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Parties Online
A Comparative Analysis of European Party Websites

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD
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by

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To Melania, Pedro e Irene
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Abbreviations Used:

ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
AUS: Austria
BEL: Belgium
BUL: Bulgaria
Con: British Conservative Party
CDU: Christlich-Demokratische Union (German Christian-Democratic Union)
CYP: Cyprus
CZ: Czech Republic
DEN: Denmark
ED: European Union Democrats
EER: Estonian Green Party (Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised)
EP: European Parliament
EPP-ED: Group of the European People's Party and the European Democrats
EST: Estonia
EU: European Union
EUL-NGL: Confederal Group of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left
FIN: Finland
FP: Swedish Liberal People’s Party (Folkpartiet Liberalerna)
FPTP: First Past the Post electoral system
FR: France
G-EFA: Group of the Greens and the European Free Alliance
GDP: Gross Domestic Product
GER: Germany
GR: Greece
HU: Hungary
ICT: Information and Communication Technologies
IDEA: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IND-DE: Independence-Democracy Group in the EP
IMF: International Monetary Fund
IRE: Ireland
IT: Information Technology
ITA: Italy
L-D: British Liberal-Democrat Party
LAT: Latvia
LIT: Lithuania
LUX: Luxembourg
LPR: List Proportional Representation electoral system
MAL: Malta
MMP: Mixed Member Proportional electoral system
NET: Netherlands
NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation
PES: Party of European Socialists
POL: Poland
POR: Portugal
PSD: Social Democrat Party of Romania (Partidul Social Democrat)
REP: German The Republicans (Die Republikaner)
ROM: Romania
SLK: Slovakia
SLO: Slovenia
SPA: Spain
STV: Single Transferable Vote electoral system
SVP: People’s Party of South Tyrol (Südtiroler Volkspartei)
SWE: Sweden
TRS: Two Round electoral System
UEN: Union for Europe of the Nations Group
UK: United Kingdom
UKIP: UK Independence Party
URL: Uniform Resource Locator
US: United States of America
VLE: Virtual Learning Environment
WWW: World Wide Web
Introduction

Political parties of the twenty first century face the logical challenges that derive from trying to adapt to the new trends and changes of contemporary societies. One of these is the development and dramatic spread of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). At the same time, it has been commonplace in the literature to talk of a crisis, not only of parties themselves, but of the democratic political systems in general. Since the early 1990s there has been widespread concern within the literature about the state of Western political systems. Academics, politicians and journalists from all schools and ideologies talk of the so-called crisis that democracy is experiencing, although they do not necessarily agree in what the symptoms, causes and factors of the crisis are (López et al., 2003; Ward, 2001).

One of the common claims is that citizens do not participate in – nor do they care too much about – their political systems (Lögfren, 2003; Norris, 2001; Putnam, 2000) because they have become disenchanted with, and have lost trust in, the core institutions of representative democracy (Lusoli et al., 2002b, 2006; Norris, 2001; Ward, 2001; Ward et al., 2003a). This dissatisfaction in the political system would arise because traditional organisations are seen as distant and obsolete, which in turn is seen as a consequence of the changes that societies have been experiencing since the late 1980s: loss of sovereignty and autonomy of the nation state, globalisation trends, drastic alterations to the model of the welfare state, etc. (Castells, 1997; López et al., 2003). The result, for some authors, is that of a crisis of the democratic system in contemporary Western societies.

Other trends that have been signalled as symptoms of this so-called crisis are:

- Strong pattern of low voter turnout (Lögfren et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2005).
- Lowering rates of membership in and attachment with traditional representative organisations, mainly political parties and trade unions (Lögfren, 2003; Lusoli and Ward, 2003; Ward et al., 2003a).
- Decline of civic involvement: both the amount of people involved and the level of that involvement have declined (Putnam, 2000), with the consequent decline of civic organisations (Norris, 2002a).
- Rise of individualism and political alienation (Castells, 1997, 2001; May, 2002).
- Rise of fragmentation within the political system (Bimber, 1998; Castells, 2000).

All of these have been commonly signalled by different authors both as the causes but also as the results of the changing roles of traditional participatory agencies in representative societies, mainly political parties. These organisations are perceived as having undergone a loss of popular legitimacy, as their linkage relationship with citizens – which is based on communication and accountability – has been eroded. At the same time, the drastic changes in the way the public communicates and gets informed such as those brought along with the development of new ICT cannot but have a profound impact in the world of politics in general, and in the relationship between political actors and citizens in particular. The link between these two phenomena – parties’ eroded relationship with citizens, and the effect of new media technologies on parties’ behaviour in general and on this relation in particular – constitutes the object of study of this thesis.

**Aims of the Thesis**

This study investigates the way in which European political parties utilise the Web. It does so through an analysis of their official websites. The focus is on three particular dimensions of these websites: visibility, interactive content, and external networking, from the perspective as they contribute to one particular function of party websites: that of encouraging political participation. All of these three contribute towards defining the relationship that parties aim to create with citizens through their websites. In particular, the degree of interactive content, but also the internal and external networking, of party websites can determine to what extent citizens are able to participate and communicate with the party through open, public websites. In turn, they can also help determining the degree of accountability that the party itself is willing to offer. All of these – participation, communication between citizens and party, and accountability from the party towards the public – are basic features of the relationship between citizens and party. Since this relationship or linkage is the premise for parties’ popular legitimacy (and ultimately, for the legitimacy of any democratic party-based system), an analysis of how new media technologies, and particularly the Web, can contribute to enhance it is of obvious interest for today’s political scientists.
The most generic and straightforward aim of this thesis is to offer a comprehensive picture (necessarily a snapshot picture due to the ever changing nature of the Web) of how European political parties are utilising the Web. More specifically, by focusing on the aforementioned three dimensions of visibility, interactive content, and external networking, the findings from this study add light to the broader theoretical question of whether the usage of party websites is being done in such a way as to contribute towards the enhancement of parties’ relationship with citizens, and by consequence of their own popular legitimacy.

One of the main particularities of this study relies on its wide comparative approach. Over 200 websites have been analysed, these belonging to parties coming from all of the twenty seven member states of the European Union (EU), in addition to those political groups operating at the European Parliament (EP). Such a large scope study contributes to the originality of this research, and allows for the analysis of a series of research questions in ways that have been impossible to look at in the past. But to be sure, a number of problems arise with such a high figure of units of comparison. For instance, on a very practical level, the difficulties for the researcher in terms of the languages in which these websites are written should not be dismissed. Furthermore, because of the method of selection of the parties analysed¹, the number of parties included in the analysis for each country varies considerably. Overall, however, the advantages largely overcome these problems. Only through such a large scale study could an investigation of which factors – contextual as well as party specific ones – affect parties’ online behaviour effectively take place. In other words, the research questions which this study is based on could not have been looked into in an appropriate manner if the focus of this research had been narrower. These questions are:

- **RQ 1**: Do European party websites vary between themselves in terms of visibility, interactive content, and external networking? Or is there a standardization of party websites taking place in Europe, regardless of specific contextual factors?

- **RQ 2**: Which factors account for the variations between European party websites? Specifically:
  - Do country-specific contextual variables affect the visibility, interactive content, and external networking of party websites? And if so, in what manner?

¹ Explained thoroughly in the methodological section of this thesis, chapter three.
Do party attributes such as size and ideology affect the visibility, interactive content, and external networking of party websites? And if so, in what manner?

It is expected – as explained in chapter three – since technology does not act in a vacuum but within specific political systems, and because it is argued that parties’ online behaviour ultimately depends on parties’ previous, offline strategies, that European party websites will vary between themselves with respect to their visibility and external networking, but not so much in terms of their interactive content. Similarly, because of the same reasons it is also expected that both country-specific contextual factors as well as parties’ own characteristics (in terms of size and ideological family they belong to) will be affecting party websites in terms of their visibility, interactive content, and external networking.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided in three main parts: the first one, including chapters one and two, contextualises academically the topic of study to better understand its findings; the second one, chapter three, presents the analytical framework of the investigation: research questions and methodological issues; the final, third part – which includes chapters four to seven – presents and analyses the findings, and concludes with a summary of the main results found in this study as well as their implications.

The object of study of this investigation is party websites in the European Union. Two fields of research are thus relevant for our topic: on the one hand, that of Internet studies – or how the Internet may affect democracy –; on the other, that of the study of political parties. The first two chapters of this thesis are therefore dedicated to these two subjects.

In particular, chapter one offers an overview of previous literature on the subject of Internet studies. It starts by briefly presenting several lines of argument about why studying the impact of new media technologies in contemporary societies is important for the discipline of political science in general. After this, a literature review of the main theories about the possible impact of the Internet in democracy is developed. Because of the relatively newness of this topic within scholarly circles, this classification constitutes already original work on its own. It is argued that, even though the subject of Internet studies is still at its academic origins, there are already grounds to establish a division between earlier – overall
enthusiastic –, and more recent – empirically based – theoretical accounts of the topic, what have been named in this study as the first and second waves of Internet studies. The chapter’s structure follows this division: first, a discussion of the earlier accounts of the possible effects of new media in political systems is presented, to conclude with the overview of several scenarios presented by scholars about how the development of ICT might affect democracy in broad terms.

Chapter two looks in turn at the state of political parties in nowadays political systems. The first part of the chapter outlines the most relevant works on this topic in recent decades. Special attention is paid to what has been called ‘the literature on the decline of the party’. It is argued that, although some functions of the party might be effectively in decline (most importantly its role as a linkage actor between citizens and the state), there are no solid grounds to talk of a crisis of the political party. Parties are still one of the pillars of contemporary democracies. It is precisely due to this importance that the analysis of how the relationship between parties and citizens may be enhanced becomes of imperative relevance for contemporary political scientists. If parties are perceived as not legitimate, then the legitimacy of the whole democratic system may be at risk. The usage that parties may make of new technologies could theoretically help to re-establish this relationship between parties and the public. The second part of this chapter looks thus at how parties could use their websites, as means for political participation mainly, although the other possible functions of party websites are also outlined. Finally, the chapter ends with a review of how parties have, indeed, been using the Web in the past years, again, primarily from the optic of websites as spaces through which participation can take place. For this, a comprehensive account of the results of recent empirical studies on this topic is developed. Special attention is paid to studies related to what has been named ‘the equalisation thesis’: that is, the argument that with the help of Internet-based technologies, smaller parties will be able to compete on more equal grounds with their major counterparts.

Chapter three presents the analytical framework upon which this thesis is based. It starts by setting up some lines of investigation after which the main research questions of this thesis, as well as the correspondent hypotheses, are developed. The second half of the chapter is dedicated to methodological issues, after an account of the unit of study: websites, by political parties, in the European Union. Because of the novelty of this type of research, special attention has been given so that all methodological issues are made clear to the reader. Two main methods of research have been used: content analysis web survey of over two
hundred European party websites; and an online forum (as well as some e-mail based interviews) with a selected number of party officials. While both of these methods are still under development within the academia, it is the online forum, which allows bringing together into a discussion participants based in different locations, the most innovative one.

