to attention in the fourth article focusing on the Finnish candidates' campaign websites prior to the 2003 Parliamentary elections (Strandberg 2006a). The candidates primarily used their websites for top-down information dissemination and for networking through hyperlinks, but not for promoting user participation. In spite of the rather individualistic campaign culture (cf. Gibson 2004), few candidates made extensive use of the opportunities the medium provides. The article also gave support to the normalization theory. Two separate regression models

predicting candidate website functions and sophistication showed that running for a major party was a strong significant positive predictor in both models. Additionally, the analysis revealed that being incumbent, and a competitive candidate, were significant positive predictors of more website functions and higher sophistication.

The patterns found in the third and fourth articles were also replicated in the second article focusing on several different types of political actors prior to the 2004 election for European Parliament (Carlson & Strandberg 2005). All types of political actors had websites which, in general, did not make use of all possible features of the internet. They mainly focused more on providing information than engagement opportunities to the users of their websites. Specifically, though, the websites of the parties and candidates provided a richer variety of information and more engagement features than the sites of the other political actors. A further scrutiny of the candidates producing the campaign websites offering the most information and engagement features also gave some indirect support to the normalization theory. Compared to the candidates producing websites with less information and engagement features, these candidates were more often middle-aged, male, incumbents running for a major party. These socio-economic traits are largely similar to the socio-economic patterns found regarding citizens involvement in traditional politics (Norris 2003, 39).

To summarize, the findings of the articles contained in this thesis show that the Finnish actors made relatively little use of the medium's potential. There are also few findings which indicate that the established patterns of electoral competition would be altered on-line. In the Finnish context, the on-line activity of the political actors appears to mostly be enforcing the *status quo*: "it seems likely that the political patterns of the real world will predominate in cyberspace" (Margolis & Resnick 2000, 73).

2.1.3 Conditions influencing on-line communication of political actors

Conditions potentially influential to on-line political communication have been examined in two of the thesis' articles; the first and third (Strandberg 2006b; 2007). These articles have focused on two different types of conditions. The first article examined different types of contextual conditions while the third article focused on several actor-specific, internal, conditions. The findings concerning these different conditions are summarized and discussed in this section.

Regarding the contextual conditions, the relevance of electoral settings, country development and the media environment to the normalization and equalization theories was examined in the first study. Findings indicating normalization were found to be linked to two minimum logical conditions in the national-institutional context. These were either a plurality election system alongside medium or low country development *or* a

long history of democracy, high country development and an unrestricted media environment. Findings indicating equalization were linked to one minimum logical condition. This condition was a long history of democracy alongside a media environment which is unrestricted on-line but restricted off-line. In light of these findings, it appears as if the contextual conditions, at least to some extent, shape the patterns of on-line electoral competition. Plurality election systems appear influential to on-line party competition in less evolved external contexts but lose their influence in developed free democratic countries. The relatively inexpensive nature of the internet appears to be an important stimulus for smaller parties when off-line media regulations on campaign conduct are used in democratic countries. This is indicted by on-line equalization of the electoral competition. Obviously, these findings only bear indirect relevance to the role of contextual conditions in influencing party on-line communication. That is, the article used aggregated findings of what the parties do on-line to assess the patterns of on-line party competition. The direct influence of the contextual conditions towards the on-line communication of specific parties is yet unexplored.

An array of actor-specific conditions – i.e. party goals, type of party organization, party size and resources and type of target voters and primary supporters – was exploratively examined in the third article of this thesis. These conditions were tested for linkage to the Finnish parties' internal opinions concerning the importance and use of their websites. The conditions were also tested for their potential connection to the content and sophistication of the Finnish parties' websites.

