

# ELECTION CAMPAIGNING ON THE WWW IN THE USA AND UK

## A Comparative Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This article is a comparative analysis of British and American parties and candidate election campaigning on the World Wide Web during the Presidential and General Elections of 2000 and 2001, respectively. The central questions are twofold: (1) Do parties differ across the two systems in terms of how they use the Web as a campaign tool? (2) Does the Web promote a more balanced or equalized exposure for party messages than other media? A combination of interview data, content analysis of sites and analysis of online and offline media coverage of the election is used to investigate these questions. Conclusions are drawn about the similarity of Web campaigning across the two countries and about the increasing dominance of the major parties, particularly in the UK.

KEY WORDS ■ campaigning ■ Internet ■ online ■ parties ■ WWW

### Introduction

The World Wide Web (WWW) is being increasingly used for communication by citizens and governments in most advanced democracies. Systematic study of how traditional political actors are using the Web and in turn are influenced by it, however, has been limited. In this article we seek to address that deficit by providing a comparative analysis of British and American parties' and candidates' election campaigning on the WWW during the Presidential and General Elections of 2000 and 2001, respectively. The central questions investigated are twofold: (1) do parties differ across the two systems in terms of how they use the Web as a campaign tool?; and (2) does the Web promote a more balanced or equalized exposure for party messages than other media? To address these questions we use questionnaire

and interview data from political party officials and Web managers, and content analysis of party websites, discussion groups and offline media coverage of the election (Gibson and Ward, 2000c).

Investigation of these questions is important given recent evidence from single-nation studies pointing to a growing 'homogenization' in parties' use of the Web (for targeted information provision), alongside a 'normalization' of party competition whereby the major parties are beginning to dominate cyberspace. Such trends clearly challenge the widespread technological optimism that greeted the advent of the Internet and its expected revitalizing effects for democracy (Grossman, 1995; Rheingold, 1995). More specifically, for political scientists, evidence of such trends adds fuel to the current debate about widespread moves toward a 'transnational' or 'Americanized' style of campaigning (Kavanagh, 1996; Scammell, 1995), and the emergence of less competitive, 'cartel-like' party systems (Katz and Mair, 1995; Koole, 1996). By examining these trends in the USA and the UK, two nations with comparable levels of Internet use but differing political cultures and institutional arrangements, we also offer some insight into broader questions about the degree to which technological connectedness and socio-structural forces shape organizations' use of the Web.

### **Parties and Election Campaigning Online**

Current studies of parties and election campaigning online have been concentrated largely on two main areas of party activity: (1) parties' style of campaigning, and particularly how the Internet relates to broader shifts towards more professionalized techniques; (2) inter-party competition, particularly the degree to which smaller parties use the Web to raise their public profile and gain greater media exposure.

#### ***Professionalization and Convergence***

Over the past 30 years, electoral commentators have noted a professionalization of electoral campaigning in liberal democracies, leading to an international convergence of campaign techniques and styles (Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Farrell and Webb, 2000; Kavanagh, 1995; Norris, 2000; Scammell, 1995, 1998; Wring 1996). The main trends include: increased centrality of television in campaigns; use of marketing techniques – advertising, opinion-polling, focus groups and soundbites; use of external political consultants (advertisers, journalists and pollsters) to assist with the conduct of campaigns; an increased focus on the national campaign; moves towards more personality-led rather than issue-led campaigns; and reduction in the level of direct interaction between voters and politicians as campaigns become increasingly reliant on the mass media (Gibson and Römmele, 2001). Collectively, these traits have been referred to as 'Americanization', since they

have developed furthest and fastest in the USA (Kavanagh, 1995; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Other commentators, while not disputing the presence of these features, have argued that they should be more generically defined as internationalization, globalization or professionalization (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996; Scammell, 1995, 1998). They also note that national differences in electoral campaigning remain among countries, which can be related to factors such as levels of economic development, political culture and electoral rules.

The emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the 1990s has led to further consideration of these globalizing trends: how far will they promote them or will they act as a countering force? Based on the inherent properties of the Internet – namely its bandwidth, individualization and interactivity – we argue that it offers both barriers and incentives to the spread of professionalized techniques. While there are numerous possibilities that can be considered here, we speculate on three main impacts that the Internet may have on the style of future elections. First, the high volume and speed of transmission could provide a more substantive basis for campaigning than other forms of media, reducing the ‘soundbite’ element that is seen as having crept into political discourse with the rise of TV. Second, the individualization of the medium in terms of user control means that it becomes possible for organizations to identify and target voters and personalize messages with direct email. Finally, the interactive potential of the technology allows parties to offer new fora for member and voter participation in the shape of chat-rooms or intranets. Alternatively, parties could take a more superficial approach and utilize the two-way communication possibilities to gather immediate feedback on their policies.

Overall, the empirical evidence gathered thus far from parties in a variety of national contexts supports the first and second of these scenarios, but not the third. While Internet use by parties has grown rapidly in liberal democracies since 1995 (Norris, 2000) and parties are increasing the sophistication of their online campaigns, websites appear to be largely mechanisms for feeding information to activists and journalists and for symbolizing the ‘cutting edge’ credentials of parties, rather than providing any meaningful interaction with voters (Davis, 1999; Gibson and Ward, 1998; Gibson et al., 2000; Tops et al., 2000). Indeed, it has become commonplace to deliver scathing verdicts on parties’ online efforts, condemning them for adopting a cautious and uncreative approach to the new medium (Davis, 1999; Selnow, 1997; Stone, 1996). Despite these generalized patterns, however, research has also noted some national differences. For example, while online fundraising has become prominent in the USA and to a lesser extent in the UK, in many continental European countries online fundraising is absent from party sites. This is partly a result of national campaign finance rules, state funding for parties, and/or political culture. In Italy, for instance, Newell (2001) argues that, because of the corruption scandals of the early

1990s, 'parties were extraordinarily reticent about asking members of the public to give them money. . . . Raising money in this way was perceived as something that on the whole is simply not done'.