Chapters four to seven are the final, and main, part of this thesis. The first three of these constitute an analysis of the findings from this research, while the final one offers a summary of the main results and a further discussion based on the former. Specifically, chapter four looks at the results of our study in terms of which parties are (not) online and the differences between them regarding their websites' visibility, measured both with the number of links into their sites as well as through Alexa's traffic ranking system. Chapter five is dedicated to the analysis of the interactive content of European party sites. The first half of the chapter looks at how present each of the interactive features analysed are in European party sites; whilst the second analyses this presence from a comparative point of view. The chapter concludes with a section dedicated to the views of party officials regarding the perceived problems, as well as advantages, associated with the use of interactive features on their websites. Chapter six follows the same structure as the second part of chapter four, the one dedicated to party websites' visibility. It analyses a different dimension of these sites, however: their external networking, measured in terms of the amount of links to external websites present in the sites.

All three chapters are structured in a way which follows the lines of investigation presented by the research questions: results are first analysed in general, to then go onto a comparison of the differences found between websites from parties from different political systems (looking at a series of contextual variables such as geopolitical area; rate of Internet access; type of electoral system; and so on) and from parties with different sizes and ideologies.

Chapter seven begins by summarising the main results presented in the previous three chapters. The effect of each of the comparative variables analysed is examined, which in turn permits a discussion of how the initial hypotheses have been proved valid or not. The second part of this chapter is dedicated to analyse what factors particularly affect the interactive content of European party websites. Next, a discussion about whether parties can indeed enhance their relationship with citizens through the use of the Web, and in particular of its most participatory / interactive features.

Finally, the Conclusion offers a succinct and clear picture of what has been the outcome regarding the main research questions of this study, as developed
above and on chapter three. It finishes by recommending a series of questions for future research on the subject.
Chapter 1: Impact of the Internet on Contemporary Democratic Systems

1. Why Study the Internet

The rapid development since the 1990s of the Internet and its applications, mainly the World Wide Web (WWW) and the Email, have revolutionised the way we communicate and are informed in our societies. New media technologies allow us to perform these activities at an unprecedented speed and minimal costs. If we consider that 'without information, democracy in any of its forms could not exist' and that 'indeed, information coupled to effective communication provides the lifeblood of a democracy' (Coleman et al., 1999: 133) then it becomes apparent that such a drastic change in how information and communication activities take place will necessarily have an impact in the way these societies organise and govern themselves. In short, the progress of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) ought to have important effects in the political realm.

As explained below, this is the premise upon which the earliest studies of the sociological and political impacts of the Internet were based on. And although these first studies can be characterised generally as highly speculative on their claims and not rigorous enough, the effects of the Internet on the political world have now been documented – in various and diverse manners – in an ever growing field of rigorous and empirical research. Scholars such as Castells (2001), Dutton (1999), Gibson and Ward (2000c), and Norris (2001) – to name only a very restricted number of the most prominent authors – have all agreed that, although in different ways, the Internet is having an effect on how citizens, organisations, parties, candidates, social movements, governments and the media participate in politics nowadays. Internet research has therefore logically become a 'field' in its own right in the social sciences', as Dahlberg puts it (2004: Abstract). Discussions about the influence of media and/or communication technologies in democracy are not new, but the debate has only really flourished in the past decade, as evidenced in the variety of academic books, conference papers, and articles in scientific journals that have appeared on the subject (Lögfren and Smith, 2003; Rice, 2005). Chadwick and Howard have recently written it in a very explicit manner: 'The politics of the Internet has entered the social science mainstream' (Chadwick and Howard, 2009: 1). Ten years before this, other scholars had already claimed that
'the Internet is one of the most talked-about topic of this decade' (Hill and Hughes, 1998: 1). Or, as the same authors put it bluntly, it has become 'the biggest celebrity on Earth today' (1998: 13). The attention that political scientists are now paying to the Internet and its applications is not surprising, 'given the media's central role in the political process and our everyday life' (Gerodimos, 2004).

It is the unique characteristics of the Internet as a medium, which distinguish it from other forms of communication, what has attracted the attention of political scientists and other scholars. Very briefly, compared to traditional media, new ICT make information and communication processes:

- Faster and cheaper (Berman and Mulligan, 2003; Norris, 2001)
- More interactive, allowing not only one-to-one and one-to-many, but also many-to-many possibilities for communication (Dahlgren, 2004; Di Maggio et al., 2001; Kamarck, 2002; Smith and Smythe, 2001)
- Reach a potential global scope (Johnson, 2003).
- More networked (Flew, 2002), a form of organisation that many consider to be the most appropriate for the new challenges of the Information Age (Castells, 2000).
- More 'user-controlled' and decentralised (Ward et al., 2003a), allowing for the overcoming of the dichotomy between users / producers, or insiders / outsiders in the communication process (Kutner, 2000).

All of these have the potential to greatly alter the dynamics of participation in democratic practices in general, and in the relationship between parties and citizens in particular.

Additionally, some authors have pointed out the unavoidability of the changes that new media introduce in our political systems as one of the imperative reasons for studying them: whether we like it or not, ICT are here to stay, and they will be used more and more by political actors in the times to come (Coleman et al., 1999). Others, more cautiously perhaps, make a point about the suitability of these early times of Internet development for the study of such phenomena. In any case, the field of Internet studies within political science is one

\[2\] Consider in this respect what Castells writes in *The Internet Galaxy*: ‘For as long as you want to live in society, at this time and in this place, you will have to deal with the network society. Because we live in the Internet Galaxy.’ (2001: 282).

Or what Jones, as early as 1999, had to say about the same subject: ‘... Whether or not one believes the hyperbolic claims about the Internet being the biggest thing since the invention of the wheel, the Internet is a medium with great consequences for social and economic life. To some extent, it simply does not matter whether one is online or not – one’s life will be, in some ways, for better or worse, touched by the Internet.’ (Jones, 1999: xii).

\[3\] Di Maggio et al. talk of ‘a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity for scholars’ (2001: 308).
that, the same as the technology, is going to grow and develop in the years to come.

One has to be cautious, nevertheless, not to get carried away and to keep in mind that as of today the Internet is far from being a universal medium, even in the most advanced societies (Johnson, 2003; Jarvis and Wilkerson, 2005). According to a study published by the Spanish newspaper El Pais, still on May 2008 one in five US citizens had never used the Internet, a statistic that grows to three in five for other countries such as Spain. This means, undoubtedly, that any study on the possibilities of the Internet for democratic participation is only applicable to a segmented and distinctive group of citizens: those who not only have the access, but also the skills to use the technology. In other words: 'Before one gets carried away with the notion of a world built upon digital democracy, it is important to remember that there are many people in the world who do not have the means to access this technology' (Nixon and Johansson, 2002: 140). On the other hand, the growth of the number of people who use the Internet has increased exponentially in the past years, and it will continue to do so (Kirschenbaum and Kunamneni, 2001; Locke, 2002). Furthermore, we cannot wait until a utopian scenario of universal access is achieved to evaluate scientifically the political effects of this technology. Instead, some even suggest that we do have to do so 'on the assumption that most people will be digitally connected sooner rather than later' (Coleman, 2002: 208).

Indeed, the Internet has already affected the lives and actions of an ever growing number of citizens in our democracies. Its capital impact can already be traced a decade ago, with the events of the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle in 1999 (Smith and Smythe, 2001). Other events such as the rise (and demise) of Howard Dean (Baker et al., 2004; Chadwick and Howard, 2009), the anti-war demonstrations around the world on the 15th February 2002 (Khan and Kellner, 2004), the concentration in front of the governmental party office in Madrid in the day after the 11th March bombs in 2003 (Silva Machado, 2004), the Make Poverty History campaign of 2005, and more recently, the spectacular campaign by President Obama, are only a few of the most striking phenomena in recent years which would not have taken place in the form that they did without the influence of new ICT. Moreover, completely new innovative ways of citizen activism are being developed online. Some of these are inspired on traditional forms of 'offline' protests, such as the virtual sit-ins – through which supporters access the targeted

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4 According to a study published on the online version of El Pais (www.elpais.com) on the 19th May 2008.
website and keep asking the page to reload itself, thus jamming it and making it non-accessible by the public for the time of the protest (Meikle, 2002) – or the online demonstrations, in which protesters send auto-generated emails to the organisation(s) they are demonstrated against (Jordan and Taylor, 2004). Other forms of electronic advocacy are fully original, in that they do not have an 'offline version'. These include for instance the creation of fake websites with mocking domains, such as www.worldbunk.org (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005), or with domains that appear to be from the organisations the protesters are targeting, such as www.whitehouse.org. They all constitute examples which illustrate the importance of new media in contemporary politics, and therefore the necessity of the development of the field of Internet studies within the discipline of political science.

1. 2. The Impact of the Internet

The Internet can potentially influence the way democracy works in contemporary systems in various ways. Indeed, its impact can be negative or positive, but also irrelevant. On the positive side, it can make political participation by individuals easier by lowering the entry barriers and the costs that rational theorists have traditionally associated with participation (Di Maggio et al., 2001). It can promote communication among people, among people and the elites, and among civic networks (Stromer-Galley, 2000) which would in turn enhance the availability of democratic channels for the citizen and, of particular relevance for this study, between parties and the public. It can facilitate the availability of flows of information and thus make people become more interested and engaged in politics (Hill and Hughes, 1998). Used as an organizing tool, it can create community involvement and collective action by altering the costs of communication and reshaping access (Lin and Dutton, 2003), and also through the formation of large networks of social ties (Hampton, 2003) and of collective identity and solidarity (Diani, 2000). New media can allow citizens to become directly involved in politics without the need of mediator institutions (Mocan et al., 2003) but it too can help traditional representative organisations such as parties in their tasks of targeting and recruiting of members (Lusoli and Ward, 2004). In conclusion, some believe that 'in relation to political and social participation, we may safely expect computer mediated communication to operate as a powerful facilitator' (Diani, 2000: 396). Others, as we shall see, are not so optimistic.
In the brief history of Internet studies, there has been a tendency for authors to speculate about the possible impact of new media technologies on democracy without basing their argument on much—if any—rigorous empirical research (several scholars have made this claim. Among others: Jansen, 2004; Kutner, 2000; Zittel, 2003). Indeed, ‘there has been far too much media hype about technological development and far too little reasoned discussion and debate based on empirical research of its actual effects’ (Warnick, 2002: 126). At the same time, ‘much of the talk about electronic democracy is loose and atheoretical’ (Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000: 2). There is a need for ‘research in this area to adopt a more contextualised approach to its subject’ (Gibson et al., 2003a: 68) and to link specific empirical studies with the more general literature on the topic.

