

A second-order medium? The Internet as a source of electoral information in 25 European countries

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Abstract. There is growing interest worldwide concerning new communication technologies and the electoral process. Studies of online elections have yielded a sizeable body of knowledge on the strategies of electoral actors in an increasing range of countries. Although in the US data are routinely gathered regarding citizens' use of the Internet as a source of electoral information, limited cross-sectional evidence originates from the EU. None of this is comparative. Using data from Flash EuroBarometer 161, this article examines European citizens' use of the Internet for electoral information regarding the 2004 European Parliament election. Specifically, it discusses use of the Internet for political information in relation to location, technological development, traditional media, individual social position, political attitudes and voting turnout in 25 countries. At micro, individual level, a model is built that controls for traditional predictors of electoral media consumption, such as age, gender, education, political interest, and electoral connectedness and activity. At the macro, country level, the article explores the import of the electoral system and rules, compulsory voting, GDP per capita, levels of electoral engagement of traditional mediators (governments, parties, press) and voting turnout on the use of the Internet for electoral information. Overall, the article introduces original evidence and analysis of the role of the Internet in European elections, and contributes to the debate on the media and elections in a comparative perspective.

Keywords: Internet, elections, European Parliament, comparative research, EuroBarometer, media and elections

1. Introduction¹

This article examines the role of the Internet as a source of electoral information during the 2004 European Parliament (EP) elections in 25 countries. Specifically, it examines EuroBarometer data in order to draw conclusions about the adoption of the Internet by citizens in EU25 countries, and the social and political background of such citizens. The article charts the relation of the Internet with other election media and with more general indicators of campaign activity, and it explains adoption of the Internet for election news in the EU25 in relation to a range of systemic indicators: social, electoral and political. Overall, the article places the Internet firmly on the research map of media and Europe, also in relation with other countries, most notably the US. Of course, no claim is made for providing a full account of the role of the media in EP elections. Due to the novelty of the approach, and to the lack

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of previous benchmarks, this study is necessarily exploratory rather than hypothesis testing. Neither a claim is made about interpreting the role of the Internet in relation to all possible electoral uses. Any exercise in interpreting the role of a single technology, or institution, in a process as encompassing as an election entails considerable reduction in complexity. The 'novelty' of new media resides as much in the capacity of the Internet to provide in-depth, interactive information 24/7 from a range of source as in the range of opportunities it makes available for citizens to directly take part in the election (e.g. [25,42]). However, this effort is valuable for a number of reasons, both theoretical and empirical, which clearly emerge from the review of existing Internet and election studies.

2. Citizens, the Internet and democratic elections

Originating with the 1992 US Presidential election, the Internet has been adopted as an electoral weapon by an increasing range of political actors in as diverse countries as the UK, Australia, Germany, Italy, France, Japan and South Korea. As a result, the study of how election campaigns are fought in cyberspace has become an increasingly more common academic pursuit [6,14,33,42,53]. However, while the role of the Internet has been assessed in relation with parties and candidates' competition online, and their style of online electoral campaign, much less is known concerning public participation and involvement via the Internet.

Firstly, although audience research is one of three main themes for the study of online elections [25,53], along with the exploration of professionalisation and pluralisation of voice, much more is known about the production of online campaigns than about their structure (covered by most contributions in this theme issue of *Information Polity*) and the patterns and predictors of its consumption, which are discussed in this article. Unlike traditional media, Internet campaigns are consumer-driven rather than producer-driven, thus challenging the producers' control of the message [42,46]. The Internet allows younger users to bypass traditional authority structures and information gatekeepers [11]. There is increasing empirical evidence that the new media channel matters to the recipients of electoral information, especially for first-time voters and young people in general [20]. Channel matters more today than in the past, as the Internet comes of age for communicating campaigns [19]. One possible reason may be that interactivity matters: it influences participants' perception of candidates as well as their levels of agreement with their policy positions [47]. Even in the absence of direct interaction with a campaign, design interaction may foster voters' critical sense. As Iyengar noted concerning interactive campaign CDs, 'Rather than waiting passively, and most likely in vain, for the media to provide coverage of relevant issues, CD users could seek out information that was personally meaningful. Our evidence shows that this new found autonomy fosters a general sense of political involvement' [17].

Of course, there are objections to the capacity of the Internet to 'reconnect' voters, and more profound critiques of the nature of the Internet exchange [2,29,44,48]. While a number of studies point to the reinforcement of social inequalities by digital means, as the Internet further enfranchises the already enfranchised, others have questioned the very assumptions on which digital reconnection rests. First, Shudson argued that considering the rational voter as the cornerstone of democracy is historically inaccurate and empirically misleading. Inasmuch as the Internet only offers the opportunity to purvey electoral information, it is unsuitable in fostering full-fledge democratic engagement [44]. Barber warned against the immediacy of images and video via the Internet, the prevalence of speed, simplicity, pictures over text, and information over knowledge in the online environment [2]. Neuman envisaged the fragmentation of an electoral audience lost in a wealth of online information, whereby increased political knowledge is not directly translated into increased political efficacy and action [29], but rather

fragments public opinion in cultural enclaves [48]. Finally, the Internet may not benefit from the 'trap' effect of television broadcasting – the idea that audiences at the lowest levels of political interest benefit most from political news – as users have to actively find contents and there are many channels from which to choose [43]. Under these circumstances, can the Internet ultimately reconnect?

Secondly, researchers need to know more on the role of the media during EP elections. While the 'second order' election thesis has been tested over the years in relation to political parties and governments [28], there is only limited evidence on the role of traditional media [9], and no research on the role of new media in EP campaigns. After a classic, very promising start [4], few have ventured to study the importance of the media system for EP elections across nations [34,35]. While across Europe both EU and EP election news are limited in visibility and without clear protagonists, coverage increases concomitantly with events, summits, and when elites disagree on EU policy or direction. Furthermore, while higher levels of public satisfaction with democracy predict coverage of EU at the country level [34], during EP elections coverage is greater where citizens are dissatisfied with their national governments [35]. Finally, while the political dynamics of the 2004 elections – in terms of party and government performance – did not step far out of line from the 'second order' model, in post communist countries the outcome was far more uncertain, due to low turnout, economic instability and the fluid nature of the party system [27]. Under such circumstances – a topical election, limited role of traditional media, a less-aligned political environment in new member states – it has been claimed that the Internet may play a significant role [6,27]. However, despite EU-fuelled expectations arising from 'Information Society' research on new media and democratisation [51], and beyond the controversial potential of the Internet to 'reconnect' citizens, mainly through the e-voting 'magic ballot' [52], there is no evidence concerning the electoral role of new media.