***Party Competition and Campaign Outcomes:  
Levelling the Playing Field?***

Literature on party change points towards a long-term decline of competition among mainstream political parties. The rise of the catch-all party has led to a convergence of parties of the left and right, and has meant that ideological battles between parties have eroded as both sides have attempted to broaden their electorate by moving closer to the median voter. Similarly, the emergence of cartel parties, arguably, has caused a further reduction in the level of competition, as parties have become quasi-agents of the state and colluded to ensure their ongoing survival and success (Katz and Mair, 1995; Lowi, 1999). However, catch-all and cartel changes have also produced a backlash. In shutting out opposition and limiting ideological debate, mainstream parties have generated an anti-establishment, anti-party momentum in many countries manifested in such phenomena as the Greens, the populist right or Ross Perot's candidacies in the USA.

The arrival of the Internet, seen initially as a democratizing force, led to suggestions that ICTs might disproportionately benefit fringe and minor parties, thus assisting the growth of anti-establishment parties (Corrado and Firestone, 1997; Morris, 2000; Rash, 1997). The lack of editorial control and relative low cost of creating a website meant that minor political movements could establish a platform for their views more easily than in the mainstream media and reach a considerably larger audience. In short, it could help level the electoral playing field. Yet a number of authors have pointed to the 'normalizing' of party competition in cyberspace, whereby the offline dominance of the major parties is simply replicated (Margolis et al., 1997, 1999; Resnick, 1999; Sadow, 1999). While websites clearly offer smaller parties a much cheaper means of reaching vast new audiences, the major parties' monopoly of other media and their bigger advertising budgets provide them with far greater leverage in guiding voters to their sites. More significantly perhaps, as Web technology advances the need to have full-time highly skilled Web managers and/or commercial professionals to manage a site is becoming more important, further squeezing out the smaller parties. Despite this general tendency, however, there is evidence that party systems in more 'party-centred' countries, such as the UK and Italy, offer slightly more resistance to 'normalization', with minor parties keeping better pace with design sophistication and publicity for their sites (Gibson and Ward, 2000b; Gibson et al., 2000). Moreover, ebbs and flows in competition have been identified: in election campaigns the major parties outperform their minor counterparts, spending considerably more resources on their site, but between election campaigns fringe parties sometimes match

them (Gibson and Ward, 2000a, b). Thus, while the Web may not be opening up the system for non-traditional choices, it may be loosening it in some cases.

### **Research Questions and Data**

As the above review indicates, most studies of parties' use of the Internet have been focused on a particular election in a given nation. Thus, while it appears that parties are converging on a more static campaign style and the major parties are increasingly dominant, the use of different coding schemes, questionnaire items and measurement criteria render such conclusions highly speculative and impressionistic. This article aims to move such speculation onto a more systematic empirical basis by engaging in an explicitly comparative analysis of parties' use of the Web in recent election campaigns in the USA and the UK.

As well as providing a more solid base for assessing trends toward convergence and normalization in parties' online activities, it is hoped that the findings will shed light on broader questions about the technological and social determinants at work in the development of cyber campaigning. Given that a significant proportion of the British and American population report access to the Internet (at the time of the US and UK elections, 62 percent and 40 percent, respectively) and that parties in both countries have been online since the mid-1990s, findings of cross-national difference would suggest that factors other than Internet penetration and parties' experience shape parties' use of the new media. Specifically, institutional and regulatory differences would need to be considered in understanding parties' online strategies. While sharing a long-standing adherence to the two-party model and first-past-the-post electoral system, the USA and UK exhibit significant differences with regard to division of governing power and overall strength of parties. Perhaps the federal and candidate-centred nature of US politics alongside its more liberalized media environment and frequent electoral cycle provides for a more dynamic and innovative model of online campaigning? Alternatively, a lack of differentiation across the two systems in parties' online strategies would seem to suggest that earlier arguments about the standardization or Americanization of campaigning may be taking hold among European politicians in terms of how they use the Web. Certainly in the run-up to the recent presidential elections, for instance, we know that the main UK parties all closely watched the e-campaigns of Bush and Gore and sent campaign staff to the USA to learn from the Bush-Gore experience.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodology

In investigating these questions we utilized a range of methodologies and data in both party systems. Specifically, these included:

- Web surveys of the online presence of presidential candidates and the major and minor parties in the USA (at the federal level) and the UK in terms of their listings in major indices on the Web and also the number of links in to the sites.<sup>2</sup>
- Electronic searches of offline and online mass media coverage of the major and minor parties and candidates in each system.
- Content analysis of the functionality and design of websites, adapted from coding schemes developed specifically for candidates and party sites (Gibson and Ward, 2000c) [see Appendix A]. The coding provides information on the emphasis placed by the parties on a range of functions, such as information provision, voter participation, campaigning for electoral support, resource generation (i.e. money and members) and networking with other like-minded organizations. Design elements are also examined, such as the glitziness of the site in terms of multimedia use, its ease of navigation and freshness. In the USA, the sites selected are those of the parties and candidates in the general election race for the Presidency in November 2000. Reference is also made to candidate sites during the primary stage. The UK sites analysed include all parliamentary parties and a selected range of non-parliamentary parties chosen to maximize the ideological variance and national origins of the sample.
- Interview and questionnaire data from national party Web managers (UK) and state and national party officials (USA) on the purposes and success of the online election campaign.

In using these data, the overall aim is to compare parties across systems and also within systems to examine how far it is meaningful to talk of online convergence in campaign style and normalization of party competition. By comparing Web presence and access, we can establish the extent to which the major parties in each system enjoy a higher profile, e.g. are they more connected across the Web to other sites, and are they advantaged in terms of key indices of party sites? By comparing content and delivery of sites we can address how similar sites are, both within and across the two countries. Do sites tend overall to be top-down and information heavy versus interactive and participative? Between systems, do US sites favour resource generation more than those in the UK, for example? Further, is there a clear gap in the range of functions and sophistication of design between the major, minor and truly fringe parties? Finally, by using interview and questionnaire data we can probe further into our findings about the function and design of sites.