Keeping this in mind, this chapter provides an overview of the main theories developed by Internet scholars since the mid 1990s. It would exceed the scope of this work to provide more than a concise review of the literature published up to date on the field of Internet studies; nevertheless, it is necessary to provide a framework of existing theories upon which the investigation undertaken by this thesis can be contextualized. However, research on this subject only dates from the decade of the 1990s, and thus any attempt to categorize the various arguments that circulate on the topic is not as straightforward as it is with older or more established fields of study. Moreover, to date there is not an established classification of the literature that can be considered accepted by the majority of scholars in the area. Whereas most of the authors agree in the distinction of the oldest works between Utopians and Dystopians, there is not a mainstream consensus about how to classify the theories developed on what we call the second wave of Internet research.

To be sure, strict categorizations that suit every scholar are scarce in the social sciences, and its desirability is far from being clear. However, the study of the social and political impact of the Internet is now a firm and established area of academic research. Studies have been published for more than a decade now which makes it possible, though not simple, to outline the arguments that have been made public and to group them next to similar theories under schools of thought. What is more, this task is not only now feasible but also necessary. New research in this area is being published at a fast pace, and whereas most scholars

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5 Keeping in mind that this work was written in 2007, and that this is an emerging field where new studies are emerging at a fast rate. However desirable it would be, it has not been possible for the researcher to keep track of all new research published in the most recent years.

6 For a further discussion on this topic see, among others: Dahlberg, 2004 and Gerodimos, 2004.
have now realised that they need to base their theories on some empirical grounds, not so many attempt to link their results with the existing literature.

Research on the socio-political impact of new ICT can be separated in two main groups: the earlier, more speculative studies from mid to late 1990s; and a later one, more rigorous in its approach and empirically grounded. We call each of these the first and the second waves of Internet studies. Naturally, this distinction is not strict: rigorous research based on empirical analysis was published also in the earlier stages of Internet studies (for instance: Hill and Hughes, 1998) and unfortunately some, even much, of the current literature is still higher in subjective speculation than in rational argumentation. However, the separation is not an arbitrary one, and most scholars would agree that in general there are qualitative differences between earlier and more recent research on this subject. In this regard Internet studies seem to be following a trend that is repeated with the arrival of every new communication technology: the first reaction always seems to be of over enthusiasm and exaggeration about the possibilities of the medium for enhancing democracy. In this sense, also in the 1950s it was proclaimed that the television would revolutionise politics, and even earlier many believed that the arrival of the radio would transform apathetic individuals into informed and politically engaged citizens (Jarvis and Wilkerson, 2005). Departing from this point, this chapter reviews in two separate sections the first and the second waves of Internet studies.

1. 3. The First Wave of Internet Studies: Utopians versus Dystopians

Although speculative accounts of the impact of the Internet upon democracy date back to the early 1970s (Zittel, 2003), the majority of statements about the influence of the Internet in the political realm, the first wave, start from the mid-1990s, when the technology left its confines from within the academic and military circles and started to rapidly expand throughout the US on a first moment, and in the rest of the Western world soon after. These early studies were highly enthusiastic and emphasized that new ICT would have a great influence on the political processes, though the authors disagreed on the shape that this impact would have. For some, the so-called Utopians, the new technologies were seen as short of solving most problems of contemporary democracy. For others, the
Dystopians, the spread of the Internet would only make governments and elites more powerful in a world that would become more and more like an Orwellian nightmare.

Regardless of their judgement about the negative or positive effects of the new digital media, both accounts have been accused by later scholars of technological determinism (Gerodimos, 2004). That is, they shared a view of the new ICT as independent factors of change not affected by external economical, social or political factors. In this sense, they overlooked issues of digital divide and the fact that, particularly in the mid-1990s, not everyone had the means to access and/or the skills to effectively use the new media. Even in the cases when this was acknowledged, there was a firm belief that it was only a matter of time until technology would become the most influential force affecting society. In a not so distant future not only everybody would be using the new media for all kinds of political purposes; the claims from these authors went further: nobody would be able to escape from it. In fact, new ICT would become so influential that, to some authors, they would eventually provoke the disappearance of the nation state (Negroponte, 1995). In the realm of cyberpolitics, we would not be able to decide what kind of society would be developed: cyberspace itself would determine the socio-political form that arises (Dahlberg, 2004).

The group of authors that has been called Utopians saw in this unavoidable rise of the influence of technology in our political life an opportunity to overcome the problems of liberal democracies around the world. As it has been outlined above, in the Introduction to this thesis, many democratic theorists have all throughout the twentieth century been signalling a significant number of contemporary trends as the symptoms of a supposed crisis of representative democracy: low participation rates, apathy and disengagement among citizens, low turnout and involvement within traditional representative organisations, and so on. These utopians scholars saw in the rise and spread of the new media the opportunity to overcome these problems. Some claimed that with the help of new ICT citizens would become more informed and would be able to communicate with their representatives, which in turn would lead them to be more engaged within the liberal representative system. The new media would also encourage alternative forms of participation (Schwartz, 1996) and the formation of real community ties in the virtual world of cyberspace (Rheingold, 1994), all of which would contribute to turn apathetic individuals into activist citizens.

Others went further, arguing that the new ICT provided the opportunity to experiment with alternative forms of democracy beyond established models of
representation (Browning, 1996); direct democracy, it was claimed, was for the first time in modern history technically possible: distance was no longer a problem, people were better informed and educated in political issues, and the bonds with traditional elites or representative agents, such as parties or parliamentarians, were being broken (Budge, 1996). Thus the 'electronic republic' was being created, a new model which would displace the dated representative system of the eighteen century (Grossman, 1995) with a stronger, more participatory kind of democracy.

One common claim amongst these early authors, but which is also shared by later ones, is that the new media have equalising tendencies. What has become known as the equalisation thesis states that because of the low costs of establishing a presence in the new media, smaller political organisations will make a bigger and better use of the new technologies than large, powerful ones. In particular, the Internet's lack of editorial control means that minor and fringe groups not represented in the mainstream media are able to find a space through which they can speak directly to citizens (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005; Gibson and Ward, 2000d; Kowal, 2002; Lusoli et al., 2002a; Pickerill, 2000). Not only this, but the ability of the Web to facilitate hyperlink connections across great geographic distance at minimal costs makes it possible to develop large networks of small groups who otherwise would lack the resources to communicate with one another; it makes therefore sense to expect these collectives to exploit this ability to a larger degree than powerful resourceful organisations (Ackland and Gibson, 2004). Arguments in line with this equalisation thesis can be found in many authors and schools beyond the early utopians, as for instance in Bimber's model of accelerated pluralism which will be outlined below. In the final section of chapter two, the validity of the claims made by the equalisation thesis are discussed in relation with the evidence available to date from various studies of party websites around the world. Likewise, the empirical evidence presented in this thesis constitutes a substantial contribution towards this debate, as it offers unique data which allows the original analysis of the differences between the websites of different sized parties in the European Union. Indeed, this analysis, as it has been outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, constitutes one of the research questions which this study aims to provide an answer to.

At the other side of the spectrum, some of these early authors raised their voice about the dangerous effects for matters such as personal privacy, freedom and security of the inevitable spread of the new ICT. These dystopians argued that
the new technologies would reinforce, instead of overcome, inequalities among citizens and political elites, as the political leaders would use the new media to recall more and more information about ordinary people (Norris and Curtice, 2006). On the other hand, rather than community ties being strengthened, social isolation would become the norm as computer-mediated communication replaces real interaction and face-to-face contact (Gerodimos, 2004).

With the exception of the equalisation thesis, whose influence can be found in several theories also today, utopians and dystopians, are nowadays considered to be overenthusiastic and unrealistic in their approach and the majority of their claims have been dismissed. As we shall see in the next section, most recent empirical studies have concluded that it is not appropriate for our understanding of the impact of new media in contemporary societies the view of technology as an inevitable force completely independent from political, economical and social factors that these earlier models adopted. As Castells has put it: 'neither utopia, nor dystopia, the Internet is the expression of ourselves' (2001: 6).

1. 4. The Second Wave of Internet Studies: the Empirical Evidence

Research on the impact of the Internet in the political process took a turn at the end of the 1990s when a series of scientific works based on empirical evidence or strong theoretical reasoning started to appear, first across the United States and then also in Europe. New media technologies had already spread fast across these areas, making it possible to evaluate their effects in specific political areas. Analysis of surveys about citizens' uses and perceptions of the Internet and also of websites from political actors (especially those used for electoral campaigning purposes in the US) made their appearance. A review of the findings from the main empirical studies about party websites published to date is made in the second half of the following chapter; prior to that, a brief discussion of the most important theoretical models developed until now is included.

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8 This is also one of the main underlying arguments of this thesis. Following it, it is expected that the visibility, interactive content and external networking of European party websites will be affected by a series of 'offline factors': contextual, country-specific variables as well as characteristics of the parties themselves (size and ideology).
9 In the US, see the series of surveys by the Pew Research Center: http://pewresearch.org.
10 See footnote 5.
Contrary to the claims of the authors from the first wave of Internet studies, the first empirical investigations led a group of authors\textsuperscript{11} to assert that the new ICT were not significantly affecting the political processes of the 'offline world'. In the preface of their book with the explicit title of 'Politics as Usual' Margolis and Resnick declare that

'far from revolutionizing the conduct of politics and civic affairs in the real world, we found that the Internet tends to reflect and reinforce the patterns of behaviour of that world. Politics in the Internet is politics as usual conducted mostly by familiar parties, candidates, interest groups and news media' (2000: vii).

This group defended what has become known as the \textit{normalisation or reinforcement thesis}, which maintains that the Internet is replicating, instead of changing, existing participatory trends in contemporary societies. Technology is not an independent force which rules the political world; on the contrary, not only are its effects mediated by existing socio-cultural patterns, but they even tend to reinforce these tendencies.

Related to these claims, the first surveys about individual uses of the Internet revealed that it was those citizens already engaged in politics the ones that were making use of the technology for political purposes. Norris talks in this sense of the 'theory of a \textit{virtuous circle}', which suggests that 'the most motivated citizens could be expected to prove most likely to use the political opportunities on the Internet. ... Through repeated use the most politically engaged will be reinforced in their civic activism' whilst the technology will have no effect in the more apathetic members of society (2001: 230-231).

Although the normalisation or reinforcement thesis has gained widespread empirical support all around the Western world, it is not clear that it should be adopted as the undisputed 'global theory of Internet effects' (Gibson et al., 2005). Recent studies have shown that important developments in the political world have been brought along mainly, or at least partly, as an effect of the spread of the new media. There are daily examples of the mobilization potential of interactive communication technologies – such as the 'spontaneous' concentrations in Spain after the 11 March bombs in Madrid, or Barak Obama's campaign phenomenon, to name but a couple of these. Finally, the normalisation thesis has been accused of promoting a relativistic view that portrays human behaviour as completely unaffected by its environment and the means and tools available to it (Gerodimos, 2004).