This article revealed some interesting findings regarding the parties' opinions concerning the importance and use of their websites. One was that, in general, the Finnish parties – as stated by their leading information officials – did not have a wholesome central planning of their websites. Also discovered, they nonetheless deem their websites to be important when compared to other communication channels such as TV, radio and newspapers. The Finnish parties also appear to have a positive general opinion of party websites. Hence, the findings in several of the thesis' other articles (Carlson & Strandberg 2005; Strandberg 2006a; 2007) that most parties and candidates do not use the internet to its fullest potential do not seem to be caused by an overly negative view of the medium. The emphasis on information over engagement found in the websites of the Finnish political actors, however, appears to reflect the parties' internal prioritization. All of the information officials of the Finnish parties ranked information over engagement when considering the main areas of use for their websites. Finally, when analyzed for dependence on the various party-specific traits – i.e. party goals, party organization, party size and party supporters and voters – the parties' internal view of their website was found to be quite *ad hoc* in nature. This finding is important with reference to the quite strong support for the normalization theory found in the other

articles in the thesis. In general, with due caution to specific exceptions, it is not attributable to the smaller actors deeming the internet less important than other communication channels, nor having an otherwise more negative general opinion of the medium, that they lag behind their major counterparts in terms of website content and sophistication. Their opinions, hopes and strategies for their websites are quite similar to those of the major actors.

The third article also revealed some significant findings as to how the character of the Finnish parties was linked to what they did on their websites. The amount of information provided, the degree of participatory elements offered and the sophistication of the presentation of the party websites were all tested for linkage to the party-specific traits mentioned earlier. In general, with some exceptions, the results of the analysis revealed that among the internal conditions, only party size appeared linked to having websites with more information, more opportunities for user participation and more sophisticated presentation. This was indicated by a significant dividing line between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties. In terms of internal, party-specific, conditions, size and resources appear to have an evident influence in shaping what Finnish political parties do on-line (cf. Nousiainen 1998, 72-73). This provides some support for the normalization theory (c.f. Margolis & Resnick 2000, 16; Margolis et al. 2003, 57-58).

The thesis' findings regarding the role of both contextual and actor-specific conditions in shaping the on-line communication of political actors can now be summarized. All things considered, this thesis has served to demonstrate that on-line political activity by political parties, and most likely other political actors as well, is to some extent, influenced by both external- and internal conditions. These off-line conditions are relevant both in shaping the specific communication of political parties and the structures of on-line electoral competition aggregated from this communication. On-line politics does not appear to be an entirely distinct form of political activity: rather, both the surrounding society and the political actors employing the internet have important parts in influencing the politics of the internet (cf. Hill & Hughes 1998, 182; Margolis & Resnick 2000, 14).

2.2. Citizens and the internet

The discussion now turns to the second dimension, the on-line activity of citizens, which was discussed in this thesis' theoretical introduction and included in the typology of four on-line political environments. Regarding this, the mobilization and reinforcement theories were presented in the introduction to the thesis. The citizens have been the focus of articles number two and number five in this thesis (Carlson & Strandberg 2005;

Strandberg 2005). These articles addressed the research questions of what the Finnish on-line citizens are doing and what impact on-line politics has on them. The articles have dealt with these questions by focusing on two types of on-line activity by the citizens. As such, these articles shed complementary light on each other. The second article assessed both the use of the internet as a source for election information and as a basis for the citizens' voting decision. That is, how the internet is serving to reduce the barriers for retrieving political information and what impact this has on the citizens' voting decisions (cf. Downs 1957). The fifth article addresses Finnish citizens' engagement in political discussions on-line and how this is serving to activate the citizens and make them more prone to express their views on public matters (cf. Norris 2001, 218). The findings of these two studies will now be summarized in turn and primarily discussed in light of the mobilization and reinforcement theories.