Thirdly, and related to the above, Internet access has grown dramatically over the last decade across Europe.² However, most of the existing evidence on political uses of the Internet concerns the United States, Britain, the Nordic countries and a few other countries where the Internet has achieved the status of a quasi mass-medium; very little is known about the majority of EU members at low and average rates of Internet penetration. This is, of course, natural as large scale surveys are not a parsimonious strategy to examine political phenomena that are dense in space, time and episteme. Except for the United States, where Pew surveys, the ANES and other independent surveys routinely include questions on Internet electoral use, micro evidence on the electoral Internet exists in Britain [6,53], Finland [5], France [49] and Australia [14]. Evidence exists that increasingly more people can be reached online at every election, most of whom are likely to vote. Starting with the 1992 presidential race [22] an increasing number of Americans has come to rely on the Internet as a source of electoral information and engagement across the 1996, 2000 and 2004 campaigns [7,36–38]. Significantly, small effects of Internet-based information on vote decisions were found [3,37,40,50]. As well, evidence suggests a migration from newspapers to the Web as a source of campaign information [23,24], although television remains the most important election medium. Interestingly, all studies suggest that young people are most likely to benefit from the availability of online electoral information. Although there is evidence from the UK and Australia that citizens are using the Internet increasingly more during elections [14,26], there are no data for other countries, including most EU member states. This is problematic, as the EU includes countries with a range of different campaign and media systems, electoral rules and principles, and largely varied political cultures: north vs. south, long-standing vs. recent accession, more vs. less

²See July 2005 data from EuroBarometer 63, at http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb63/eb63_en.htm and 2004 access figures reported below.

affluent (e.g. GDP) and, traditionally, consociative vs. majoritarian political culture. More specifically, one may expect compulsory voting to favour information search, as citizens have an incentive to seek out information, and the Internet, where available, provides an expedient solution. Also, one may expect that citizens would be more willing to gather information where they could choose among candidates, as they can do with open electoral lists and non-blocked lists, rather than where candidates were selected a priori by the parties. Finally, Internet use for electoral information can be expected to be higher in countries where people actually turn out on Election Day, as a reflection of an informed, participant polity. Therefore, has the Internet entered EU citizens' electoral media diets as it already has in the US? Also, can it be expected that the Internet plays a similar electoral role across a variety of institutional and cultural settings?

Fourthly, and finally, while something is known about the role of the Internet for citizen information *comparatively* across Australia, the US and the UK [12,15,16] and other EU countries, mainly from EuroBarometer (EB) 53 [15,16,32], none of this research concerns elections. Although, it was noted, the study of citizens' behaviour during such elections attracts wide scholarly attention, only one comparative study covers, in a limited fashion, the role of new media at EU level elections. Based on European Election Survey data from 1999, Schmitt looked at the importance of the Internet as a source of pre-electoral information in the EU15. On average, only 5% of EU citizens used the web for that purpose, well below usage rates for TV and newspapers, but on a par with attending public meetings. Younger citizens and more educated citizens were more likely to have accessed online election news (7%), as well as voters in countries, especially the Nordic countries, where participation is higher. Although, as Schmitt argues, this has to do with the similar predictors of Internet access and political participation [41]. While in some countries, as Australia [14] and the United States (see above) the Internet is on the rise while traditional media seem to be in retreat, in Europe most citizens still get most of their electoral information from traditional sources.

3. Research questions, data and methodology

The review of the literature has identified a number of ways in which the Internet may be significant for EP elections. Firstly, what is the role of the Internet as a source of electoral information in relation with other traditional media? Has the Internet entered EU citizens' electoral media diets as it already has in the US? Secondly, how important is the Internet in different countries, and what explains any differences? And how far does the geography of Europe, social and political, shape the electoral influence of the Internet? Thirdly, can the Internet connect an increasing and increasingly diverse number of European citizens with EU representative institutions? What explains citizens' adoption of the Internet for electoral purposes? Ultimately, and more generally, is the Internet an electoral technology in the EU 25?

This article directly addresses these questions by offering a comparative account of Internet use as a source of information across 25 European countries just before the 2004 EP election. Firstly, the article surveys European citizens' use of the Internet for electoral information during the election, in a range of nations. Then, it discusses use of the Internet for political information in relation to location, technological development, traditional media, individual social position, political attitudes and voting turnout in 25 countries. At the individual level, a model is built that controls for traditional individual predictors of electoral media consumption, such as age, gender, education, political interest and electoral connectedness and activity. Finally, at the macro-national level, Internet use for electoral information is discussed in relation to factors found significant at the micro level and to: compulsory voting, GDP per

capita, levels of electoral engagement of traditional mediators (governments, parties, press) and previous trends of voting turnout.

Individual-level data analysed here are drawn from Flash EB 161, entitled 'European Elections 2004 Barometer'. The survey includes an item for the use of the Internet for electoral information (Q7 Political parties and candidates campaigned for votes in the European Parliament elections we have just had. For each of the following, please tell me if you have been in this situation or not . . . j) You have searched for information on the European elections on the Internet), together with a number of questions regarding the electoral campaign. Limited to the variables included in this study:

- Knowledge of the election date (Yes-No).
- Probability to vote at the next European elections (1–10).
- Adequacy of information in order to choose for whom to vote (Yes-No).
- Importance of knowing who the candidates were at the European elections (Yes-No).

In addition, Q7 on the campaign environment asks respondents:

- Whether political parties or candidates visited home (Yes-No).
- Whether they were contacted by political parties or candidates by phone (Yes-No).
- Whether they were contacted in the street by political parties or candidates (Yes-No).
- Whether they saw advertisements for parties or candidates (Yes-No).
- Whether they discussed the elections with family, friends or acquaintances (Yes-No).
- Whether they took part in public meetings concerning the elections (Yes-No).
- Whether they read about the electoral campaign in the newspapers (Yes-No).
- Whether they received leaflets concerning the election in their mailbox (Yes-No).
- Whether they seen or heard things concerning the election on television or on the radio (Yes-No).