\textsuperscript{11} The \textit{cyber-skeptics} according to Norris (2004).
An alternative explanation to the effects of ICT in society appeared also in the late 1990s with Bruce Bimber's model of *Accelerated Pluralism*. Instead of stating the absolute dominance of technology over the political world, as the earliest authors had done; or the complete independence of politics from technological means as the sceptics had claimed, Bimber's model recognised the interactions that go in both directions: from the political to the media and the other way round. The Internet, he claims, will indeed have effects in the political world, but it will not revolutionize it. Concretely, it will contribute to the ongoing fragmentation of modern political systems and the rise of issue-, rather than institutional-, based politics that was already taking place in contemporary democracies before the Internet. In his own words, Bimber's thesis is that 'above all else, the Net is accelerating the process of issue group formation and action, leaving the structure of political power ... altered, but not revolutionized or quantitatively transformed into a new epoch or era of democracy' (Bimber, 1998: 136). From this claim it makes sense to expect the smaller and the non-mainstream parties to be making a stronger use of the Internet than the larger, established, traditional parties.

As with Bimber's, the *Amplification* model proposed by Philip Agre can also be positioned somewhere in between the earliest cyber-optimist accounts and the scepticism of the normalisation thesis. Agre claims that the Internet is far from creating genuine new patterns of political behaviour or democratic practices, for 'the Internet changes nothing on its own' (2002: 317). However, he also argues that new ICT are having a tangible effect in that they are *amplifying* certain existing forces within the political world 'and those amplified forces may change something'. In this process not all forces are being equally amplified: the behaviour and strength of some actors are being more magnified than others. In the same sense that for instance surveys have shown that the people who make the most political use of new ICT are those who were already active, 'the Internet will not amplify all forces equally, and not all of the forces will be headed in the same direction' (Agre, 2002: 316). The Internet thus has not one, but many effects spread out throughout society (Gerodimos, 2004) and therefore its different impacts ought to be studied through the analysis of how specific institutions and actors are making use of the new media, as this thesis does with regard to European political parties.

A more recent account of the impact of the Internet in democracy is the *Political Market Model* proposed by Pippa Norris and John Curtice. According to these authors, this impact will be dependent upon the *supply* of information and communication from civic institutions and the *demand* in the use of this information
and communication among the public, which in turns depends upon prior social characteristics of the online population (Norris and Curtice, 2006). As the supply is not constant, it needs to be re-studied over time. This thesis provides an analysis of this supply in the European context, and it is argued that the demand will ultimately depend on this offer: if the party websites are not offering channels through which users can participate, it follows logically that citizens cannot be expected to be actively using the Web for political participation or to communicate with parties. For Norris and Curtice, rather than attempting to make bold generalisations about what effect the Internet will have in democracy, it makes more sense to analyse the impact of the new media separately according to the different shapes that political activism can adopt (2006). The Internet promotes only certain ways of engagement; and this encouragement depends in turn on the opportunities made available by the political organisations, the 'supply' side, as this thesis argues, and on the social and political profiles and patterns of behaviour of the users in the 'demand' side.

The final and most recent theory that will be outlined here is Gibson, Lusoli and Ward's Contextualised Model of online participation (Gibson et al., 2005). Based on empirical findings, these authors suggest that, contrary to the claims of the proponents of the normalisation thesis, the Internet is indeed having an effect on patterns of participation for it is expanding the numbers of those politically active. What is more, the citizens who are becoming involved in participation through online media are not the same who tend to participate in the political system via more traditional means. Whereas conventional explanations for political participation based on the socioeconomic resources of the individuals do account for determining who has access to the new media, as Morris and Curtice had noted, the influence of these resources 'fades once people are online' (Gibson et al., 2005: 579). Thus people who would otherwise not take part in the political processes are doing so because of the influence of the new media. This model focuses exclusively on the user or 'demand' side, and does not seem to take into account that citizens can only participate online if real opportunities to do so are provided either by the institutions or the political actors themselves.

The same authors, however, have paid attention to the 'supply' side in other studies in which they have analysed the use that specific institutions are making of new ICT. Their findings, concretely those concerning the use of the new media by political parties, will be discussed below. They have also reviewed the existing literature up to date and have come up with five broad scenarios that different
scholars have developed about the possible impact of the rise of new ICT in traditional political institutions (Ward et al., 2003a). Very briefly, these are:

- **Erosion and direct democracy.** As the new technologies set up opportunities for citizens to become directly involved in the political processes, traditional intermediary institutions such as parties will become obsolete.

- **Accelerated pluralism.** These intermediary organisations will not disappear, but their role will be reduced as the Internet may encourage the development of single-issue groups and more citizens will turn to these for their involvement in politics. This is Bimber's argument, as discussed above.

- **Participatory reinvigoration.** Traditional institutions may well use the new technologies available to enhance their internal participatory structures.

- **Administrative and organisational modernisation.** On the other hand, these institutions may use new ICT not for participatory but for administrative purposes.

- **No change.** Finally, some have claimed that the Internet will have not much impact on institutions, as it does not have much effect on any other political factor. This is the 'Politics as usual' thesis of Margolis and Resnick, outlined above.

These have been the most relevant theoretical accounts about the possible effects of the Internet in democracy as published to date. A trend can be spotted: while the first models were highly enthusiastic and exaggerated the effects of technology in the political world; the second wave of studies is characterised by the wariness – if not scepticism as in the case of the proponents of the normalisation thesis – of the authors, who have avoided making grandiose claims about the impact on the Internet in democracy. It has now become the mainstream opinion within Internet researchers to accept that ICT, whatever their influence may be, do not act on their own: existing trends may be accelerated or amplified, new practices of participation, networking and activism may indeed emerge, but a brand new world of politics exclusively built around digital technologies is not going to appear in any near future. The new media, we cannot forget 'are political artefacts. ... The design, application and environment that new media create are prescribed by policy choices and are thus political choices' (Wring and Horrocks, 2001: 207). They have, furthermore, not appeared ‘in a vacuum, but within specific political

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12 See footnote 5.
cultures’ (Coleman et al., 1999: 8). The Internet therefore does not exist in isolation and cannot be studied as if it was somehow apart from the offline or ‘real’ world (Jones, 1999). In other words, the potential of the Internet to produce widespread changes in society ultimately depends on social and institutional conditions (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003); its ultimate impact will depend on the context of the political systems where it operates and on the actors’ previous strategies and political choices (Lusoli et al., 2002a; Wring and Horrocks, 2001). A priority of this thesis is thus to provide empirical data upon which this argument can be tested. Not only the websites of political parties will not be studied in a vacuum, but within the systems they operate in. Moreover, European party websites are expected to vary between themselves precisely due to the contextual factors of the political systems they operate in.
Chapter 2: Parties and the Web

2. 1. Parties in Contemporary Democracies

'Too often, Internet studies have treated Internet usage as though it occurred in a vacuum' (Ward et al., 2003a: 319).

One of the main, if not the most, important critiques that can be made to the emerging field of "Internet Studies" of the late 1990s is that the studies published in those times – and, unfortunately, still some of what is written today – tended to dismiss the importance of the so-called 'offline context' when analysing the outcomes that the development of the Internet could have in democratic systems. That is, as explained on the previous chapter, many theories about the influence of ICT in contemporary political systems did not take into account the characteristics of the very same systems these theories were supposed to be applied to. To be sure, this trend changed rapidly, and with the turn of the century a variety of scholars started to develop arguments on the impact of the new media in modern societies that did take into account 'offline factors' to contextualise, and even explain for, their thesis. Nevertheless, a call for Internet researchers not to make a division – intended or not – between the realities of political systems and the artificially-separated realm of what has been called 'cyberspace' is still needed. This call has already been made elsewhere – for instance, on the study of the influence of ICT in parties (Ward et al., 2003b), parliaments (Leston-Bandeira, 2007a, 2007b), or parliamentarians (Vicente-Merino, 2007) – but needs very much to be reiterated, for much of the problems with previous accounts for the role of new media in democracy are related to this. It is in fact one of the main underlying arguments of this thesis the belief that not only there is no real separation between the 'online and the offline spheres', but in particular that political party websites will be affected by the contextual factors of the political systems the parties operate in. Prior to this analysis, a clear – if necessarily brief – picture of the situation of political parties, and crucially their role as participatory agents, in contemporary democracies is needed. This section provides this basic overview, which is vital to contextualise the findings and arguments that this thesis presents about the online behaviour of European political parties.
Political parties are amongst the most studied actors within the discipline of political science. There is already a vast amount of literature on this subject, and one may wonder the need of yet another study about parties. However, as Montero and Gunther (2002) tell us, some of the new challenges and transformations that have appeared in the early twenty-first century with relation to parties have not been adequately addressed by the existing literature, if at all. Moreover, when these issues have been studied, the scholars have not agreed in their verdict. One of these fundamental changes in modern political science has been the arrival and consolidation of the Internet as a means of information and communication. Although, as it is shown below in this chapter, some studies analysing the influence of this new medium with relation to political parties have appeared in the past few years, there is still a fundamental lack of cross-national, empirically grounded research on this subject. And yet, the impact of the Internet in contemporary democracies cannot be fully assessed without paying attention to one of the most important actors in current political systems: the political party.

That parties are essential to contemporary democratic systems is a statement with which nearly all student of political science would agree. As Webb puts it, 'few, if any, would deny that political parties are integral to representative democracy as we know it' (Webb, 2002a: 338). Or, in other words, one of the most important characteristics of modern democracies is the pervasive presence and the influence of political parties (Budge, 1996). To date, parties remain the organisations through which most citizens channel and express their preferences in the political system. They are the providers of the most important linkages between citizens and the political process (Schmitter, 2001) and also between citizens and the government (Margolis et al., 2003). They also articulate demands, aggregate interests, and are in charge of the nomination of candidates to public office (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000a; Oñate, 2005; Selle and Svásand, 1991). In summary, many - if not most - of the essential functions required for the functioning of modern political systems are to date fulfilled by parties.

However, there is a growing number of scholars that, since the 1960s, have proclaimed that modern parties are under crisis or, even more, in an irreversible decline. The literature on this so-called 'crisis of parties' has become so large in the past years that Daalder (2002) has been able to differentiate between four types of argumentations that can be found within this body of work. Two main claims are

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13 In Daalder’s view, there are those who deny a legitimate role for parties in any case; those who see certain types of parties as good and others as bad; those who regard certain types of party systems as good and others as bad; and finally, those who believe that parties are starting to be redundant in contemporary political systems, where other actors
shared by the scholars in this literature: first, they all declare the obsolescence of traditional mass parties, and particularly of their local units; and secondly, they all point to similar changes in society and technology as contributing to the seemingly inevitable downfall of local party organisations (Scarrow, 2001: 82).