2.2.1 On-line political information and its impact on citizens' voting decisions

The Finnish citizens' use of different types of sources for election-related information, both traditional and on-line, prior to the 2004 election for the European Parliament were assessed in the second article of this thesis (Carlson & Strandberg 2005). The demographic characteristics of Finnish citizens with internet access who a) looked for political information on-line, b) visited party or candidate websites and c) visited the candidate selectors provided mainly by the news media, were also examined. The article, moreover, examined the impact the on-line sources had on the Finnish voters' voting decisions, both in general and according to the citizens' demographic characteristics. Therefore, in a theoretical perspective, the article shed light on both the general use and importance of the internet as a source for political information, and the socio-economic patterns of this on-line political activity. These are two areas which have been perceived to be potential indications of reinforcement (cf. Norris 2001, 91-92).

As for the findings of the article, it should firstly be noted that the study indicated that internet-based sources for election information still lag behind traditional sources for the Finnish population in general. Thirteen per cent of the population looked for election-related information on the web, while ten per cent visited party- or candidate websites. Significantly higher shares of the population followed election stories on television and in the newspapers and observed election ads on television (41%, 36% and 61% respectively). Only the candidate selectors mainly provided on the websites of the news media attracted a considerable share of the citizens (24%). The internet is far from being frequently used by citizens as a source for election related-information in Finland. Some interesting findings were, however, brought forward when taking socio-demographic characteristics into account as predictors in logistic regression analyses. The

Finnish voters' propensity to look for on-line election information, visit party/candidate websites or candidate selectors were predicted in these analyses. The findings firstly showed that when access to the technological resources are equal, citizens aged 18-34 appear more prone to visit political websites for finding information than older citizens (cf. Boogers & Voerman 2003, 25). It should also be noted that the candidate selectors provided by the news media also attracted middle-aged (35-49) voters. In conjunction with Norris' finding (1999, 85) this generational effect lends some support to the mobilization argument. Secondly, and also on a positive note, neither class nor income, two demographic characteristics often associated with traditional political activity, proved significant predictors of seeking and placing emphasis in on-line political information. Thirdly, however, the analysis mostly revealed socio-economic patterns similar to those found in traditional political activity, interest and engagement (cf. Norris 1999, 87; 2001, 91-92); the voters looking for political information on-line and visiting party or candidate websites showed an overrepresentation towards males, the highly educated, and citizens living in urban or semi-urban milieus. The patterns were the same for those visiting candidate selectors, with the exception of gender having no significant effect. Nonetheless, these latter findings support the reinforcement theory.

In regards to the impact of the web-based sources for election-related information on the voters prior to the 2004 EP- election, the findings of the second article also mostly support the reinforcement theory, but to some degree, also maintain the potential for mobilization. The analysis showed that Finnish voters in general do not place great importance on web-based information sources, i.e. party or candidate websites or candidate selectors on media websites (only 6%, 9% and 14% respectively), when making their voting decision. Traditional information sources, such as television news and current affairs programmes, and newspaper stories, still have a larger impact (28% and 26% respectively). For the youngest voters (ages 18-24) the picture is, however, the opposite. These voters deem the web-based sources more important than traditional information sources in forming their voting decision (cf. Lusoli 2005b, 154-156). Nonetheless, the results of regression models predicting the kind of voters who deemed the web-based sources as quite- or very much important in making their voting decisions revealed findings similar to those regarding voters looking for political information or visiting political websites on-line. The logistic regression model showed that, alongside being young, living in an urban context had a significant positive effect on placing greater importance in web-based sources in influencing citizens' voting decisions.

Considered together, there is generally strong support for the reinforcement theory in the findings of the second article. The Finnish population, as a whole, are neither turning to the internet for election-related information nor placing significant importance in such information when forming their voting decisions. Some of the socio-

economic patterns usually associated with off-line political activity were also by-and-large replicated regarding the use and emphasis placed in on-line sources for election information. There were, nevertheless, some indications which provide prospective support for the mobilization theory. The insignificance of both class and income in predicting citizens' visits to political websites, and the interest and emphasis in on-line political information showed by the younger generations of Finnish voters merit attention. These findings give reason for some optimism regarding the future of the medium, especially as the young are "currently least engaged in the political process and least attentive to conventional news media" (Norris 1999, 85).