## **Research Findings**

### ***Website Presence and Access***

Tables 1 and 2 report the findings about the overall presence of the major and minor parties and candidates in terms of online access (i.e. number of links into the sites) and in terms of references to them in major online and offline news sources. The findings reveal an unsurprising story of dominance by the major parties. While all parties and candidates were present on the Web, clearly more traffic is guided towards the sites of the major parties. In the UK, as Table 1 reveals, links into the sites of the Conservatives, Labour Party and Liberal Democrats are at least three times greater than those into the most linked minor parties.

In the USA, the story is not quite so clear, the Libertarian Party has actually developed more links into its site than either the Republicans or the Democrats. The Greens, the Reform Party and the Natural Law Party, however, have significantly fewer links in than the two major parties. A starker picture emerges with regard to the sites of candidates. Only Pat Buchanan comes close to rivalling Gore and Bush in terms of links into his site. Overall, therefore, the major parties appear to have been more visible on the Web, although they did not completely dwarf or overshadow the smaller parties.

In terms of online media coverage of the parties leading up to the election, this also appears to reflect a disproportionate emphasis on the major parties in terms of references to them in news stories. Table 2 reports the numbers of stories referencing the parties and candidates in the BBC and CNN online news database, and, while taken over different periods of time and covering slightly different regional archives, the pattern of more references to the British Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties and the US Democrats and Republicans is clear.

To compare, a variety of mainstream offline news sources were also searched using the Lexis-Nexis database. Not surprisingly, these figures give greater prominence to major parties than minor parties in the news stories. The average number of stories appearing in the UK and Irish press on the three major parties during the final week of the General Election according to Lexis-Nexis was 765. The average for the other parties listed was 26. A similar imbalance is found in the figures for the US parties covering a wider period (January–December 2000). The Democrats and Republicans averaged 5,861, while the 4 minor parties averaged just 352. Thus, while online news was not quite so pronounced in its bias towards the major parties as offline news, overall the Web remains far from equal in the access it provides to all parties.

**Table 1.** Website access

<i>Party</i>	<i>Links in<sup>1</sup></i>
<b>UK parties</b>	
Conservatives	1,430
Labour	1,340
Liberal Democrats <sup>2</sup>	957
SNP	337
Plaid Cymru <sup>3</sup>	314
Ulster Unionists	684
Democratic Unionist Party	363
SDLP	106
Sinn Fein	249
Socialist Alliance	44
BNP	27
Socialist Labour	26
Pro-Life Party <sup>4</sup>	63
UKIP	82
Greens	325
<b>US parties</b>	
The Democratic Party	6,334
The Republican Party	7,729
The Libertarian Party	9,242
The Green Party <sup>5</sup>	2,791
The Reform Party <sup>6</sup>	2,340
The Natural Law Party	2,025
<b>US candidates</b>	
Al Gore	5,602
George W. Bush	7,768
Harry Browne	787
Ralph Nader	887
Pat Buchanan	3,294
John Hagelin	255

<sup>1</sup> Links in calculated using google search engine (www.google.com) using 'links:www.partyname' during the first week of June 2001 for the UK and the second week of October 2000 for the USA.

<sup>2</sup> The Liberal Democrat site was redesigned to highlight election information and menu buttons for 'People', 'Policies' and 'Conference' were removed although the material was still accessible via search and other less obvious buttons. These items were therefore scored as present.

<sup>3</sup> The score represents the 24 links into the new site www.plaidcymru2001.com as well as the 290 links to the old site www.plaidcymru.org

<sup>4</sup> The score represents the 22 links into the previous name of the site www.prolife.org.uk and the 41 links into the new name www.prolifealliance.org.uk.

<sup>5</sup> Green links in are to the 'Association of State Green Parties'. The National Green Party (www.greenparty.org) has only 77 links.

<sup>6</sup> Reform links in were unavailable in October when the party had a dispute with Pat Buchanan over the official nomination.



**Table 2.** Online and offline news coverage of parties/candidates

<i>Parties</i>	<i>BBC/CNN archive</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>Lexis-Nexis</i> <sup>2</sup>
<b>UK Parties</b>		
Conservative	+1000	959
Labour	+1000	919
Liberal Democrat	+1000	416
SNP	350	47
Plaid Cymru	415	12
Ulster Unionists	466	35
DUP	288	22
SDLP	394	12
Sinn Fein	630	57
Socialist Alliance	37	11
BNP	78	10
Socialist Labour	25	5
Pro-Life Alliance	0	1
UKIP	56	86
Green	128	19
<b>US parties</b>		
Democratic	515	5,664
Republican	545	6,057
Green	118	649
Libertarian	18	167
Reform	130	465
Natural Law	25	125

<sup>1</sup> www.bbc.com/news contains a database of all BBC news stories. Searched 16/01/01–16/07/01 using ‘party names’ (exceptions Conservatives; SDLP; SNP [Scottish National Party found only 8 refs]; Ulster Unionists; DUP; BNP; UKIP); www.cnn.com contains a database of all CNN news stories. Searched 01/06/00–31/12/00 using ‘Democratic Party’ AND Gore; ‘Republican Party’ AND Bush; ‘Green Party’ AND Nader; ‘Reform Party’ AND Buchanan; ‘Libertarian Party’; ‘Natural Law Party’.

<sup>2</sup> For the UK, figures are from www.nexis-lexis.com/executive. Includes FT and Global News Wire. Restricted to major news stories 02/06/01–07/06/01 (restricted to 1 week, because beyond that too many party references were +1000). Search terms: Party name AND UK OR United Kingdom OR Britain (exceptions Conservatives; SNP; UKIP). For the USA figures from www.nexis-lexis.com/universe Worldwide database including European newspapers 01/06/00–31/12/00. Search terms: Democrat!, Green Reform, Libertarian in same sentence as Party AND America! OR USA OR United States. Republican and Natural Law within the same sentence as Party.

## Website Content Analysis

Both homogeneity and normalization are in evidence when we examine what the party sites did and how effectively they delivered their content.