Indeed, it seems that "we all speak about the crisis of parties" (Daalder, 2002: 41) and the 'crisis of the political party' or 'the decline of the mass party' has become a central theme in the specialised literature (Panebianco, 1988). The list of factors that have been enumerated as signs of this so-called crisis is long. The decline of partisan identification and attachment by citizens; the rise of protest vote and abstention or decline in electoral turnout; the increased fragmentation and volatility of party-systems; the appearance and consolidation of campaigns that, even in proportional systems, more and more are centred around the individual candidates instead of around parties, and so on (among others: Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000a; Mair, 2005; Oñate, 2005; Puhle, 2002). All of these trends have been pointed as symptoms of the crisis that political parties seem to be immersed in all modern democratic systems. Others are:

- The lowering rates of membership and activism that parties have been experiencing since the 1960s, both in relative and absolute terms (among others: Dalton, 1988; Katz and Mair, 1994; Lusoli et al., 2002a; Mair, 2005; Mair and Van Biezen, 2001; Norris, 2005; Scarrow, 1994, 2001). Moreover, this membership is becoming increasingly socially restricted: more middle than working class and tends to participate in the party through individualised modes rather than collectively (Lusoli and Ward, 2004).
- The decline of inter-party competition in Western democracies, due to the change from mass parties to catch-all or cartel parties (Ward et al., 2003b).
- The changing relationship between the citizen and the party. According to Katz and Mair's well-known thesis, the party, which used to function as an intermediate agent between the state and the citizenship, has become more and more integrated within the apparatus of the state and less within the civil society (Katz, 1990; Katz and Mair, 1994).
The rise of participation in alternative organisations such as new social movements, NGOs, protest groups, and transnational networks. (see for instance: Lawson, 1988; Norris, 2002a; Scott, 1990; Ware, 1996).

The recorded attitudes of dissatisfaction, distrust and discontent towards parties among citizens around the world (Dalton, 2000; Linz, 2002; Ofiate, 2005). This phenomenon, commonly referred to as 'anti-party sentiment', will be further explored below.

It is unclear what effects the development of ICT, and in particular the Internet, will have in these trends. Some authors claim that new media technologies will dramatically alter the dynamics of party organisations, both internally and externally (such as Margetts, 2006) and or inter-party competition (such as the proponents of the equalisation thesis); while others argue that for the time being they will not have such a strong influence, if any at all (for instance: Margolis et al., 2003; Resnick, 1998). With regard to the role of parties in political systems, Norton has argued that, contrary to what some of the earlier, enthusiastic scholars had maintained, the spread of new media will actually enhance parties' position within the system (Norton, 2007). In any case, the significance of the mentioned trends for the functions and overall influence of contemporary parties in the political system is not clear. The same as it has been a reoccurring theme in political science in the past decades to talk of 'the decline of party', a large body of work has emerged in reaction to it which defends the pre-eminence of parties and argues that the claims from those announcing the decline of parties were overstated (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000c). For instance, regarding the issue of shrinkage of membership, patterns of membership vary considerably within nations: while in the majority of countries the number of party members has indeed fallen; in some – such as Spain – it has experienced a rise in the past decades (Mair and Van Biezen, 2001; Norris, 2002a, 2005; Selle and Svåsand, 1991; Webb, 2002a). Moreover, the benefits of a large membership are not straightforward. To be sure, members still offer many benefits to a party: they contribute economically to the party, and also execute some organisational tasks for free; they perform a legitimising role, at least in the public opinion; and they constitute loyal voters and potential candidates (Katz, 1990; Katz and Mair, 1994; Scarrow, 1994; Ware, 1987, 1996). However, they also imply costs; and, although it is commonly assumed that the larger the membership, the more democratic the party is internally, this is not necessarily always the case 14. The consequences of the shrinkage in party

14As Norris reminds us, certain minor or fringe parties with a small membership base, such as the British Greens, are extremely participatory and democratic (Norris, 2005).
membership remain under debate (Norris, 2007) and, in Scarrow's terms, 'one should not overdramatise the possible consequences should parties cease to function as grass-roots membership organisations' (Scarrow, 2001: 83).

While it is indisputable that 'political parties are not what they used to be' (Gunther and Diamond, 2001: 3), they continue to play a dominant position in the practice of politics and governance within modern parliamentary democracies (for a more detailed argumentation, see for instance Biezen, 2004; Linz, 2002; Nixon and Johansson, 2002; Poguntke, 1996; Puhle, 2002), and in certain areas, their influence has even been strengthened in the past years (Katz and Mair, 1995). Parties continue to monopolise the nomination to public office (Selle and Svåsand, 1991) and, while their role as aggregators of interests has certainly declined — in favour of interest groups and the media — there is (yet) 'no such ready alternative to parties in terms of interest aggregation' (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000b: 283). The party, thus, is not an organisation in crisis in contemporary democracies, but an organisation under change: it is under pressure to change and adapt to the new times and the new ways that citizen participation takes place in society, and some of its traditional roles (mainly regarding participatory ones) are rapidly eroding (Lusoli and Ward, 2004; Margetts, 2006; Norris, 2002a). In fact, the debate about the decline versus the resiliency of parties is misleading, for political parties are complex organisations and some sides of parties have been, indeed, declining in the past decades, whereas others have been reinforced. Most researchers of parties and party systems differentiate between parties in the electorate, as organisations, and in government (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000a), or, in other words, between parties on the ground, parties in public office, and parties in central office (Katz and Mair, 1994, 1995, 2002). There are no signs of decline — if anything, of the contrary — regarding parties in government or in public office (Thies, 2000). Parties as organisations have also become stronger (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000b; Katz and Mair, 1995; Norris, 2007; Webb, 2002a), something which, for some authors, has contributed to the widespread image of parties as institutions more and more remote from the citizenry (Katz and Mair, 2002). It is in their role as parties in the electorate, or on the ground, where parties have shown the stronger — and perhaps more worrying for the democratic system — signs of decay. As Mair has put it:

'The problem is not one of party decline per se, as is often imputed to be the case; rather, it appears to be one in which the parties are at once stronger, but also more remote; at once more in control, but also less
powerful; and at once more privileged, but also less legitimate' (Katz and Mair, 1995: 19).

This loss of legitimacy of contemporary political parties has been attributed, mainly, to the troubled relation that current parties have with the citizens they in theory represent. Originally, as it was exposed above, one of the main functions of parties was to act as the linkage organisations between the citizenry, on the one hand, and the parliament and the government on the other, the represented and the representatives. Nevertheless, surveys in most advanced democracies, from Europe to South America, show that nowadays citizens see parties as distant and – what is more worrying – distrustful institutions (at this respect, see for instance Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000c; Linz, 2002). Scholars have called this sense of dissatisfaction towards political parties by the people – and also, sometimes, by the elites – as 'anti-party sentiment'. Scarrow defines this term as 'distrust, or even hostility towards, political parties as channels of political representation and as policy makers' (1996: 298). Some of its possible indicators are low party identification; undecided voters; declining turnout at elections; rising vote for ‘anti-party parties’ and lowering rates of party membership (Poguntke, 1996). As it has been noted above, all of these have also been signalled as factors accounting for the so-called 'crisis or decline of parties'. Nevertheless, measuring ‘anti-party sentiment’ is not an easy task for ‘anti-party sentiment’ is in fact ‘an elusive concept’ (Poguntke, 1996: 319). Trying to break down its components, Torcal, Gunther and Montero have argued that there are two dimensions within the sentiment: on the one hand, there is ‘reactive anty-partism’, which is a critical response by citizens towards parties due to their dissatisfaction with the performance of party elites and institutions. It can have positive repercussions for democracy as it may help to mobilise citizens and the demands of change (2002: 260). On the other hand, 'cultural anty-partism', is not the product of reactions towards specific performances of parties, but instead something that is rooted in the historical values and traditions of a political culture and therefore not easily changed (2002: 261). When ‘anti-party sentiment’ is analysed in surveys taking this differentiation into account, patterns in different countries are not as similar as previous studies had tended to show (Torcal et al., 2002). It would be safe to affirm, however, that a very important proportion of citizens from most democratic political systems do show signs of dissatisfaction towards parties. At the same time, the same – if not a higher – proportion believes that parties are indispensable to the functioning of democracy. Parties may not be trusted, or even liked, but nevertheless tend to be seen as necessary (Dalton, 2000; Linz, 2002; Mair, 2005).
They remain as the organisations through which most citizens still channel and express their preferences in the political system (Ofiate, 2005). However, on the one hand, it is clear that today they attract considerable less attachment and involvement than the mass parties of the past; and on the other, they are far from being the only actor through which citizens participate today politically in their communities. Some see these two factors as correlated: it is because of the failure of parties to act as linkage between individuals and the state, that citizens have turned to other organisations (Lawson, 1988). Or, as Scott puts it:

'The reappearance of protest and social movements in Western societies over the last twenty-five years is to be explained by the failure and inadequacies of the institutions of interest intermediations. ... Especially parties have failed to respond to popular demands and feed those demands into the political system' (Scott, 1990: 10).

Others, however, see in the rise of non-institutional associations not necessarily a result of the failure of parties to engage the citizenry, but rather an effect of the changes that post-industrial societies are experiencing not only in the political, but also in the economic, cultural and social realms. Dalton and Wattenberg talk on this respect of the 'Modernization thesis'\(^\text{15}\), which sustains that due to the developments that are taking place at all levels (micro, meso and macro) in society, the role of political parties and other participatory institutions are being transformed. On the micro-level, these changes include the increased educational levels and availability of political information for most citizens in advanced democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000c) – trends that have both been strongly reinforced by the development of new ICT. As Inglehart has infamously shown, these transformations, particularly at the cultural level, have involved a shift on the concerns of activists, which have turned from materialistic to post-materialistic ones, and which go beyond existing partisan alignments. As a consequence citizens have turned to those new movements that deal with these post-materialistic values, such as women, environmental or human right groups (Inglehart, 1997). Other authors talk of the appearance of 'lifestyle' or 'symbolic politics' to explain this development (Castells, 1997).

In any case, thus, and contrary to some scholars who had been talking of a 'crisis of democracy or participation' since the eighties, citizens are not participating less: they are simply participating in a different way. They are not 'as uninvolved, uninformed, and undemocratic as their critics would have us believe' (Dalton, 1988: 15) In a different piece, Dalton talks of the 'Dealignment thesis', which sustains that it is because of social and political modernization that party ties with citizens are eroding in most advanced democratic systems (Dalton, 2000).
xiv). Indeed, the number of people involved in what was traditionally considered ‘radical’ or minority politics such as protests, demonstrations, petitions, etc., has considerably risen in the past decades (Dalton, 1988; Margetts, 2006; Norris, 2007; Ward, 2001) and they are likely to increase even more when participation will become easier due to the spread of the Internet. As a result, ‘not all indicators, by any means, point toward consistency and steady secular deterioration across all dimensions of political activism’ (Norris, 2002a: 7). This is not to say, however, that low levels of traditional means of participation in the system such as voting are not to be taken seriously. As a general rule, citizens from more deprived backgrounds are less involved in political action, and typically one of the few ways through which they participate in politics is by these traditional means. If voting turnout is lowering, then it is likely that it is these citizens the ones who are participating less. The consequences of this for political equality should not be dismissed (Lusoli et al., 2006).