2.2.2 On-line political discussions – activity and impact

An analysis of citizens' discussions on the internet prior to, during, and after the 2003 parliamentary election was conducted in the thesis' fifth article (Strandberg 2005). The activity on four discussion boards provided by the Finnish parties and one discussion board provided by a Finnish web portal were examined. As such, this article provides indications of the general level of interest in participating in on-line political discussion. The article also sheds light on what impact, in terms of politically engaging and making the citizens more articulate in expressing political views, this activity has on citizens. It should, however, be noted that the article has not thoroughly examined individual-level changes in political preferences, interest and motivation. The findings of the article should therefore be considered more as aggregate-level indications of the plausibility, or lack thereof, of the mobilization and reinforcement theories.

The findings of the article provide several interesting findings concerning the theories. The study showed that only one discussion board – hosted by the National Coalition Party – had a significant amount of activity in terms of discussion threads. None of the discussion boards activated large numbers of citizens. In fact, in roughly 90 per cent of the debates, only a maximum of eight citizens participated. Similarly, when compared to a non-political forum, a political forum on an independent web portal attracted a lower number of debaters. These findings give very little reason for optimism regarding citizens' use of the opportunities for political activity on the web. These findings strongly support the reinforcement theory. The analysis of the quality of the citizens' discussions similarly revealed an utterly off-putting picture. The discussions generally lacked both liveliness and intensity. The Finnish citizens did not engage in long, continuous debates over public matters (cf. Barber 1984, 178). In fact, on average, the citizens who participated in the discussions only posted a maximum of roughly 1.5 messages to the discussion threads. The impact of on-line political discussions on citizens appears to be quite limited. In other words, with reference to the mobilization theory,

they did not appear to "become more knowledgeable of public affairs, and more articulate in expressing their views via […] online discussion lists…" (Norris 2001, 218).

In sum, the findings of the fifth article strongly support the reinforcement theory. Very few citizens appear to engage in on-line political discussions in Finland. What is more, the analysis did not provide any indications of such discussions having any positive impact on the citizens. On-line political discussions are, thus far, failing to activate citizens and make them more prone to express their views on public matters (Norris 2001, 218).

2.3. Conclusion – on-line politics and the Finnish on-line political environment

The purpose presented in the introduction to the thesis stated that this thesis partly aimed at examining the central components of on-line political environments. The discussion in this concluding chapter has, in turn, presented the findings from the thesis' articles regarding the on-line activity by the political actors and citizens with focus on different types of political actors and varying types of on-line activities by citizens during different elections. As such, several different components of on-line politics have been addressed and discussed. In this closing section, these findings are now juxtaposed against each other and discussed in light of the thesis' theoretical framework. This is mainly carried out through positioning the Finnish on-line political environment within the typology of four on-line political environments presented in the introduction. Hence, this concluding part of the thesis sheds light on the second part of the thesis' purpose; to assess the ways, if any, in which on-line politics could come to affect the politics of representative democracies.

The findings of the thesis' articles primarily indicate that the Finnish on-line political environment could be positioned within the typology of four on-line political environments as pictured in Figure 1.