In addition, the survey includes questions on age (18–99 years old), gender (male-female), occupation (self-employed, white collar, blue collar and unemployed) and education (1–4 scale). Fieldwork was conducted prior to the election, between 17 and 28 May 2004. Total sample size is $N = 48,235$, based on sample sizes of approximately $N = 2000$ for each EU Member State, according to standard Flash EB procedures.³

Country-level data, presented in Table 4, Fig. 3 and in the text are drawn from a variety of sources. GDP per capita for 2004 is from Eurostat.⁴ Data on Internet access in Europe in 2004 are from Eurostat.⁵ Where 2004 data are not available, ITU⁶ and ESS⁷ data were used, which were weighted to 2004 by EU average growth from Eurostat. For France⁸ and for the Netherlands⁹ a composite weight was created using national-level data. Electoral turnout data are from EU official statistics.¹⁰ Data for total voting population, number of MEPs and electoral rules are from Richard Rose's IDEA report on the EP election [39]. Data on countries' date of entry to the EU and a battery of indicators on the electoral

³For the interested reader, more details on Flash EB methodology may be found at http://www.gesis.org/en/data_service/eurobarometer/flash/.

⁴http://epp.eurostat.ec.eu.int/portal/page?_pageid=1090,30070682,1090_33076576&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL.

⁵http://epp.eurostat.ec.eu.int/portal/page?_pageid=0,1136250,0_45572555&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL.

⁶http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/Internet04.pdf.

⁷Edition 1 of the second round of the European Social Survey (ESS2-2004), available at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>.

⁸See <http://www.industrie.gouv.fr/biblioth/docu/4pages/pdf/4p192.pdf>.

⁹See <http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/bedrijfsleven/innovatie-ict-investeringen/publicaties/artikelen/2005-1644-wm.htm>.

¹⁰See http://www.elections2004.eu.int/ep-election/sites/en/results1306/turnout_ep/index.html.

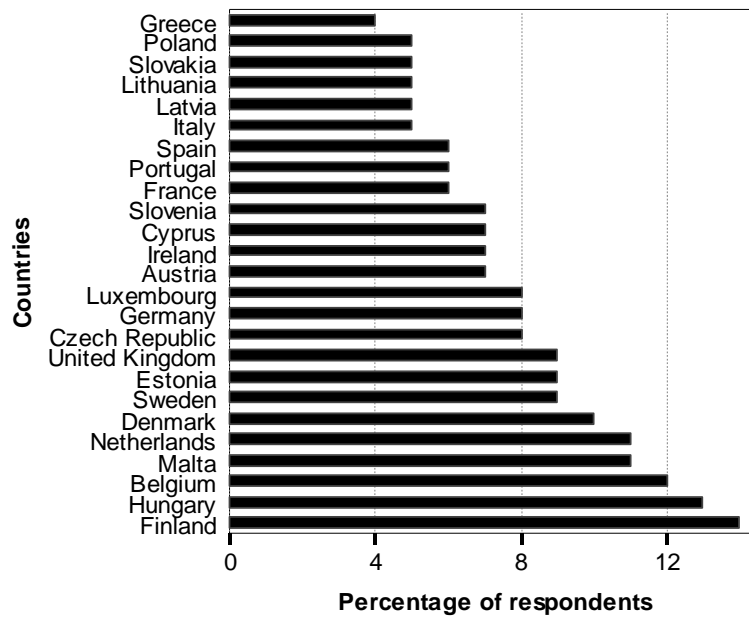
system in the EU25 are from Stöver and Wüst [45]. Data were analysed using a range of methods. Cross tabulation was used where the aim was to explore patterns of adoption within individual countries (Table 1). Hierarchical logistic regression was used to explain variance across countries (Table 2), factor analysis to explore the relation of Internet use with other campaign activities (Table 3).¹¹ Correlation analysis was used in lieu of a full explanatory model to link Internet electoral uses and macro-institutional factors, as the number of observations is necessarily limited to 25 (Table 4) and OLS regression is used to explain the relation between Internet access and electoral use across Europe (Fig. 3). Concerning specifically hierarchical logistic regression, the method was chosen as it allows ranking the relative importance of independent variables, to easily interpret the interaction effects of variables, and to understand the impact of covariate control variables in subsequent models. Four blocks of variables were entered in the model hierarchically (no stepwise). The first block (and therefore also the first model in Table 2) includes EU countries only. The second block adds socioeconomic factors, discussed above. The third block includes knowledge about the election date, the probability of voting, and the perceived need of electoral information. The fourth block comprises campaign factors, such as the likelihood of having received electoral information and stimuli in a number of formats from a range of campaign actors.

4. Results and discussion

Across Europe, the Internet was an auxiliary tool for acquiring electoral information during the 2004 EP election. Approximately 3.5 million Europeans, about 8% of EU25 population, used the Internet to look for EP election information. This compares unfavourably with the numbers who have seen or heard about the electoral campaign on television or on the radio (78%), who have read about the election in newspapers (60%) and who have discussed the election with friends and family (46%). There is, however, wide variation across national settings (Fig. 1). Northern Europeans are more likely to have used the Internet for electoral information than citizens in southern Europe. At the bottom of the usage table is Greece (4%), not too distant from a group of southern European countries: Italy, Spain, Portugal and France (5–6 %). A number of new member states also feature in the low adoption group. Conversely, Nordic countries (Finland, Estonia, Sweden and Denmark) and other countries in the north of Europe enjoy high electoral usage (10–15%), with some exceptions such as Malta (11% however English-speaking) and Belgium (12% however residence of EU bureaucracy). The rest of the EU is located somewhere in-between the two extremes.

Aggregate differences in the use of the Internet for electoral purposes may depend on a range of factors. Firstly, they may depend on traditional predictors of Internet use and Internet political use at the individual level: age, gender, education, social and geographical location. Secondly, they may depend on the levels of citizens' political interest in general and engagement in the EP election in particular. Thirdly, and related to this, differences may depend on the campaign media environment of specific countries, and on the use of different media to follow election campaigns, including measures related to the reception of election stimuli from a range of political actors. Finally, difference in accessing the online campaign may be due to country-level systemic factors such as the electoral system, compulsory

¹¹Regarding the factor analysis, I only report in Table 3 the number of clusters found, variance explained and where the use of the Internet belongs in relation to other factorial components. More details on factor loadings and cross-loadings can be found on the author's website, at <http://www.lusoli.info>, in the 'Data' section.