One of the conclusions to be drawn from this analysis of the figure of ‘parties in contemporary democracies’ is that they are undergoing a generalised loss of popular legitimacy in most – if not all – advanced industrial democracies. This is not to say that parties are in crisis or decline. As explained above, their role and importance as agents of government or political organisations has indeed increased in the past decades. But the relationship between parties and citizens, which is crucial to legitimise these institutions, has been undeniably altered: parties have tended to become closer to the state, while citizens, as outlined, show clear signs of dissatisfaction and distrust towards parties’ performance. Most citizens do not believe that parties can be trusted to represent their interests, or that they care about ordinary people’s real needs (Dalton and Weldon, 2005). Even if one follows the ‘party adaptation’ thesis, which sustains that parties are not in decline but have instead survived and adapted to the new challenges and times (for instance: Webb, 2002a), the fact remains that both their representative role and the linkage between parties and citizens have been reduced, and, with it, their main sources of legitimacy. This has very important consequences for the functioning of democracy: parties are essential agents of representative democracy as it is currently conceived, and if they lose their popular legitimacy, they ‘may be able to fill public offices, but they may no longer be able to justify doing so’ (Mair, 2005: 23). Or, as the same author had put it several years earlier: ‘the leaders whom parties recruit, the policies which they formulate, and the governments that they seek to control can be legitimised only to the extent that the parties themselves are
legitimised' (Mair, 1990). It is thus for the sake of democracy – and not only for their mere survival – that parties' popular legitimacy needs to be increased – or, one may dare say, reinstated. For this, the relationship between the people and the parties needs to be reinforced – again: or reinstated.

Parties’ political – and/or popular – legitimacy derives from their linkage role between the government and citizens. Commonly, the failure of parties to fulfil this linkage role has resulted in the spread of anti-party sentiments among the population. It has been argued that the higher anti-party sentiment rates are, the less parties are able to act as the link between representatives and represented (Gunther and Montero, 2002). On the other hand, it is doubtful that parties who are constantly being negatively evaluated by citizens will be able to fulfil this connection. What parties need to do, therefore, is to re-establish citizens’ trust through the enhancement of accountability, responsiveness, and, crucially, popular participation in parties. On the practical level, this means that parties need to create new channels through which ordinary citizens can have their voice heard. Contemporary citizens, it has been argued above, do not participate less than before; they have just started to participate in politics in different ways. Regardless of whether this is due to the failure of parties to create, and maintain, channels for effective participation accessible to the ordinary people; or to the cultural, social, and political changes that modernization has brought along, such as the development of new issues and lifestyle politics, the fact is that people are participating and are interested in democracy and political matters. It is not therefore towards the people that scholars and democratic theorists need to direct their criticisms, but towards parties. In other words, the responsibility to restore their legitimacy is on the parties’ side. It is argued in this thesis that the development of new ICT can theoretically help parties on this task: through their websites, for instance, parties can develop new means of participation that are accessible and opened-up to (almost) everyone. In this way, their websites can also be used as means to increase parties’ accountability as well as the communicative relationship between party and citizens, which in turn can contribute to enhance citizens’ trust in parties. As discussed above, all of these are essential components of the linkage relation between party and the public.

Are European parties using the new media for this purpose? Are they indeed using the Web not only to present and market themselves, but also as a means for popular participation, increased accountability, and communication with

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16 One needs to take into account, of course, that there are still large segments of the population that do not have access (or the skills necessary to use) the Internet.
citizens? This thesis aims to respond to these questions, by offering an analysis based on the empirical observation of over two hundred European party websites. Prior to this, however, and to understand how parties have been using the Web up to now, in the following sections of this chapter there is, first, an analysis of the use that parties could potentially give to their websites (2.2); and then an examination of how parties around the world have actually used the Web in the past decade, based on a review of the findings from recent empirical studies (2.3).

2. 2. What Parties Can Use the Web For

2.2.1. Websites as Channels of Linkage between Party and Citizens

Norris (2003: 22-23) claims that there are two distinctive roles of party websites. In her opinion, party sites function as:

1) Pluralistic civic fora – by facilitating the voice of oppositional challengers, but also by raising the visibility or minor and fringe parties, and therefore producing a more egalitarian scenario in party competition.

2) And, crucially, as channels for political participation – by facilitating interactive linkages between citizens and the party.

The first of these would be in line with the propositions of the *equalisation thesis* sustained by some Internet scholars, already outlined and which is discussed in the final section of this chapter. To be sure, Norris is far from asserting that the development of new ICT will equalise the ground for all parties regardless of their size, as the most enthusiastic authors had believed. She does not imply that the balance of power between the bigger and the smaller parties can be altered merely by the development of the Web. She does support the claim, however, that ‘compared with the traditional channels of mass communications, the development of party websites will generate more egalitarian patterns of party competition’ (2003: 25). In line with this, this thesis evaluates the features included in European parties’ websites and analyses, from a comparative point of view, which differences exist in this respect between the websites from minor and major parties.

The second of Norris’ assertion is that party websites can function as channels for political participation. As it has been discussed above, parties’
legitimacy in contemporary democracies derives from their linkage role between citizens and the government. That parties are nowadays able to fulfil this function is a matter that has been questioned, however, due precisely to the erosion of parties' own linkage with the citizenry. Indeed, parties' relationship with citizens is a problematic one, with the latter showing signs of distrust and what has been called 'anti-party sentiments' towards these organisations and the former being seen as remote and distant from – and by – the people. These two phenomena – anti-party sentiment and the erosion of the linkage between citizens and parties – are strongly correlated, both of them being at the same time cause and consequence of the other. Together, they contribute to the generalised loss of parties' popular legitimacy across today's democratic systems. Parties are, however, essential actors within these systems. Whereas their “party on the ground” side might have been eroded in the past decades, their other faces – in public office and in government - have been reinforced (Katz and Mair, 2002). Moreover, they are still seen as essential agents for the functioning of democracy by the electorate. Parties are thus here to stay, at least in the foreseeable future. At the same time, and due precisely to the capital functions that they continue to perform in current democratic political systems, their loss of popular legitimacy is of maximum importance for the posterior legitimisation of these systems. If parties continue to experience a perceived loss of legitimacy, then the democracies where they operate will also suffer from a generalised loss of legitimation. In other words: ultimately, public support for parties is an essential element from within those that legitimise the existence and performance of a party-based democracy (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000c). It becomes clear therefore the importance for parties to recover their lost legitimacy and public support. As it has been outlined, this recovery implies, in the practical level, the renewal of channels of communication with citizens, so that they can become closer to the public they are meant to represent. For the people to regain their trust in parties, these need to be seen as closer and accountable organisations. To put it concisely, parties’ relationship with citizens needs to be reinstated.

Norris (2003: 22) talks of three main channels of communication that serve to link citizens with parties:

a) Face-to-face political conversations;

b) Traditional, broadcast, mass media;

c) New ICT, such as candidate and party websites.

The first two ones have existed for several decades now. It is commonplace in the literature to claim that the first of these channels, face-to-face political
conversations, is in decline. This would be part of a more generalised erosion of the activities that traditionally formed what is known as 'social capital'\textsuperscript{18}. Nonetheless, as it has been argued above in this thesis, and in line with what scholars such as Dalton have stated (1988), citizens are still concerned about and participating in politics, they are just doing so in different ways and, crucially, through new political organisations such as social movements as opposed to traditional agents such as parties or unions. In this sense, political dialogue has not necessarily diminished over the past decades; whether it can still be claimed that it continues to enhance the relationship between the public and parties, however, remains under debate.

The second means of communication in the connection between parties and citizens is, according to Norris, traditional mass media such as radio and television. These media are still one of the main sources of political information for the general public. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that they can act as a channel for two-way communication. Instead, they are characterised by a top-down, one-to-many way of functioning. If they are to enhance any relationship between parties and citizens it can only be a unidirectional one: parties may make use of them to communicate with the citizen, but not the other way round. If anything, many-to-one ways of conversation are available (by sending a letter to the Editor in a newspaper, for instance), but the opportunities for real dialogue are scarce.

The third channel is that introduced by the development of new media technologies, and crucially the Internet. Because of the unique characteristics of this new medium, the opportunities for real interaction and dialogue between citizens and parties become real. Communication can now take a bottom-up direction, and conversations can take place through a multiplicity of paths: one-to-many, but also many-to-one and even many-to-many. What is more, out of the three channels mentioned by Norris, this is the most recent one. Whereas the first two may not be fulfilling their role as links between the people and parties, this third one is still under development, and so one can still believe that it may eventually evolve to become a real channel of linkage in the relationship between citizens and parties. Theoretically, there are grounds to claim that party websites could thus act as means for enhancing this relationship. Today, however, the question remains: are party websites being used as channels for linkage between citizens and parties?

In modern democratic societies, parties act as vehicles through which political participation can take place. Parties do this mainly through:

\textsuperscript{18} For more on theories of social capital see Putnam (2000).
- the mobilisation of electoral turnout,
- and by fostering participation through members' activities (Webb, 2002b: 12).

Nowadays, parties could also use the Web to set-up arenas for political participation which are open to all citizens, not only members.

As it has been said, the matter is of capital importance, not only for parties but for contemporary democratic systems. If the linkage with citizens is eroded and cannot be achieved through traditional ways of communication, then parties are facing a loss of popular legitimacy that affects the legitimation of the whole democratic system. It is thus necessary to find out new ways of enhancing their relationship with citizens. In this investigation it is claimed that this is theoretically possible through the use of party websites. Of course, there are other possible means of strengthening this relationship, but this thesis focuses exclusively on party websites.

### 2.2.2. Possible Functions of Party Websites

As it has been outlined above, Norris believes that party websites serve two main functions: as pluralistic civic fora and as means for political participation (2003: 22-23). In turn, in their discussion of a potential methodology for the analysis of political websites, Gibson and Ward (2000e) enumerated a list of functions that party sites could have. These included:

- information provision;
- resource generation;
- networking (internal, within the party, as well as external, with like-minded organisations);
- participation (through the inclusion of email for contacts in the site, or features that allow users to send in feedback, as well as other elements such as opinion polls, chat-rooms or spaces for debate);
- and campaigning (for instance with elements such as the possibility to download the party's logo or joining an email update service).

Re-arranging these potential functions, a few years later Ward, Gibson and Nixon (2003b: 12-13) considered that party sites can be used as tools in three, not strictly separated but in fact overlapping areas:

1) As administrative tools: for the provision of information, as labour-saving devices, and also as huge archives for resources.
2) As active campaign tools: by bypassing traditional media parties can set their own agenda. They can also target specific audiences.

3) And as participatory and organisational tools: parties could use their websites to encourage donations and participation (since the Internet reduces to a great deal the traditional costs associated to participation), and also crucially to mobilise voters. Within the party, websites could be used to foster internal debate through the use of interactive elements, and to organise linkages and networks between the different intra-party groups through the use of hyperlinks.

These potential functions of party websites are not that different from those characteristics of the Internet in general summarized by Hill and Hughes (1998) which were outlined above: the Internet as a space for information provision, interactive dialogue, a huge post-office and an administrative tool for business and organisations. The combination of these attributes allows, in theory, parties to develop websites that could be used to fulfil all the functions described above, if not more.