Citizens

	Reinforcement	Mobilization
Normalization	A **Finland**	B
Equalization	C	D

Political actors

Figure 1. The Finnish on-line political environment

Evidently, the findings regarding the political actors have almost unanimously pointed in the normalization direction. There is little evidence of on-line activity being particularly different from 'politics as usual' in Finland (Margolis & Resnick 2000). This is interesting seeing as Finland is both technologically developed and its off-line political context contains elements which could spur innovative, dynamic use of websites by political actors and provide preconditions and incentives for smaller political actors to emphasize internet campaigning (Cunha et al. 2003, 70; Gibson 2004, Norris 2003, 25). This thesis has highlighted several findings which support the normalization theory. It has demonstrated that on-line politics is not disconnected from the off-line national-institutional context or the political actors employing the technology. Both external context and the actor-specific conditions lay their mark on the on-line communication by political actors. This thesis also found that the dominant off-line political actors, i.e. the parliamentary parties and their candidates, have a dominant presence in the Finnish on-line political environment as well. Finally, even though the websites of the Finnish parties and candidates by-and-large resemble "electronic brochures" (Kamarck 1999), there is, nonetheless, a gap between the mainstream actors – e.g. the major parties and, to some extent, the minor parties in parliament, the incumbent and competitive candidates – and the parties and candidates on the margin in refernce to what they are doing on their websites. On-line electoral competition, both between parties and individual candidates, appears to be quite normalized even in the candidate-centred Finnish election system and corresponding campaign culture. While the internet might have provided the smaller political actors in Finland with a more egalitarian platform than they have in off-line Finnish politics (Norris 2001, 239) – this has not been empirically examined here – the thesis has showed that the internet "cannot eliminate the power of traditional

organizational, financial […] resources…" (Norris 2001, 239; cf. Margolis & Resnick 2000, 66). The major Finnish parties and their candidates are the dominant political actors on-line. The patterns of real world politics in Finland are replicated on-line.

Regarding the Finnish citizens' political activity on-line, this thesis has mostly provided findings which support the reinforcement theory. Currently, even though the country has a long history of high internet penetration, the Finnish population by-and-large is still not 'tuning in' to internet politics (cf. Hill & Hughes 1998, 183). Citizens seek and place significantly more emphasis on political information from traditional sources than on-line sources. The socio-economic patterns found in traditional political interest, activity and engagement were also, on the whole, replicated among Finnish citizens seeking and placing information in on-line political information. Finnish citizens also do not appear to have become activated and engaged on-line, as evident from the analysis of on-line discussions. Some findings which do not entirely support the reinforcement theory do also merit attention: the thesis has shown that there could be a potential for a growing political "internet generation". The youngest voters, regardless of other socio-economic traits, are more prone to visit and to place emphasis on the on-line political information than the older generations. Furthermore, the thesis also found that neither class nor income, both of which are commonly used indicators of traditional political activity, proved significant predictors of seeking out and placing emphasis on any on-line political information. Nevertheless, looking at the general picture, the findings provided vis-à-vis the on-line activity by Finnish citizens generally support the reinforcement theory. The thesis' second article showed that the new generation of Finnish voters appear to give significant importance to internet-based information in shaping their voting decisions. The fifth article, however, showed that the on-line opportunities for political discussion fail to activate and engage citizens (cf. Boogers & Voerman 2003, 25). This indicates a rather supplementary role for the internet in providing "information shortcuts" (Downs 1957) for those already likely to be politically interested (cf. Boogers & Voerman 2003, 25). While the young Finnish voters might be seeking information from new and more accessible sources (cf. Downs 1957; Norris 1999, 85), on-line politics is still not turning even these young people into 'political animals' (Davis 1999, 8).

Returning to the typology of on-line political environments, then, the current situation in Finland resembles a 'no-change' situation in as much as the on-line activity of both the political actors and the citizens follows familiar patterns. This corresponds to position A in the typology. Even though the Finnish case contains several contextual conditions which *a priori* suggested a potentially innovative and dynamic on-line environment, there is little evidence of internet politics showing signs of affecting off-line politics in Finland. Whether this is due to the pull- or push effects discussed in this thesis' theoretical framework is hard to assess in light of the empirical evidence presented.

Tentatively, supporting the push perspective, the Finnish citizens might not be turning to the websites of the Finnish political parties and candidates as these are generally quite lacklustre and mostly resemble traditional brochures. This is also partly supported by the higher interest shown by the citizens on visiting and placing emphasis in the innovative candidate-selector websites. On the other hand, from the pull perspective, the political actors might not yet be making any extensive efforts with their websites as most citizens are not engaging in political activity on-line. Instead, they maintain a web presence mainly to stay up-to-date. The evidence presented in this thesis, nonetheless, indicate that on-line politics does not appear to affect the politics of Finland in general.