Source: Flash EB 161.

Fig. 1. Internet use for EP election information in EU25.

voting, an index of representation and the level of development. These can be thought of respectively as systemic incentives and barriers to the adoption of the Internet for electoral purposes. Of course, one would expect these factors to co-vary in relation to each other and in relation to the use of the Internet for electoral information. The next four sections will review these possible explicators individually, while a more general account is provided in the discussion.

5. Individual-level results

At the individual level, evidence suggests that young, male, university educated citizens are more likely to use the Internet for political purposes. This proved remarkably true in the case of the EP elections, with a few interesting exceptions (Table 1). Concerning gender, in all 25 EU countries male respondents sought online information in excess of female respondents. In some countries, such as Germany, Austria, Denmark and Estonia, twice as many males went online as females ($\Phi > 0.10^{***}$). In other countries the differences are statistically insignificant, as in Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic and Portugal. In terms of age, older people (above 55 years of age) were much less likely to look for information online across Europe. In those countries where the youngest category (up to 24 years) were more active online, as in Finland, Estonia and Hungary, the correlation between age and use is stronger ($\Phi > 0.15^{***}$), although it is non-significant in Ireland and Sweden. Conversely, there is broader variation in patterns with regard to occupation and social grade. Overall, ‘white-collar’ workers outclass both the self-employed and ‘blue-collar’ workers concerning online election information. However, Internet use for political information varies more according to occupation than to gender and age. Overall, the occupation-information correlation is much stronger in new EU countries, such as Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, than in pre-2004 member

Table 1
Use of the Internet for electoral information by socio-demographic traits

Countries	Gender		Age				Occupation			Terminal education age			μ	N	
	Male	Female	18-24	25-39	40-54	≥ 55	Self-employed	Employee	Manual worker	None	≤ 15	16-20			≥ 21
Austria	11	4	11	9	8	3	7	9	6	6	5	8	8	7	1942
Belgium	15	9	23	12	13	8	11	13	12	12	6	10	15	7	12 1967
Cyprus	8	5	8	11	5	4	6	10	7	4	2	6	12	3	7 1902
Czech republic	9	7	11	10	8	5	14	12	3	5	4	7	17	8	8 1923
Denmark	14	7	11	11	13	8	13	14	9	8	4	7	13	2	11 1930
Estonia	12	6	15	11	12	3	11	16	7	6	1	7	17	9	9 1917
Germany	11	5	9	10	8	5	11	9	7	7	4	8	11	8	8 2001
Greece	6	2	7	6	4	2	5	7	3	3	1	4	9	4	4 1903
Finland	15	13	23	19	12	7	11	18	10	12	3	11	19	14	14 1894
France	8	4	3	8	8	4	11	8	6	4	3	4	10	4	6 1923
Hungary	16	10	22	15	15	5	20	16	4	10	4	11	21	13	13 1966
Ireland	9	6	9	9	6	6	8	8	7	6	3	7	10	7	7 1868
Italy	7	3	10	7	5	2	7	7	6	4	3	5	12	5	5 1908
Latvia	6	5	8	8	5	2	15	8	2	2	1	4	9	13	5 1976
Lithuania	5	5	11	6	6	2	8	12	3	3	1	4	10	5	5 1881
Luxembourg	10	7	10	11	8	6	10	11	6	7	4	8	12	6	8 1975
Malta	14	8	17	14	10	7	12	21	4	7	2	12	27	11	11 1964
Netherlands	13	8	21	12	10	7	12	13	8	9	7	10	12	11	11 1978
Portugal	7	6	7	7	10	3	5	11	5	4	2	7	13	4	6 1817
Poland	7	3	7	7	6	1	4	13	4	3	0	5	9	13	5 1950
Slovakia	7	4	8	8	5	2	9	9	5	3	1	5	13	5	5 1964
Slovenia	10	5	9	7	10	4	9	10	8	6	3	8	10	7	7 1923
Spain	8	4	9	7	6	2	6	10	6	4	1	6	10	2	6 1971
Sweden	11	7	10	10	9	7	12	11	6	9	5	8	11	9	9 1919
UK	11	6	13	9	8	7	9	10	7	8	7	8	13	9	9 1991

Figures reported are percentages of respondents who searched for information on the Internet. Missing values were omitted. Source: Flash EB 161.

Table 2
Predictors of use the Internet for electoral information

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	0.08***	0.09***	0.02***	0.02***
<i>Countries</i>				
Belgium	1.69***	1.56***	1.19	1.39**
Cyprus	0.92	0.78	0.64***	0.68**
Denmark	1.51***	1.28*	1.36*	1.64***
Estonia	1.38*	1.44**	1.32*	1.56***
Finland	1.99***	1.71***	1.64***	1.75***
Greece	0.56***	0.52***	0.42***	0.50***
Hungary	1.95***	1.97***	1.44**	1.30*
Ireland	0.99	0.88	0.68**	0.61***
Italy	0.68**	0.79	0.58***	0.56***
Latvia	0.70*	0.63***	0.64**	0.69*
Lithuania	0.69*	0.70*	0.59***	0.60***
Luxembourg	1.14	1.04	0.75*	0.72*
Netherlands	1.56***	1.34*	1.43**	1.96***
Spain	0.81	0.76*	0.64***	0.75*
Sweden	1.28*	1.10	1.23	1.34*
United Kingdom	1.14	1.19	1.32*	1.41**
<i>Gender</i>				
Female		0.60***	0.60***	0.60***
<i>Age</i>		0.99***	0.98***	0.98***
<i>Education</i>		1.53***	1.47***	1.44***
<i>Occupation</i>				
Self-employed		1.52***	1.46***	1.40***
Employee		1.74***	1.63***	1.63***
Manual worker		0.99	1.02	1.01
House person		0.97	0.93	0.96
Student		1.82***	1.70***	1.55***
Retired		0.93	0.91	0.90
<i>Knowledge</i>			0.80***	0.86***
<i>Voting probability</i>			1.07***	1.05***
<i>Electoral information</i>			1.91***	1.54***
<i>Candidate information</i>			1.65***	1.45***
<i>Campaign activities</i>				
Home contact				1.21*
Phone contact				1.71***
Street contact				1.31***
Seen adverts				1.19***
Discussed election				2.44***
Rallied/campaigned				1.76***
Nagelkerke R ²	0.02	0.08	0.13	0.17

The table reports logistic regression odds ratio of variables predicting Internet use for electoral information. Coefficients represent a percent variation in odds for the reported category with respect to the reference category. Coefficients above 1 indicate an increase in the probability of using the Internet for electoral information, while figures < 1 indicated a decrease. Only countries significant in at least two models are reported. Slovenia was set as reference category for *countries*; unemployed was set as reference for *occupation*.