### *UK Parties*

For the UK parties, our analysis reveals that sites perform a range of functions (see Table 3).<sup>3</sup>

**Table 3.** UK party websites – overall functions

	<i>Information provision</i>	<i>Resource generation</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Networking</i>		<i>Campaign</i>
				<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	
Parliamentary parties						
Conservative	8	12	16	5	1	7
Labour	13	13	15	6	7	5
Liberal Democrat	11	12	11	6	7	4
SNP	12	8	10	3	1	4
Plaid Cymru	7	0	6	2	2	1
Ulster Unionists	10	4	10	0	0	2
DUP	7	0	7	0	0	3
SDLP	9	2	5	0	4	0
Sinn Fein	8	1	3	0	7	1
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>9.4</i>	<i>5.8</i>	<i>9.2</i>	<i>2.4</i>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>3.0</i>
Non-parliamentary parties						
Socialist Alliance	7	3	3	3	0	2
BNP	13	11	7	1	6	4
Socialist Labour	7	2	4	0	1	0
Pro-Life Alliance	8	3	7	0	1	0
UKIP	11	11	12	3	5	3
Green	11	13	21	5	7	4
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>9.5</i>	<i>7.2</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>2.0</i>	<i>3.3</i>	<i>2.6</i>
Range	0–16	0–13	0–n	0–6	0–15	0–9

Providing information and generating resources (members and money) appear to be major goals of the sites, along with offering some means for voter participation. Eleven of the 15 parties score more than halfway on the information provision index, and 7 parties scoop more than half of the points available for resource generation. In terms of participation, the picture is slightly more skewed, with some parties offering fairly extensive opportunities for feedback, although far fewer facilitate genuine debate with leaders. Of all the functions examined, networking appears to be a generally lower priority for most of the parties. This is true particularly for external networking, or links into other organizations, which does not feature very prominently on many sites, except for the Greens, the BNP, Sinn Féin and the two left-of-centre mainstream parties. Active campaigning through the site with direct email proved to be one of the most consistent elements across the sites, and certainly represented a change from 1997.

Comparing party performance online, it would seem at first glance that there is a relatively small divide between the parliamentary and non-parliamentary players. In terms of function, the fringe parties' information provision is actually slightly more extensive, as is their resource generation, and in terms of participation opportunities they certainly seem to hold their own.<sup>4</sup> The same is true for aspects of style and delivery reported in Table 4. In terms of the 'glitz' factor, the smaller parties do not shy away from graphics and more high-tech offerings such as audio and video, as the mean scores reveal.<sup>5</sup>

The smaller parties are similarly equipped in terms of navigation tools such as search engines and home page icons, and perhaps most importantly have learned to keep their sites current, with all parties offering fairly continuous news updates during the campaign. Ensuring easy accessibility to users was one aspect of delivery that most party sites seemed to lack. Features to create printer friendly documents, such as removing frames and graphics, were not commonly used, and mobile telephone access (WAP) was possible only on a couple of sites.

When we look beyond these broad figures, however, we see some clear blue water separating the three major parties from both their parliamentary and non-parliamentary competitors. The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats consistently offered more depth and a greater range of activities from online donation and membership (resource generation), online Q&A with leaders (participation) direct emailing, logo downloads, to site customization through cookies<sup>6</sup> (campaigning), and live feeds from their press conferences (multimedia). Still, a number of interesting caveats apply. First, despite the major parties' emphasis on resource generation, several minor parties rival them, notably the BNP, UKIP and the Greens. These parties have clearly understood the relevance of the Web for raising the hard currency of support. Second, the delivery figures reveal that while the major parties might offer more glitz on their sites, and provide slightly easier access in terms of facilities for the blind or WAP, the smaller parties

**Table 4.** UK party websites – style and delivery

	<i>Glitz/multimedia</i>	<i>In principle</i>	<i>Access Kb home pg</i>	<i>Navigation</i>	<i>Freshness</i>
Parliamentary parties					
Conservative	6	2	31	6	6
Labour	6	4	53	4	6
Liberal Democrat	5	1	39	5	6
SNP	2	1	NA	0	5
Plaid Cymru	2	1	2	2	5
Ulster Unionists	2	0	22	2	6
DUP	4	0	2	2	5
SDLP	1	0	2	3	4
Sinn Fein	2	0	1	1	4
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>2.8</i>	<i>5.2</i>
Non-parliamentary parties					
Socialist Alliance	2	0	7	2	5
BNP	4	0	4	1	6
Socialist Labour	2	0	4	2	4
Pro-Life Alliance	2	0	12	3	5
UKIP	5	0	NA	4	5
Green	4	2	2	3	4
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>0.3</i>	<i>5.8</i>	<i>2.5</i>	<i>4.8</i>
Range	0–6	0–5	0–n	0–n	0–6

generally have smaller home pages that take a shorter time to load. Given that many users access these sites from home through 56 kb modems (or less), these shorter download times might make a floating or less interested voter more likely to view the site. Thus, in contrast to previous findings for the UK party system, the divide no longer seems to be between the parliamentary parties and their non-parliamentary counterparts, but between the big three and the rest.

### *US Parties*

Before comparing US and UK party websites, we should remind ourselves that candidates' personal organizations rather than national political parties generally dominate US presidential election campaigns (Keefe, 1998: 319). This leads to some interesting contrasts with British party websites at the national level. For instance, even though the Natural Law Party had an active website during the fall campaign (see data in Table 1), the Alexa Wayback Archive<sup>7</sup> includes three websites for the party's presidential candidate, John Hagelin, but none for the party itself. Reflecting a similar order of importance, Pat Buchanan's site ([gopatgo2000.org](http://gopatgo2000.org)) flourished throughout the campaign, while the official Reform Party site ([reformparty.org](http://reformparty.org)) became 'Temporarily Unavailable' on 16 September, shortly after Buchanan won his legal dispute with the party's executive committee and officially laid claim to the party's presidential nomination and to its \$12.6 million share of the presidential campaign fund.<sup>8</sup>

The data on party sites shown in Tables 5a and 5b indicate that the US national parties differed from their British counterparts mostly regarding information provision, participation, resource generation, campaign functions and (to a lesser extent) media glitz. The US parties contrast most strongly in their presentation of background information and in their solicitation of participation in party affairs. US parties provide more background information – organizational history, party platforms, policy statements and the like – than do UK parties. All score near the top of the 16-point scale, on average over 4 points higher than British parties. The situation is the reverse regarding participation, particularly with regard to solicitation of feedback by email. US parties' scores average nearly four points lower than UK parties on this scale.