Regarding the future, however, this thesis did provide some evidence of the internet possibly becoming a 'medium of choice' in seeking political information for the next generation of Finnish voters. Even if this thesis demonstrated that these citizens were not becoming more engaged and active, this slight trend in the citizens dimension leaves open for some speculation concerning different potential directions for the future of the Finnish on-line political environment. First and foremost, a growing audience for internet politics could mean that the major actors further strengthen their positions. This would resemble environment B in the typology of on-line political environments. If the trend of young citizens placing emphasis on on-line information in making their voting decisions continues, the major actors would seem likely to catch the larger share of these voters. As Lusoli (2005b, 160) remarks: "The internet does attract a younger audience and forces politicians to come to terms with the new medium". As they can reach increasingly more citizens on-line, the resources of the major actors would be increasingly mobilized into their websites and their dominance among the on-line political actors would continue (cf. Gibson et al. 2003, 50-51; Margolis et al. 2003, 58). This potential development is arguably quite likely as the major political actors already dominate the Finnish on-line political environment even though they are not using the internet to its fullest potential. Secondly, tentatively, the smaller political actors who are disadvantaged through traditional mass media (Margolis et al. 2003, 58), could be more keen to seize the possible 'net gain' and channel a large share of their resources towards catching the on-line voters (cf. Sadow & James 1999, 5). This could drive the on-line electoral competition towards a more equalized situation. If the smaller political actors are competing on a relative equal footing with the major actors for a growing on-line audience, and if they manage to attract these voters to their websites, on-line politics could influence off-line power structures as well (cf. Norris 2003, 43). This would correspond to situation D in the theoretical typology of online political environments. Finally, it is noteworthy that the impact of the internet could be due to political actors and activities not extensively analyzed in this thesis. The young are increasingly turning to new social movements, protest groups and transnational networks in their off-line political activity (Norris 2002).

The real impact of internet politics could indeed come through its adoption by such political actors (Norris 2001, 238-240).

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In conclusion, it should be noted that the internet only has roughly ten years of history since its rapid spread to the general public began. Norris remarks that the diffusion and evolution of the internet:

> "remains in process and the limitations of our ability to peer into the future of the Internet is self-evident […] so it is hazardous to provide more than, at best, an educated guess about the long-term consequences of new technology for democracy". (Norris 2001, 240)

This thesis has provided a 'snapshot in time' which, eventually, probably will be referred to as the early years of the internet. Norris (2001, 240), nevertheless, stresses the importance of analyzing the current state of the development. Correspondingly, the snapshot taken in this thesis has been of an on-line political environment in a country which arguably stands towards the front of the information and campaigning 'evolution'. The empirical findings of the thesis provide important information on the current state of internet politics, the components shaping it, and its current impact on the politics in general of representative democracies. The tentative prospects for the future presented in the conclusion are, likewise, arguably more likely to be 'educated guesses' than pure speculations. With this in mind, the conclusion of this thesis is that while the new generations of voters could be turning to the internet for their political information, the impact of the internet on the politics of modern representative democracies is, at least for the time being, limited.

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The internet has been argued to affect two corner-stones of representative democracies; pluralistic competition between political actors for positions of power and political participation by citizens. According to optimistic visions, smaller political parties would use the internet to campaign on more equal footings with major parties. The internet, it is also argued, provides citizens with accessible opportunities for political participation and engagement which would spur increased political activity. Less optimistic visions, however, perceive few changes in both electoral competition and political participation due to the internet.

This dissertation examines how the internet is affecting the politics of representative democracies in times of elections. Drawing on the inconclusiveness in the research field, the thesis studies the on-line activity of political actors as well as the citizens in Finnish elections between 2003 and 2006. The thesis also examines how different external and internal conditions affect the on-line activity of political actors. Important knowledge of the current state of on-line politics, the components shaping it and its impact on the politics of representative democracies is thus provided.