N = 43,038 * = sig. $p < 0.05$, ** = sig. $p \leq 0.01$, *** = sig. $p \leq 0.001$.

Source: Flash EB 161. Dependent: Q7 Political parties and candidates campaigned for votes in the European Parliament elections we have just had. For each of the following, please tell me if you have been in this situation or not . . . j) You have searched for information on the European elections on the Internet.

states. In the British Isles, where a larger section of the population is employed in the service sector, there is virtually no difference due to occupation. This is also likely to reflect the extent of Internet access

in the workplace, which is lower in Central-Eastern Europe than elsewhere in Europe. Finally, formal education achievement is the strongest individual predictor of use of online news during the election. It is strong and significant ($\Phi > 0.15^{***}$) in eight countries, and significant in all the rest except for the Netherlands. In all countries, university-level education accounts for most of the variance.

Overall, therefore, the same factors explain the use of the Internet for electoral information across a range of countries. This begs the question, then, of what explains the small but significant variance, reported above, across countries. An initial, intuitive answer stems from the observation that election news consumption largely descends from individual political appetites in general and election behaviours in particular [33]. One may expect citizens who are more interested in the election to want to find out more, which has been described by Bimber as 'increasing' Internet returns on the stock of citizens' existing political capital [3]. This suggests, in other words, a micro version of the reinforcement theory. Over the years, this explanation has been remarkably accurate in predicting online political behaviour in a range of countries [13,18].

A hierarchical logistic regression was modelled that includes country, socio-demographic variables, examined above, and a range of measure of electoral connection included in the original EB dataset (Table 2 and methodology, above). It is immediately evident from the table that the four blocks of factors (block 2) provide relatively independent, however limited, explanatory power. Overall, the four blocks only explain 17% of the variance in the use of the Internet for electoral information. SES factors – age, gender, education and occupation - have the strongest influence on the likelihood of accessing the Internet after controlling for election related attitudes (block 3) and exposure to the campaign (block 4); SES which accounts for 6% of the variance. European female citizens are 3% less likely than men to have looked for online information; older people are equally disenfranchised, as probability decreases 1.3% for every ten additional years of age. Education has possibly the strongest influence, as online information seeking ranges from 1.5% for those without formal education to 12% for the university-level educated. Predictably, coefficients decrease with further model specification, especially concerning education and occupation, traditionally related to campaign attentiveness and activity, even in second order elections. In terms of electoral connectedness (block 3), the likelihood to vote boosts Internet use for information by 3%. This is not a large increase when one considers the continued evidence from the United States that voters are much more likely to be accessing online news. Along with SES factors, citizens' use of the Internet is boosted by having discussed elections (8% increase), participated in election campaign meetings (+ 6%) and having been contacted by a campaign by phone (+ 6%) boost. As expected, behavioural indicators in block 4 reduce the significance of attitudinal indicators approximately by half. They do not, however, seem to affect the importance of SES, except for a negative effect on student status. In other words, students who are engaged in the campaign rather than students in general make the most of the Internet as a source of information.

Finally, it is interesting to assess the importance of the factors described above in relation to the overall importance of the Internet in different countries. Zero-order coefficients for the country-only model (model 1) reflect the relative importance of the Internet in different countries, as reported in Fig. 1. The expectation may have been that individual-level explanations subtract explanatory power from *country*, as Internet participation has consistently been found to depend on micro indicators. Unexpectedly, however, when variables in blocks 2, 3 and 4 are controlled for, citizens in some member states are still more likely to have used the Internet for electoral information than citizens of other countries, as coefficients in model one and four are not dissimilar. Furthermore, all signs remain in the initial direction. This indicates that across the EU25 the Internet is used more in some EU countries for electoral purposes for reasons other than SES, election connectedness and campaign activity. However, this statement requires

further specification. First, some countries with lower rates of Internet use – such as Poland, Slovakia, Portugal and France – dropped out of model 4. In these countries, therefore, individual factors alone account for the lack of electoral engagement with the Internet. The same is true in Malta, although SES explains most of the country's propensity for online elections. Secondly, in most countries where online elections are relatively popular, such as Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Estonia, there are minor oscillations after the inclusion of additional controls. Citizens from these countries are more active online as compared to citizens from the same backgrounds, social and political, in other countries. Conversely, citizens from Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and Spain are less active online regardless of their backgrounds. Thirdly, a number of countries that were not significant at zero order become significant when controls are included. In the UK (and also partly in the Netherlands), when the scanty levels of electoral interest and engagement are controlled for (models 3 and 4), citizens are quite happy to use the Internet for election news. In other countries – Luxembourg, Ireland and Cyprus – the opposite is true. In these countries, discounting relatively high levels of electoral connectedness and behaviour, citizens are less likely to use the Internet for electoral information. Overall, therefore, the interplay of citizens' SES, election connectedness and behaviour creates a very complex pattern of demand for online electoral information across Europe. Also, there is evidence that *country* matters above and beyond its social and political capitals.

6. Country-level results

In order to shed further light on these patterns, I now examine two aspects of the interplay of the Internet and other media as a source of election information. First, I examine the place of the Internet in the election media regime of different countries. A range of indicators were available in the EB dataset, including the reception of campaign material, home visits from parties and candidates, and having received information about the election from the radio and TV (Table 3). Using factor analysis at the country level, the extent to which use of the Internet clustered with other campaign stimuli was assessed. To be clear, I am mapping here the structure of the electoral campaign as experienced by citizens in different countries, by factoring indicators concerning the consumption of election news and information, to find out the role of the Internet in citizens' campaign diet in a range of countries. Although there are differences worth further investigation (especially in 2004 member states) the similarities rather than the differences in the campaign environments across European countries are reported here.