Even though the resource-generation mean score for US parties is higher than that for UK parties, the major party websites reflect less emphasis on resource generation than do those of the major UK parties. The Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties all score near the maximum of the scale, while the Democratic and Republican parties' scores vary from five to nine. In contrast, the minor US parties (excepting the Reform Party, which previously had relied upon Ross Perot's largess) score in the top half of the scale. The Libertarian Party scores at or near the maximum. Notwithstanding their relatively weak control over the presidential campaign,

**Table 5a.** US national party websites – overall functions

<i>Parties<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Information provision</i>	<i>Resource generation</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Networking</i>		<i>Campaign</i>
				<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	
Democrat	14	5	6	5	6	8
Republican	15	9	3	5	7	8
Libertarian	14	13	7	5	2	7
Green	13	7	5	4	10	4
Reform	13	3	10	5	4	4
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>13.8</i>	<i>7.4</i>	<i>6.2</i>	<i>4.8</i>	<i>5.8</i>	<i>6.2</i>
<i>Range</i>	0–16	0–13	0–6	0–6	0–15	0–10

**Table 5b.** US national party websites – style and delivery

	<i>Glitz/multimedia</i>	<i>Access in principle</i>	<i>Navigation</i>	<i>Freshness</i>
Democrat	6	2	3	6
Republican	6	3	2	6
Libertarian	6	1	4	6
Green	5	0	2	5
Reform	3	0	3	6
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>5.2</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>2.8</i>	<i>5.8</i>
<i>Range</i>	0–6	0–5	0–n	0–6

<sup>1</sup> The Natural Law Party is not included in the content analysis since its site was excluded from the Alexa Election archive used to retrieve the US election sites now at [www.web.archive.org/collections/e3k.html](http://www.web.archive.org/collections/e3k.html) (see footnote 3 for further details).

US party websites still provide more varied campaign support than do those of UK parties: they average six of ten indicators in contrast to fewer than three for websites in the UK. The US party websites also display more glitz than do those of UK parties.<sup>9</sup>

The US presidential candidate websites, reported in Tables 6a and 6b, were not surprisingly used as personal promotional tools to win support for the individual rather than their party as a whole. Indeed, except for Harry Browne's website, which proudly declared him to be the Libertarian candidate for president, the naive visitor would be hard-pressed to discover which party each candidate stood for.

Neither Gore nor Bush displayed Democratic or Republican symbols on their home page, nor did their parties' names appear except in the text of news releases. Internal links were mostly to the Gore and Bush state organizations, not the state party organizations, or else to otherwise non-partisan groups of voters, such as students, Latinos, African-Americans, veterans, young professionals or senior citizens for Gore or Bush, who happened to support the candidate but not necessarily the rest of his party's ticket. Despite his successful court battle against the party regulars' endorsement of John Hagelin to secure the Reform Party's official nomination and its \$12.6 million in presidential campaign funds, Pat Buchanan made no mention of the Reform Party on his home page. Ralph Nader's website stated that he endorsed the Green Party's platform, but it did not state that Nader was running as the Green Party's official nominee. Partisanship on John Hagelin's website was used only to guide voters to the candidate. Visitors were instructed to click on a map to determine the proper way to cast their ballot for Hagelin in their respective home states: Natural Law, Independent, Reform or write-in.

The candidates' campaign sites provided substantial information about their personal organizations, comparable to that provided by UK parties, but less than the American political party sites provided about their party organizations. The sites also provided a good deal of information about the candidates' campaigns, more than did British parties but less than did the American party sites. None of the candidates engaged heavily in resource generation: the mean score was only 3.5 and the highest score (5 for Gore) was below the mean for parties in both countries. The Gore and Bush websites focused mainly on providing information that reinforced voters' presidential predispositions or tried to win over the presidential choice of swing voters. Not only were the Gore and Bush home pages devoid of a Democratic or Republican logo or link, they also contained no pleas for support of any candidates running for Senator or Representative on their party's ticket. Finally, the candidate sites were even less inviting than the US party sites regarding voters' participation in organizational affairs.

Except for becoming members of an email list, those who wanted to volunteer to work for the campaign were directed to the URL of the candidates' campaign organization in their home states. Campaign souvenirs

**Table 6a.** US national candidate websites – overall functions

	<i>Information provision</i>	<i>Resource generation</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Networking</i>		<i>Campaign</i>
				<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	
Al Gore	14	5	6	5	1	5
G. W. Bush	12	4	3	4	1	4
Harry Browne	12	4	7	1	1	5
Ralph Nader	10	3	1	1	2	7
Pat Buchanan	8	3	4	1	0	5
John Hagelin	8	1	1	1	2	2
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>10.3</i>	<i>3.5</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>2.2</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>4.7</i>
Range	0–16	0–13	0–n	0–6	0–15	0–10

**Table 6b.** US national candidate websites – style and delivery

	<i>Glitz/multimedia</i>	<i>Access in principle**</i>	<i>Navigation</i>	<i>Freshness</i>
Al Gore	6	2	4	6
G. W. Bush	4	2	1	6
Harry Browne	4	1	1	6
Ralph Nader	2	0	3	6
Pat Buchanan	3	0	2	6
John Hagelin	4	0	0	6
<i>Mean score</i>	<i>3.8</i>	<i>0.8</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>6</i>
Range	0–6	0–5	0–n	0–6



and merchandise were not promoted heavily, nor were there dues paying campaign memberships comparable to traditional party memberships. As Gore and Bush had accepted full funding from the presidential campaign fund for their fall campaigns, they could collect money only 'for legal and accounting services to ensure compliance with federal law', not for running the campaign itself. Donations of 'soft money' go directly to political party organizations, ostensibly for party-building activities or for campaign activities that are run independently of the candidates' organizations. Large donations of this type were not solicited on either the candidate or national party websites.