Parties can decide to include many different elements in their websites, with various degrees of interactivity and networking. These features range from those with the lowest degree of interaction, such as the inclusion of an electronic form in their sites to which citizens can direct their questions or general feedback; to those which allow for the highest level of many-to-many communication such as forums or blogs opened up for users to dialogue between themselves, but also with official figures and leaders of the party. As it will be described further on, European party websites range considerably with regard to the number of these types of elements included in these sites. But beyond their interactive and networking potential, websites can also differ in terms of accessibility, navigability, user-friendliness, design, degree of information provision, freshness, the number – and quality – of multimedia elements included in the site, visibility, and other factors.

The combination of the various purposes that different scholars (concretely: Cunha et al., 2003; Gibson et al., 2003a; Gibson and Rommele, 2003; Lusoli et al., 2002a; Norris, 2003) have attributed to party websites results in the following list of potential functions of party websites:

1. Information provision
2. Participation
3. Networking
4. Campaigning
5. Targeting of specific audiences
6. Resource generation

Additionally, Gibson, Margolis et al. also take into the account the 'delivery' (glitz; access; navigability; freshness; visibility) aspect of the site, when analysing party websites from the US and the UK (2003a).

Moreover, there are many elements that can be looked at within the study itself of party sites. As explained, party websites can be used for a variety of functions, and so features can be added to them with different purposes and goals in mind. The research that is presented here does not look in detail to party websites as instruments for campaign, resource generation or for instance information provision. Instead, it focuses exclusively in the potential of these websites to enhance the relationship between party and citizens in terms of political participation, which will in turn increase the communication between them as well as the accountability from the party. While it is undeniable that the development of ICT has had very important consequences in other fields, such as how election campaigns are being run – and, very possibly, has accelerated the trend towards the post-modern, professionalized style of campaign – and so some references to this and other issues will be made, there is already a growing section of the literature on Internet studies analysing this subject (see at this respect, among others: Gibson et al., 2003a; Gibson and Rommele, 2003; Jackson, 2007; Kamarck, 2002). The features that are analysed in this research refer to three areas of party websites:

- their visibility or presence,
- their interactive content,
- and their external networking.

As explained in the following chapter, all three of these are studied from the optic of how they function as channels for political participation. That is, party websites are analysed in this study as 'means for political participation' as Norris puts it (2003: 23). When (or if) party websites are utilised for this purpose, both the communication between party and citizen as well as the degree of accountability from the party towards the citizen increase. These two can help to increase citizens' trust in parties and are fundamental features of the linkage relationship between party and the public which it is claimed has been eroded in the past decades.

The next section presents a review of the literature which has researched the content of party websites in the past decade, paying special attention to the question of whether parties have been using their websites as means for political participation or rather merely as tools for information-provision.
2. 3. Parties on the Web: the Empirical Evidence to date

This section reviews a wide selection of the most relevant empirical studies about the use of websites by parties published to date. The focus is on those studies which have made original research of primary sources, particularly website content analysis and users surveys. Out of the many articles, books and book chapters reviewed, most of them date from the early to mid years of the 2000s. This is not a coincidence: as explained above, the literature on the impact of the Internet in the political world was mainly speculative in its first years, with the very few empirical studies being published until the very end of the 1990s. The selection of most recent articles was, thus, to a degree inevitable: there was not that much earlier research to choose from.

Political parties are in general conservative organisations reluctant to embrace major changes (Rommele, 2003). Partly due to this, their relationship with new ICT is complex: on the one hand, it is clear that the new media can help parties fulfil a wide range of activities, from campaigning to recruitment; on the other, they present ever-growing demands for change and adaptation and as such can be more of a pressure than an opportunity for large organisations like parties. It is not surprising therefore that for many years since the spread of the Internet, parties have lacked a clear or original strategy with regard to the use of new media technologies (Gibson et al., 2003b; Roper, 1998). The process of transition to procedures based on ICT has not been a ‘natural thing to go into’ for this kind of political organisation, and parties have tended to rely in their pre-existing organisational tactics when they have turned online (Lusoli et al., 2002a). The result of this has been that to a very large extent they have failed to make use of the most innovative features of the Internet. Instead, research findings reveal that they have tended to use the Web in the same way as traditional type of media in a one-way, top-down, style (see for instance: Gibson and Ward, 2000b).

2. 3. 1. Participatory Content of Political Parties’ Websites

The first large empirical study of political organisations on the Web is that of Hill and Hughes from 1998. They analysed a hundred random political websites from the US, including parties, expecting to find that the Internet would be dominated by conservatives and libertarians and that, in line with the equalisation
thesis, non-mainstream collectives would be over-represented online. What they found was that one out of five political sites came indeed from the political extreme, confirming their hypothesis about the overrepresentation of the non-mainstream. They also found that, although the content of most political areas of the Internet was, as expected, dominated by conservative, libertarian and anti-governmental ideas, the majority of the people who use the Internet for political activity tend to be more liberal. Interestingly, conservative websites tended to be more flashy, and thus more focused in the recruitment and advertising possibilities of the Net; whereas liberal ones had more hyperlinks, which the authors argued was a sign of liberal sites being more community building oriented websites (Hill and Hughes, 1998).

If Hill and Hughes' study constitutes the first empirical analysis of political websites on a large scale, Roper's analysis of parties websites from New Zealand in 1996 constitutes one of the earliest research which focused exclusively on political parties on the Web. She found that in those early years of the Internet 'a lack of knowledge on the potential of the medium had resulted in the content and the format of the sites resembling those of more traditional media' (Roper, 1998: 77). Indeed, none of the sites analysed allowed for open deliberation with or between users.

In the European context, and particularly within the United Kingdom, the team composed by Rachel Gibson, Stephen Ward and Wainer Lusoli has published extensively on this area. In one of their first analysis on this topic they looked at party websites from the UK in 1998 and found, in line with Roper, that 'parties have failed to seize the new communication opportunities offered to them by the Internet.' (Gibson and Ward, 2000a: 121). The overall emphasis seemed to be on one-way information dissemination: out of the fifteen websites surveyed, none offered the possibility of an open, direct, online debate with leaders, and only three allowed for online discussion between the users. The message is clear: at the turn of the century British parties were 'failing to exploit the democratic and participatory potential of this media.' (Gibson and Ward, 2000b: 206). Some authors claimed that this was a particularity of the British parties, less willing to utilize online interactive features than their North American and continental European counterparts (Wring and Horrocks, 2001). However, research coming from the other side of the Atlantic was reaching to similar conclusions as those from Gibson and Ward. In one of the first, and for some 'the only large comparative work on parties online' (Ackland and Gibson, 2004: 4), Pippa Norris concluded that 'fewer opportunities existed for 'bottom-up' interactivity in communication with
parties than for ‘top-down’ information.’ (Norris, 2001: 170). Nevertheless, she also claimed that the difference was only minor, as more than three quarters of the websites reviewed provided an email address to contact party officials. This does not seem however to show much innovative use of the new technologies, nor does it allow for open and public discussion. The opportunities for participation online were being disregarded, as most mainstream political organisations used the new media in much the same way as traditional means of communication, ‘changing the channel but not the nature of communications’ (Norris, 2001: Conclusion).

Regarding continental European parties, Nixon and Johansson analysed the content of party websites in Sweden and Holland in 1997-98. Their results show that the Internet was mainly used to provide general information to the public and there was little evidence of attempts to foster online based deliberation (Nixon and Johansson, 2002).

The failure to exploit the interactive features of the Web was thus not an exclusive characteristic of British parties at the end of the 1990s. On the contrary: the vast majority of parties from all around the world seemed to be constructing websites which focused on one-way, top-down, delivery of information and neglected the possibilities for real participation and open communication that are available in the digital context. As Meikle – who studied political websites from Australia in the late nineties – concluded, visiting the website of a typical major party in those days was ‘like watching a television tuned to a dead channel’ (Meikle, 2002: 42). This seems to be in line with the common conception of parties as conservative bureaucratic organisations who would no doubt be slower than other, more informally organised, groups in adopting the new technologies. However, on the only study to date that has compared websites from different political actors – including parties, unions, pressure groups and protest networks – Lusoli, Ward and Gibson found that parties were the fastest organisations in embracing the ICT opportunities for organisational communications. Perhaps even more surprisingly, it was also them who comparatively delivered the most opportunities for online participation via their websites (Lusoli et al., 2002a). The differences between the websites were explained because of the pre-existing characteristics and organisational philosophies of the groups that the websites belonged to. Contrary to the claims of the most technological determinists among Internet scholars, their findings show that adaptation to the new technologies by political actors depends more on previous, offline strategies than on the technology itself. When drawing conclusions from their study on a comparative level, however, problems arise. On the coding of the features available on the websites, the
authors counted at the same level activities that differ greatly in their participatory dimension; the opportunity for leafleting or advertising was for instance given the same value as the chance to take part in an online survey. On the other hand, generalising from their findings is difficult as they 'only' analysed less than thirty websites, which is a rather small a number for comparative research. Nevertheless, the main purpose of their study was not as much to compare the websites from these different actors, as to provide an overview of how British political organisations were using the Web. Their main claims therefore refer to the usage of the new media by political organisations in general. On this matter, they found that 'so far, the Internet has been used more as an administrative and informational device for organisations rather than a tool for democracy and participation' (Lusoli et al., 2002a: 20).

With the turn of the century and the rapid spread of the Internet, some expected that parties would catch up on the new technologies – in the same way that the commercial sector had already done – and develop highly interactive and participatory websites. Research undertaken during the first half of the 2000s, however, shows that party websites continued to act more as digital brochures than as platforms for citizen engagement. What is more, there were hardly any differences between different countries or political systems in this respect. Although instinctively one would think that parties from wealthier countries or from those with a higher rate of Internet penetration would develop more sophisticated websites than those from the less wealthy states, the available data shows that up to now this is not to be the case. In a study of party websites in Sweden and Denmark, two of the most advanced European democracies in terms of economic wealth and Internet penetration rates, Löfgren found that the new media was not being utilised to enhance the opportunities for online deliberation (Löfgren, 2003).

In the Anglo-Saxon context, the empirical evidence available in the United States and United Kingdom does not support the idea of parties utilising the interactive potential of the new technology as a medium for participation (Gibson et al., 2003a). In their investigation of local parties and candidates sites for the 2001 UK election Ward and Gibson found that 'online communication between voters and candidates is still largely one-way' (2003: 199). Other studies, such as that of Margolis et al. (2003) or Farmer and Fender’s (2005) analysis of party websites in the US 2000 elections further confirm this finding for the North American context. What is more, a homogenization in parties' use of the Web has been found for both the UK and the US contexts. Websites from parties in these countries tend to serve
mainly as vehicles for the provision of information to targeted audiences (Gibson et al., 2003a).