Table 3 reviews the results of this analysis. In 20 EU countries three main campaign factors, remarkably similar, account for most of the variance in campaign activities. Overall, a first common factor is found across a range of countries that reflects the media campaign: reading about the electoral campaign in the newspapers, having come across advertisements for parties or candidates and seen or heard things concerning the electoral campaign on television or on the radio. The second factor comprises traditional direct campaigning from parties and candidates, such as home visits, phone messages, the reception of leaflets and street contact. The third factor includes the individual-initiated aspects of the campaigns: discussion with friends and colleagues, attending public meetings and, in a large majority of countries, also using the Internet for electoral campaign information. There are a number of considerations arising from the factoring that are worth noting here. First, in all European countries (except for Poland), the Internet belongs to that factor explaining the least variance, that is it belongs with relatively sporadic campaign activities. As was noted above, the Internet has yet to enter the mainstream of electoral campaigns, on the demand side. Secondly, Internet use for electoral information loads with discussing the election with friends and colleagues (in 13 countries), attending rallies and public meetings (in

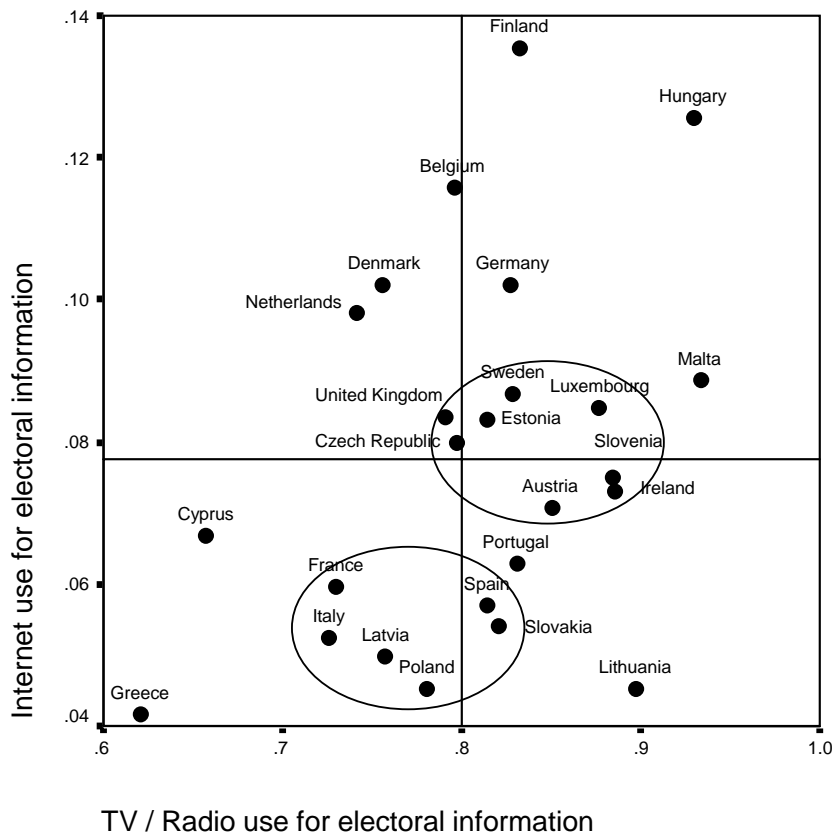
Table 3
The Internet in the wider campaign environment

Country	Factors extracted	Variance explained	Factor Internet use belongs to	Campaign activities co-loading with Internet use for electoral information
France	3	44%	II	Discussion, public meetings, newspapers
Belgium	3	45%	III	Discussion, public meetings
UK	3	47%	III	Discussion, public meetings
Greece	3	49%	III	Discussion, public meetings
Ireland	3	44%	III	Discussion, public meetings
Hungary	3	43%	III	Discussion, public meetings
Luxembourg	3	42%	II	Discussion, public meetings
Netherlands	3	43%	III	Discussion, street contact
Finland	3	44%	III	Discussion, street contact
Spain	3	46%	II	Discussion, newspapers
Denmark	3	46%	III	Discussion
Sweden	3	45%	III	Discussion
Cyprus	3	48%	III	Discussion
Italy	3	48%	III	Public meetings
Czech Republic	3	49%	II	Public meeting, phone contact
Estonia	3	43%	II	Public meeting, phone contact, home visit
Slovenia	4	53%	IV	Public meetings, street contact
Slovakia	3	50%	III	Public meetings, street contact, letters
Malta	4	56%	III	Newspapers
Lithuania	3	43%	III	Phone contact, home visit
Germany	4	53%	IV	—
Austria	3	45%	III	—
Portugal	3	46%	III	—
Latvia	4	53%	IV	—
Poland	2	38%	Equidistant	—

Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation. Eigenvalue > 1 for inclusion. A common threshold for factor communality was set at 0.4.

12 countries) and with street contact (in 5 countries), all of which involve a large degree of citizen involvement. Although this confirms the individual-level results reported above about reinforcement and electoral connectedness, it also highlights the ‘informal’, citizens-oriented nature of online information. Thirdly, and related to this point, use of the Internet is associated with party-directed campaign activities in a number of new member states, especially from Eastern Europe. In Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic use of the Internet for political information loads more frequently with phone contact, home visits and street meetings than in other EU countries, but never with political discussion. This may suggest that people who are embedded in traditional campaigns also use the Internet to supply election information, or alternatively that traditional mediators in these countries have integrated the Internet in their media repertoires (although existing evidence would suggest otherwise). Fourthly, in a number of countries – Germany, Austria, Portugal, Latvia and Poland – Internet use for information stands alone as an individual factor (last extracted). Although this would deserve further investigation, it will suffice to note that none of these countries were a significant predictor of Internet use for electoral information, either at zero order and including additional controls (Table 2). The Internet may have played, in these countries, a relatively marginal electoral role. Finally, while in three countries the Internet loaded with the use of newspapers for electoral news, in no EU25 countries did the Internet load with the consumption of the election on television and radio.