While there is some additional variation among the party and candidate sites in both countries, the overall averages for all other variables we measured show no remarkable contrasts. In neither country did the parties or the candidates place emphasis on facilitating website access for visitors with special needs. None of the US parties or candidates made provision for the physically disabled. Only the Democratic and Republican websites and the Gore, Bush and Browne candidate websites offered Spanish translation; and only the Libertarian Party website clearly displayed a text-only option, a convenience for those with low-speed Internet connections.

### ***US Parties: Questionnaire and Interview Data***

In the US federal system, state and local party organizations coordinate their efforts with candidate organizations and otherwise participate in aspects of presidential campaigns independently of the national parties. We used email questionnaires and telephone surveys directed to knowledgeable state and national party officials to complement our observations about the content of the US parties' national party websites. Responses concerning 30 different party websites (13 Democratic, 11 Republican and 6 minor) were collected between February and June 2001. Four minor party and two Republican Party officials responded by email. The remaining 24 responses were obtained by telephone.<sup>10</sup>

As we expected, minor party officials saw their websites as more critical to their election campaigns than did major party officials. All but one of the minor party respondents ranked fundraising via the website as important or very important. The same number also saw their party's website as important or very important for recruiting volunteers, and two-thirds saw it as similarly important for voter feedback. In contrast, all but two Democrats and four Republicans said fundraising via the Internet was 'not important'. (These four Republicans answered 'Don't Know'.) Moreover, only five Republicans and five Democrats saw their websites as important or very important sources of volunteers.

The results suggest that our observations regarding use of national websites to impart general information and to campaign directly can be extended to state parties as well. All but one website reported using personal

email to voters, and two-thirds reported using targeted email to groups. A majority of respondents ranked two specific uses – informing the electorate and communicating with activists – as important or very important website functions. While this pattern generally held for all parties, the minor party respondents chose ‘very important’ more often than did the major party respondents, and the Democratic respondents thought that these website activities were less important than did the Republicans. Surprisingly, 6 of 10 Republicans responding to the question ranked feedback as important or very important, but only 4 of 13 Democrats ranked it so highly.

When it comes to comparing the importance of online activities with offline activities, however, the major and minor parties differ greatly. Three minor party officials ranked online campaigning first or second when compared to commercial advertisements, candidate appearances, personal communication and campaign paraphernalia. Seven Democrats and four Republicans gave online campaigning the lowest ranking. Only one Democrat ranked it as high as second. All six minor party respondents said that online campaigning significantly affected their candidates’ election results. Only one Democrat and two Republican respondents rendered similar judgments.

In sum, minor party respondents rate campaigning via the Internet as more important than do their major party counterparts. Even though the major parties overshadow minor parties on the Web, minor parties still have a relatively greater presence in cyberspace than they have in the mass media. The major party respondents see Internet campaigning more as a demonstration of their technical prowess than as an effective way to elect their candidates. The demonstration has little payoff today, but it may be rewarded tomorrow. Although nearly everyone expects that the Internet will be an increasingly important campaign medium in future elections, they have made little effort to measure the performance of their websites. Indeed, only seven Democrats, two Republicans and three minor party officials reported using surveys, polls, focus groups or other systematic feedback to measure the effectiveness of their websites.

### *UK Parties: Questionnaire and Interview Data*

Seven UK parties provided additional questionnaire data and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the major party Web managers shortly after the election.<sup>11</sup> The aim of both the interviews and the questionnaire was to examine the importance, function and impact of the Internet and email during the election campaign.<sup>12</sup>

The party officials all reported that the WWW and email had grown significantly in importance since the 1997 election. The three main parties confirmed that they had injected considerably more cash into their 2001 online campaign. This reflected a more serious approach to the medium by the large parties. Conservative and Labour teams of at least three full-time

staff were employed to construct and manage the e-campaign. Instead of the isolated and experimental pattern of the 1997 campaign, these teams were integrated into the overall campaign strategy. The websites were professionally designed and server reports were used to monitor 'hits' on the site, although officials were extremely reluctant to reveal any details in this regard. In part, this greater professionalism and integration stems from a desire by the parties to deliver a consistent campaign message through the different media. As one Conservative campaigner has commented:

Consistency of message is everything. . . . If you are watching the Conservatives talk about health on the TV, hearing about it on the radio and reading about it in the papers, it would be inappropriate to visit our website and be told what we think of defence.

(Jackson, 2001)

Despite the increased professionalism of the 2001 campaign, parties still regard the Internet and email as supplementary campaign tools, just as they did in 1997, and it is interesting to note that since the election the efforts of some of the main parties have clearly been downscaled. In the case of the Conservatives, the 'team' appears to have entirely disbanded very shortly after the election. When asked to assess the importance of different types of electoral communication methods for their party (including radio, television, newspapers, direct mail, face to face), the Internet, and more surprisingly email, were still rated the least important campaign tools. UK parties see the importance of the Internet and email increasing in the future, but are sceptical that they will replace existing methods of communication, or become primarily important in the near future. As one party official stated: 'I think people will still need to be spoken to and communicated with in person. At election time the personal touch is still better'.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the role of campaign websites, the interviews and questionnaire data supported the content analysis findings. When asked to assess the potential functions of their sites there was a general consensus among party officials that information provision, particularly to elite audiences, such as researchers, journalists or their own activists remains the primary goal. This was underlined by the fact that all parties here noted that the press and researchers/academics were the most frequent users of the site.

Recruitment of volunteers and new members was also seen as significant, especially for the two non-parliamentary parties (Greens and Socialist Alliance). Both these parties claimed that 50 percent of their membership had joined online in the previous year, compared with 10 percent or less for the parliamentary parties. For smaller parties with less of an administrative infrastructure, or a physical presence in all constituencies, websites are a useful alternative recruiting tool. The Liberal Democrat Internet campaign manager also indicated that many website volunteers and enquiries come from areas where Liberal Democrat grassroots campaigning has been traditionally weaker.

In contrast to information provision and recruitment, the ability to gather feedback from both members and the public in general was rated the least important of the website functions – a further indication that UK parties still perceive the Net largely as a top-down, one-way, communication tool.