Although the relation with newspapers is per se remarkable ($\Phi = 0.11^{***}$, EU 25), the weakness of the relation of televised election news with (or spill-over to) Internet use is surprising ($\Phi = 0.05^{**}$), as TV has long been the most important medium in Europeans’ electoral diet [10]. At the aggregate



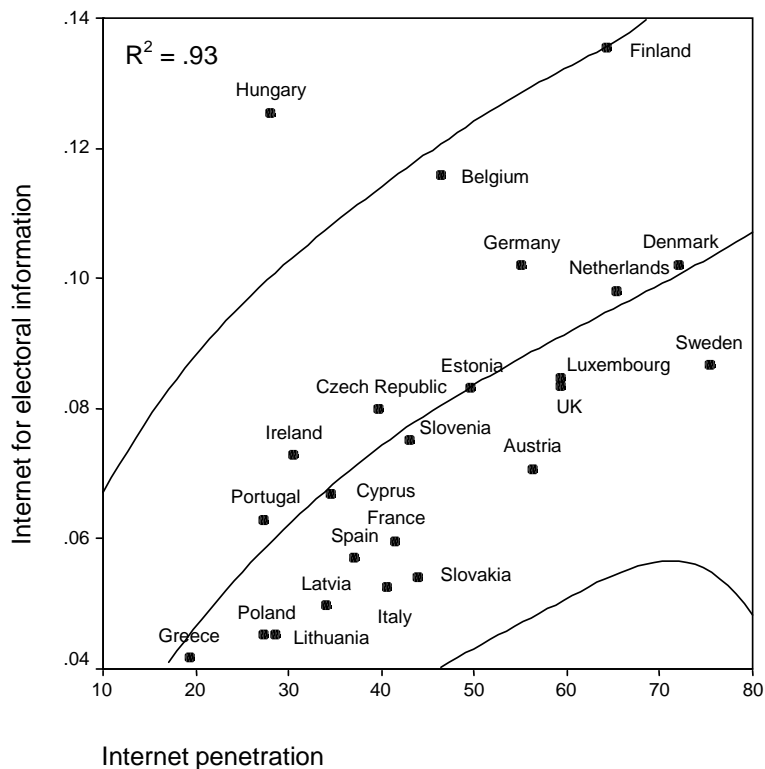
Notes
Reference lines represent mean values

Source: Flash EB 161.

Fig. 2. Internet use and TV/radio use for electoral information in EU25.

level, the correlation between Internet use and TV use for electoral information is barely significant. This means that citizens in different countries have slightly different media diets during the election, based on the prevalence of television and the secondary role of the Internet (Fig. 2). In a large range of countries citizens have very similar patterns of TV/radio ($\mu = 0.80$) and Internet use ($\mu = 0.07$) for political information. In Finland and Hungary, discussed above as countries where the Internet plays a more prominent role, traditional media are also consulted. In southern Europe and in some new member countries, citizens use both the Internet and television less than the EU average to get electoral information. In Denmark and the Netherlands, however, the Internet plays a slightly more prominent role vis-à-vis television. While these data do not allow further extrapolation, it is in these countries that the Internet may be playing an increasing role as a source of campaign information.

It may be expected, however, that the levels of Internet use for political information reflect different Internet access rates in member countries. Indeed, Internet access and use are strongly correlated (Fig. 3). However, there are two main exceptions to an otherwise linear, symmetric correlation. On the one hand, for a large range of countries, including southern and eastern EU countries, Internet use for electoral



Notes

The inner line represents a cubic regression curve $[y = ax^3 + bx^2 + cx]$; a constant was not included as Internet use assumes Internet access (ruling out positive intercept) and at aggregate level $y > 0$ (ruling out negative intercept). Outer lines represent the confidence interval (.95) for the mean of the distribution.

Sources: Flash EB 161 for Internet use; Eurostat, ITU and national sources for Internet penetration [see methodology for further details].

Fig. 3. Internet access and Internet use for electoral information in EU25, 2004.

information is less responsive to Internet access. This suggests that new media are less of a political technology in these countries than elsewhere. Conversely, in other countries, such as Finland, Hungary and Belgium, the relation is more elastic. These countries ‘beat the trend’ in that the Internet is more of a political technology than in other countries, discounting for Internet access.

Finally, online electoral information was tested in relation to a range of country-level indicators (Table 4). Some are traditional macro predictors of electoral dynamics [39], while some have been used as indicators of the information polity in Europe [30,32]. Concerning institutional factors, none of the traditional predictors of voting turnout – compulsory voting and electoral rule – are related to the use of the Internet for electoral information. The incentive provided by the need to vote (compulsory voting) did not instigate citizens to search for voting information, even were controlling for Internet access. The nature of the competition had no influence either on Internet electoral use. Citizens were no more willing to use the Internet where they could chose among candidates than where parties parachuted candidates

Table 4
Macro predictors of Internet use for electoral information

	Coefficient	Sig.
Compulsory voting	0.02	
Yoked – Free standing	–0.27	
Electoral lists (open, blocked, unblocked)	0.34	
Turnout	0.11	
1979 members	–1.24	
2004 members	0.99	
GDP per capita PPS, EU25 = 100	0.34	†
Internet penetration	0.56	**
Newspapers as a source of information	0.57	**
TV as a source of information	0.35	
Proportion (of population) through Higher Education	0.47	*
Proportion of white collar and self-employed	0.26	
Proportion knowing the election date	0.19	
Proportion with the necessary information for vote choice	0.50	**

Results reported are Pearson's for continuous independents, independent samples t-tests for dichotomous independents, one-way ANOVA for categorical independents.

Two-tailed significance tests, † = $p < 0.10$, * = $p \leq 0.05$, ** = $p \leq 0.01$.

in blocked-list systems. Again, this was the case even where controlling for Internet access. Finally, one may have expected turnout to positively correlate with Internet electoral use at the country level, as the relation was weak but positive at the individual level. That is, one would expect people to make more use of the Internet to inform the vote in countries where voter turnout is higher. Again, these results were not significant. This means that in every country voters are slightly more likely to have used the Internet for electoral information than non-voters, regardless of the inter-country differences in voting turnout. The distinction old vs. new Europe is also largely ineffective in predicting the consumption of online news, even when controlling for different levels of Internet access. Finally, as concerns institutional factors, GDP per capita has a weak but significant correlation with online news. This means that people in relatively affluent countries are more likely to use the Internet for political information. As they are also more likely to use the Internet in general (see Fig. 3), this is not very surprising. GDP was then tested against a linear measure of the relative importance of Internet political use with respect to use in general. The correlation was, again, not significant.