When asked to analyse the impact of the Internet on the campaign, five of the seven parties covered here felt it had made a positive contribution to their electoral campaign, though this was not necessarily reflected through votes gained. The Internet was not seen as a major vote-persuading tool. Along with recruitment (mentioned above), the parties believed that the major contribution of their website was a less tangible, more general, raising of awareness. This is perhaps more significant than it sounds, given the generally low levels of interest in the 2001 election campaign. Nevertheless, party officials identified two remaining problems that restrict the usefulness of the websites as campaign communication tools: firstly, levels of access and use of the Internet are still too low and biased towards higher SES groups of the population; secondly, unlike some of the traditional media, the Web requires a greater degree of user initiative. Hence, whilst parties can reach passive voters who are relatively uninterested in politics through television or radio, they cannot directly reach them with the Internet. Voters need to be aware of and have a reason for visiting a party website. Although the general problem of access may be reduced in the coming years as Internet users increase, attracting voters to political sites will remain problematic.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

To return to our original questions, therefore, what can we conclude? With regard to the issue of convergence our results generally confirm that a similar pattern is developing in party Web campaigning, at least in transatlantic terms. On the whole, political actors in both the USA and the UK are taking a cautious approach to the Web, using it to perform existing functions rather than offering any radical innovations. Information provision and resource generation are consistently emphasized while promoting participation and establishing electronic networks, both within and outside of the party, are less of a priority. Web-based communication is largely a party-led and top-down phenomenon rather than two-way dialogue.

In terms of broader implications, these findings raise some interesting questions about the extent to which the national context shapes the online strategies of parties. The basic similarities in the style and functionality of how parties use the Web in both countries suggest that national institutional and cultural factors are not playing a dominant role in the development of Web campaigning. Indeed, the extensive information provided by US sites and their modest level of 'glitz' confronts the conventionally held view of the American political arena as more commercialized and entertainment focused. Turning to the nature of the technology itself, however, as an

alternative way to explain the trends we observe, offers little extra insight. The lack of full exploitation of the new media indicates that parties are not being driven relentlessly forward by its technological possibilities. This is highlighted by the fact that we observe significantly more innovative forms of online electoral politics on the burgeoning independent media or political satire sites (Coleman, 2001).

As such, the evidence would seem to point to the parties themselves, rather than their external environment as the main drivers behind the observed patterns in adaptation to the Net. Parties are generally seen as inherently conservative organizations. Change when it occurs in parties does not often happen quickly and in a wholesale fashion (Harmel and Janda, 1994). Why, therefore, should this be any different with media technologies? Allowing open chat-rooms or bulletin boards facilities on one's site clearly holds the potential for opening up a tide of damaging abuse without offering much by way of perceived benefits. If one also adds in the fact that serious campaigning for office, particularly in this new more professionalized era, requires minimizing vulnerability to attack, then one can wonder why we might expect anything other than an incremental and gradual incorporation of the technology by parties.

In terms of our second area of concern – levelling the campaign playing field – again somewhat surprisingly, given past surveys, we found that less of a divide opened up between the US major parties and their minor counterparts than in the UK. The larger American parties, while generally more active in campaigning, provided only marginally more functionality on their sites than the smaller parties with similar levels of sophistication in terms of delivery. In the UK, however, whereas previously a gap existed between the larger group of parties with parliamentary representation and those truly on the fringe, in 2001 the big three clearly pulled ahead, outperforming all others in terms of both function and delivery. Beyond site content and delivery, however, the access and visibility figures make it clear that the two key parties in both countries (Labour and Conservative, Republican and Democrat) maintain a significant advantage in terms of their profile to casual Web surfers. If one also considers that the audience for party websites is still only very small, recent figures reported only 2 percent of Britons and 7 percent of Americans with Internet access visited party sites during the election (Crabtree, 2001; Stromer-Galley et al., 2001), claims for equalization of party competition through media exposure become even more doubtful.

Thus, while Web campaigning may not yet have fully matured, the findings here confirm that it is settling into a rather standardized form. Although it is more than simply another billboard canvas, cyberspace is clearly not jolting traditional political actors into radically different styles of message delivery, nor is it leading to a more egalitarian world of political communication. Rather than providing a springboard for attacking parties and their 'luddite' ways, however, we argue that these findings point to the

need for research in this area to adopt a more contextualized approach to its subject. Instead of expanding on the revolutionary potential of the new media and then criticizing parties and other institutions of representation as failing to realize those ambitions, our theoretical starting point should start with expectations about what '*incremental*' change might look like in these instances? In using this more forgiving benchmark, we are arguing for a more 'internalized' view of party behaviour, but one which we consider ultimately to be more fruitful in assessing the true extent of innovation and experimentation taking place.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **SCORING SYSTEM: PARTY WEBSITE SURVEY**

#### **Functions**

##### **Information provision**

Additive index – 1 point assigned for each item present (0–16)

Organizational history

Structure

Values/ideology

Policies

Documents (i.e. manifesto, constitution)

Newsletters

Media releases (i.e. speeches, statements, interview transcripts, conferences)

People/Who's Who

Leader focus

Candidate profiles

Electoral information (statistics, information on past performance)

Event calendar (prospective or retrospective)

Conference information

Frequently asked questions

Privacy policy

Article archive or library

##### **Resource generation**

Cumulative index (0–13). Three ordinal indices:

(i) *Donation index* 0–4

(ii) *Merchandise index* 0–4

(iii) *Membership index* 0–4

(iv) Associate membership/volunteer solicitation 1 = present 0 = absent

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**

##### **Internal**

Ordinal index: 0–5 plus point for Extranet

(i) *Internal links* include those to local parties, MPs/MEPs, international

branches *if they are independent* of the main party site. 0 = no links; 1 = 1–10; 2 = 11–20; 3 = 21–50; 4 = 51–100; 5 = +100.

- (ii) Extranet available from site or members only pages 1 = present 0 = absent.