Conversely, indicators reported above as predictive at the individual level also prove relatively strong at the macro level. Newspapers stand out even more at the aggregate level as strongly correlated with Internet use for political information across Europe. In newspaper-oriented countries, as Pippa Norris put it [31], the Internet seems to flourish ($r = 0.57^{**}$), while it is no more used in television-oriented countries, where no correlation is found. Finally, in those countries where the media-political complex provides citizens with enough electoral information, citizens are also more likely to use the Internet for the same purpose ($r = 0.50^{**}$). However, this may have more to do with European countries' educational structures than with social composition. Traditionally, higher education is part of this virtuous circle, and again this was the case for Internet news across Europe ($r = 0.47^*$).

7. Conclusions

This paper has generated comparative data on the role of the Internet as an electoral medium during the 2004 EP elections. Results reported here are both encouraging and dispiriting for those hoping

that the Internet may 'reconnect' the EU electoral sphere. From this analysis it is immediately evident that the Internet remains a secondary medium for a minority of Euro-citizens to find out about the election campaign, across Europe. Furthermore, use has not evolved dramatically since 1999, when it was last surveyed, bucking the stronger trend of Internet diffusion in Europe. These cyber-citizens are young males, with university education and white-collar jobs, who are using the new medium to gather information on a usually uninspiring campaign [9]. Furthermore, they are already well informed and relatively more likely to vote than the average EU citizens. It was also found that it is the educational structure rather than the social structure of EU25 countries that has the most influence on the likelihood of using the Internet during the election. The electoral Internet, it was argued, largely maps the European digital divide, thus confirming previous findings on the political Internet [32].

Nonetheless, again in most countries, the Internet is not a second-order medium as the term is commonly understood. On the contrary, factor analysis suggests that the Internet goes hand-in-hand with citizen-centred campaigns, where the individual takes a more active role in information gathering, in taking part to political discussion and in attending public electoral events. The Internet is embedded in the dynamics of production and re-broadcasting of the electoral message more than it is related with passive consumption of electoral information and electoral apathy. Perhaps, and this will require much further examination, the Internet may revive the newspaper culture, found in decline in most OECD countries, and replace a TV-centric culture with a renewed citizen-centric political culture. Overall, to repeat, the Internet is hardly a second-order medium because it is disjointed from traditional institutional explanatory variables regarding EP electoral dynamics. It is uncorrelated with electoral system, compulsory voting and countries' length of membership of the EU. In that respect, it largely follows endogenous dynamics of development that have technological and political (but not electoral) drivers. The analyses reported here provide three interesting addenda to this general finding.

Firstly, there are countries such as Hungary, the Netherlands, Finland and Denmark where, *ceteris paribus*, the Internet is more important for elections. In these countries a higher proportion of Internet users retrieve online information about the election, also in relation to traditional media. Use is less constrained by social and political predictors, and online information-seekers are also consistently engaged in discussion on politics offline with friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. In other words, in these countries the Internet is more of an electoral technology than in the rest of Europe. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is in these countries that a range of political actors are more active in reaching out to the electoral using the Internet [5,8].

Secondly, in keeping with Marsh's findings concerning the anomaly represented by post-communist countries in the second-order model [27], evidence examined here suggests that a smaller but more varied online electoral sphere exists in Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia and the Czech Republic, which is nevertheless hampered by low Internet adoption. In the context of second-order elections in new member states, other factors are important that can be referred to economic explanations [1,21], the stability of party systems and low voting turnout [27]. Under these circumstances, political actors may have an incentive to set up effective online campaigns [25]. Unfortunately, however, the Internet is less widespread in those countries where it could have made an effect – low voter turnout, an unaligned political system and a traditional media system more or less in disarray (at least with regard to coverage of the 2004 EP election).

Thirdly, and related to the above, it may also be that we are looking in the wrong place, as the import of the Internet may be more conspicuous (which does not equate with important) in times of crises than in times of routine. Television certainly is [34,35], and there is evidence that the Internet can mobilise where more is at stake. It may well be that the 'imposition' of an external system of representation and rules,

largely proportional, flattens any potential effects of the Internet. The Internet may be more important in fluid situations, that is, where the political system is not perfectly aligned, traditional media are not very strong, more is directly at stake and turnout is lower. That is, the Internet may become an important factor in elections where politics is 'dealigned', according to traditional formulations: declining political influence of class, opening up of the electorate, new politics and post-materialist orientations, and decline in cleavage politics.

Finally, this study is a first step towards a mapping the role of the Internet in European elections. Results reported in this study highlight the need for more and more structured research on the role of the Internet in European elections. As it was noted in the first section, there is virtually no cross-national evidence on electoral uses of the Internet. I have begun here to examine the Internet as a source of information about the 2004 EP election using Flash EB data. However, the data examined have some intrinsic limitations, as the dataset does not include routine political behaviours and attitudes, specific information on where Internet users went to retrieve online information, what they *did* online and about the offline externalities of online behaviours. These are some of the most fruitful avenues for further exploration, if and when the EB and other European election studies will include such measures. This is done ever more often at the national level in an increasing number of countries, most notably, once again, the United States. Secondly, multi-level, integrated models can be tested that take into account the provision of online information and engagement opportunities in such settings by a range of traditional players: parties, government and the media, in relation with its retrieval, consumption and performance by EU citizens. While the Internet & Election Project is a first worthy effort in this direction [<http://oase.uci.kun.nl/~jankow/elections/>], this will need linking up with cross-national survey research. Finally, following in the footpath of US researchers, much more study is needed on the 'effects' of the Internet on voting behaviour and direction (within the media 'effects' tradition), and overall on citizens' media diet (within the media 'uses and gratifications' tradition'). This will require richer datasets and more sophisticated analytical techniques, both of which are neither unworkable nor necessarily more costly than current provisions.

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