### External

Cumulative index: 0–15 (3 ordinal indices)

- (i) *Partisan links* are those to other parties and organizations that are supportive of the party's goals. For example, if the Labour Party link to the Trades Union Congress site, or the American Democratic party, 0 = no links; 1 = 1–10; 2 = 11–20; 3 = 21–50; 4 = 51–100; 5 = +100.
- (ii) *Reference links* are those to neutral or news/educational sites such as news broadcasters, newspapers, parliamentary/government sites, national libraries, etc. 0 = no links; 1 = 1–10; 2 = 11–20; 3 = 21–50; 4 = 51–100; 5 = +100.
- (iii) *Commercial links* are those promoting business services such as book sellers, Web designers, 0 = no links; 1 = 1–10; 2 = 11–20; 3 = 21–50; 4 = 51–100; 5 = +100.

### Participation

Cumulative index 0–n (2 ordinal indices and two count)

*Openness* (0–n): Count of email contacts to distinct units or branches within the party listed on site, i.e. Web master, hq, candidates/MPs, local organizations, leader, international office, youth organization press office, etc. Each unit/branch = 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 guestbook 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 ex-pat voters

Targeting marginal constituency/swing voter (explicit effort)

Cookie

Join an email update list

Become online campaigner

Information on proxy/absent vote

Download logo

Download offline leaflets/propaganda

### Delivery

#### Glitz factor

Cumulative index (0–6): comprised two additive indices

Homepage design index: 1 point for each item present (0–3)

- graphics
- frames
- moving icons

Multimedia index: 1 point for each item present (0–3)

- sound
- video
- live streaming

### **Access**

This consists of two dimensions – access in principle and access in practice.

*In principle index:* 1 point for each item present (0–5)

- 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

*In practice*

- size of home page in Kb (>25 slows site loading time significantly)

### **Navigability**

Additive index: 1 point for each item present (0–n)

- Navigation tips
- No. of search engines
- Home page icon on lower level pages
- Fixed menu bar on lower level pages
- Site map/index

### **Freshness**

Ordinal index (0–6)

Updated daily (6); 1–2 days (5); 3–7 days (4); every 2 weeks (3); monthly (2); 1–6 months(1); + 6 months (0)

### **Visibility**

Number of links in (calculated with search engine, e.g. Google link: [www.conservatives.com](http://www.conservatives.com))

## **APPENDIX B US SURVEY PROCEDURES**

### **I. National parties and presidential candidates**

a. Gore and Buchanan campaigns disbanded their Web operations before the survey began in February and proved unreachable using email. Bush campaign emails and telephone calls went unanswered. Bush campaign telephone line appeared inoperative.

b. Nader campaign was reachable only by email. Email messages bounced, however, as their mailbox was over capacity, indicating email was not being checked on a



regular basis. Likewise email to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee bounced.

c. Republican and Democratic National parties, senatorial and congressional campaign committees were each contacted a minimum of three times by telephone and maximum of seven times by telephone as well as by email.

d. Other national parties were contacted once by email and a minimum of three times by telephone.

e. Contact problems included repeated voicemails unanswered, and individuals not in the office or in meetings. On two occasions, permission for survey had to be obtained from higher-ups who could not be reached (e.g. RNC).

f. Several websites offered forms, but no direct email address as a means of contact.

## II. State parties

An effort was made to contact all state GOP and Democratic parties by telephone. Many state parties did not list telephone numbers on their websites. One state GOP party declared that its website was 'controlled from Washington, D.C.'. Larger state parties proved as difficult to penetrate as national parties, despite several call-back messages. Approximately 20 percent of state parties did not have live operators, only voicemail systems.

III. Surveys began in mid-February and continued through the first week of June.

## Notes

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- 1 British parties have a tradition of sending staff to the USA to learn campaigning techniques. Since the 1980s, Conservative and Labour parties have established links with Republicans and Democrat electoral campaigns.
- 2 For the UK parties, coding took place on all live sites during 1–6 June 2001. For the USA, party and candidate sites were retrieved using the Alexa Wayback Machine: Archive of Election 2000. Commissioned by the Library of Congress, this collection contains 800 gigabytes of data that reproduce 833 election-related websites daily from 8/1/2000 to 1/21/2001 ([archive0.alexa.com/collections/e2k/full\\_list.html](http://archive0.alexa.com/collections/e2k/full_list.html)). The coverage is not complete, however, with websites of minor parties, such as the Natural Law Party ([natural-law.org](http://natural-law.org)) being unavailable and some websites, such as that of the Green Party ([greenparties.org](http://greenparties.org)) or of Pat Buchanan's ([gopatgo2000.org](http://gopatgo2000.org)) being included for only part of the period.
- 3 For full reporting of the scoring system, see Appendix A.
- 4 It should be noted that non-parliamentary parties' mean score for participation is boosted significantly by the Greens, whose high score on this measure is due to the sites' openness in terms of email contacts, which are extensive.
- 5 Full tables of scoring by function are available from authors on request.

- 6 In the last week of the campaign, the Tories introduced 'My manifesto', a feature which enabled the user to customize the information viewed to suit their particular policy interests.
- 7 Alexa.com has since been bought out by Amazon.com and the elections archive for 2000 is now available at <http://web.archive.org/collections/e2k.html>
- 8 As archived by Alexa, the site remained unavailable through President Bush's inauguration on 20 January 2001.
- 9 We did not score US minor parties that lacked a national presence. Past observations suggest that these parties would have lower scores. See Margolis et al., 1997 and 1999.
- 10 Data on minor parties included responses from officials about the candidate campaign sites of Harry Browne, Ralph Nader and John Hagelin, the Constitution (anti-tax) Party's national website, and the Libertarians' Indiana and national websites. Republican responses included eight state parties, the Republican National Committee, the National Republican Congressional Committee and the Republicans Abroad. All 13 Democratic responses covered state party websites. See Appendix B for the survey procedures. The questionnaire is available from the authors on request.
- 11 Conservatives – Justin Jackson 19/06/01; Labour – Kate McCarthy and Simon Christopher-Chalmers 21/06/01; Liberal Democrats – Mark Pack 27/06/01.
- 12 Further questionnaire details and information can be obtained from the authors on request.
- 13 Questionnaire information provided by a party IT manager of one of the smaller parliamentary parties.

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