Southern European countries had the lowest percentages in the EU for both access and usage of the Internet during the early 2000s. Cunha et al. analysed party websites from this area and found that, although there were some distinctive features in the way the new media was utilised politically in these countries – a finding which supports the thesis that technology does not act in a vacuum and it therefore needs to be integrated in its broader offline context for its study – the majority of parties had developed websites that, like those from their Northern neighbours, lacked in interactivity and opportunities for online discussion (Cunha et al., 2003).

The same can be said about the websites from French (see Villalba, 2003), Romanian (Mocan et al., 2003), Russian and Ukrainian (Smetko and Krasnoboka, 2003), Canadian (Hillwatch, 2004, 2005; Jansen, 2004), Australian (Ackland and Gibson, 2004), New Zealand (Conway and Dorner, 2004) and Japanese (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003) parties.

In the European Union context two large comparative studies that go beyond the one-country dimension have been produced: those of Norris and Trechsel et al., both from 2003. Norris (2003) analysed the content of 134 political parties websites in the then fifteen members of the EU in the year 2000. Surprisingly, she found that ‘contrary to expectations, many types of interactivity were encouraged’ (2003: 29). A closer look at the elements that she uses as indicators of interactivity shows, however, that the kind of interactivity that was made available in the websites tended to be very restricted, such as the ability to email party officials. Indeed, only 53% of the websites analysed offered the possibility to join a mailing list, something that can hardly be considered as highly participatory or interactive. This confirms the importance of defining indicators for any kind of research. The most relevant claims from Norris’ study have to do, in any case, with the differences in the use of the new media by major and smaller parties. These are reviewed in the next section of this chapter.

Contrary to Norris, who claimed to have found evidence to support the existence of a North-South European divide, the evidence procured by Trechsel et al. (2003) shows that higher level of wealth and economic development in a country did not automatically produce better party websites: in their ‘e-party index’, German parties came top, followed by Spanish ones. Other variables that could be expected to play a role, such as the nature of the party system, ideological
orientation, or the level of ICT use and access in the general public were not found to be good predictors of the sophistication of party websites. In the US context, Farmer and Fender also arrived to the conclusion that factors such as the Internet penetration rate or the economic level of a political system did not have any effect on the content of party websites (2005). Similarly, in a recent study, Sudulich argues that country-specific variables do not account for differences in the interactive content of party websites (Sudulich, 2009). Again, this contradicts Norris' claim that 'the strongest and most significant indicator of the presence of all parties online is the technological diffusion, measured by proportion of the population online' (Norris, 2001). This study adds light to this debate by analysing the effect of country-specific contextual factors (such as the degree of economic development or Internet penetration rate, but also others) the content of European party websites.

In any case, and regardless of the variables that affect party websites' sophistication, the conclusion from Trechsel's analysis is a familiar one: 'national and European political parties tend to favour the provision of information, i.e. merely displaying their stances on issues or circulating a newsletter, rather than using their websites for the purposes of mobilization' (2003: 30).

The empirical evidence is thus, with very few exceptions, unambiguous: most communication that takes place in or through party websites all around the world is still one-way, top-down and not two-way interactive. As a recent report from the Inter-Parliamentary Union concludes, "websites are still primarily used as a one-way communication device by MPs, parliaments and political parties." (2008: 137). Even in the relatively few cases when parties have started to make use of the – potentially – more interactive features available by the new technologies, such as blogs, they have done so by using them 'as one-way communication channels which added colour to party web sites' and not real interaction with and between users (Jackson, 2006). The reasons that have been given for this are that the quality of debate in digital forums tends to be very low, or that unmonitored online discussions posses a risk that party strategists are not willing to take (Ward et al., 2005; Ward et al., 2003b). On the other hand, it is not clear that citizens themselves are interested in particularly interactive websites from their parties. In a survey of visitors to political websites, Boogers and Voerman (2003) found that in the few cases where political websites in the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2002 offered opportunities for two-way communication, these were hardly taken up by

19 In terms of their visibility, interactivity, and external networking.
the citizens visiting the sites. Moreover, spaces for online discussion such as messageboards or blogs, tend to be dominated by small numbers of citizens, most of which were already politically active (on this topic, see also: Norris, 2002a; Ward et al., 2003b).

2.3.2. Evidence regarding the Equalisation Thesis

Since the early days of Internet studies, many have claimed that the spread of new ICT will have an equalising effect with regard to party competition\textsuperscript{20}. The underlying assumption of these claims is that smaller organisations – such as minor parties, but also others, like new protest movements for instance– would be helped to a larger extent by the new technologies than older, more established organisations. This would happen in societies where communication strategies and (old) media structures tend to be dominated by the larger, more established parties. Or in other words, the idea is that smaller organisations have more to gain from using the Internet and therefore will make a better and stronger use of the new technologies (Lusoli et al., 2002a). As it was outlined above, certain unique qualities of the Internet, namely its decentralisation, openness, and inexpensiveness have been said to hold the potential for levelling ‘the communication playing field for small and fringe actors, allowing them to challenge major parties more effectively’ (Berman and Mulligan, 2003; Ward et al., 2005: 1). In this sense, the Internet can be used by smaller parties to present themselves and disseminate information freely, without intermediates or editorial control (Gibson et al., 2003b; Pickerill, 2000) and so bypassing the structured media, dominated by the major actors (Nixon and Johansson, 2002; Roper, 1998). Because of the very low costs of the new media compared to traditional ones, these smaller organisations are now able to establish a presence online, and also to set up stronger network ties, mainly through hyperlinks, with similar-minded, less well-resourced, actors (Ackland and Gibson, 2004). Indeed, the comparatively inexpensiveness of the Net has been offered as a main advantage for the less-powerful since very early on by communication scholars. As Hill and Hughes put it already in 1998, ‘the Web ... is potentially the greatest thing since the postal system and the telephone for political interest groups. ... In fact, the Web may just be the cheapest publishing outlet for use by political organisations ever invented.’ (1998: 133). The big losers from the cyberspace revolution, was once said, were

\textsuperscript{20} As explained above, a decrease in inter-party competition has been pointed out as one of the signs of the ‘crisis of parties’ (Ward et al., 2003b).
the traditional institutions, who would be unable to keep up their privileges once the smaller organisations started to make use of the revolutionary potential of the new media (Grossman, 1995).

These arguments seem to have been taken up by the political actors themselves: officials from the smaller parties have been, from very early on, consistently enthusiastic about the possibilities opened up to their organisations by the spread of the Internet. They are thus more passionate about proclaiming the value of new media than officials from more established parties (Ward et al., 2003b). In a study by Margolis, Resnick and Levy, who, incidentally, are traditional speakers for the reinforcement thesis, they found that minor party officials saw their websites as more critical to their election campaigns than did major party officials (2003).

The evidence available to date, however, tells us a different story. Most studies show, in line with most that was proposed by the normalisation or reinforcement thesis, that the larger parties that already control the traditional, offline media, tend to be stronger also in the online realm. For instance, Ward, Gibson and Nixon concluded a study of parties online by stating the domination of major parties in cyberspace (Ward et al., 2003b). Investigations of party websites in different countries have arrived to a similar result: major political organisations were producing the most complete websites in the US 2000 election (Farmer and Fender, 2005), and also in New Zealand, where they were using websites in a more effective way than the smaller parties (Conway and Dorner, 2004). Moreover, money, it seems, does matter in cyberspace, and bigger organisations with more resources dedicated to their communication strategies can afford to hire professionals to build up, and, crucially, maintain, more sophisticated websites than smaller, poorer, ones (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Margolis et al., 2003; Resnick, 1998). Also, and contrary to that declared enthusiasm on the potential of new media by minor parties officials, on an early stage, at least in the UK, non-parliamentary parties had been relatively slow to move online (Gibson and Ward, 2000a). Things have been slightly different the other side of the Ocean: at the very beginning, until 1995, minor parties from the US did use online resources to a higher degree than the major ones. However, by 1996 major parties had become the dominant ones in terms of presence and usage of online resources (Margolis et al., 2003). The same dominance in terms of presence or visibility – calculated usually by the number of links into the party website – has been found for Southern European political parties (Cunha et al., 2003) and for the US and the UK (Gibson et al., 2003a). What is more, these same authors found that in these two countries
the major parties, in particular the three biggest ones in each system, were consistently making a better and more varied use of online tools for mobilisation, organisation, resource-generation and interactive participation activities (2003a).

This scenery appears not to have changed much in recent years. Findings from a study of 20 UK parties websites in 2005 show that in terms of visibility – measured by the amount of traffic, or ‘links-in’, guided towards a website – major parties continue to dominate the online British political realm (Ward et al., 2005). However, these same scholars conclude from their survey that, in relation to the content of parties websites, ‘straightforward normalisation … is difficult to sustain’ (2005: 11). The differences in party websites cannot be simply explained by their disparities in terms of financial resources. Money matters in cyberspace, but also other incentives such as party culture or the target audience. In a study of Swedish and Dutch party websites in the late nineties it was found that there were not great differences in the sophistication and complexity of websites from parties with more or less financial resources. While money was obviously an important factor in producing good websites, other resources, such as strong bases of technologically aware activists, were compensating for the lack of financial resources in the less affluent of the parties (Nixon and Johansson, 2002). As it has been put elsewhere ‘it appears that there is little correlation between one’s monetary resources and one’s effectiveness in using the Internet’ (Berman and Mulligan, 2003: 81).

Moreover, although findings from studies of party websites around the world have tended to be in line with the main claims from the normalisation thesis, not all of its claims have been consistently proved. On the contrary, scholars like Ward, Gibson and Lusoli have argued that, whereas the equalisation thesis has found limited evidence to be sustained, ‘any normalisation process does not seem to be inevitable or inexorable’ (2005: 6). Smaller parties, it is argued, can close the gap with the major ones in the times of ‘peacetime’ between elections, when bigger parties tend to leave their websites unattended (Gibson and Ward, 2000a; Ward et al., 2005). This argument has also been suggested by scholars from other countries, such as Cunha, Martin, Newell and Ramiro in the case of Southern European countries, where they found that the impact of size on the visibility of party websites varied in different periods of time (Cunha et al., 2003).

Were then both the proponents of the equalisation and those of the normalisation thesis wrong? As it is usually the case, the answer probably lies somewhere in between: whereas it would be utopian to maintain that new ICT will transform the political realm into an arena where minor and fringe parties have equal positions hand in hand with the bigger organisations, one cannot dismiss the
influence of the Internet in levelling the playing field for all types of parties, regardless of size. It is clear from the evidence up to date that a pure equal scenario is not likely to appear, at least not in the near future, and certainly not without major transformations in the political systems where the new technologies operate. However, as the authors above have claimed, one cannot take all arguments from the normalisation thesis for granted. It is crucial to be wary of absolute judgements when interpreting the data obtained from the surveys and studies undertaken. For instance, it is necessary to differentiate between how websites from different-sized parties differ in terms of their presence or visibility and their interactive content. Equalising tendencies may be taking place regarding party websites’ content, whereas the same might not be true for these sites’ visibility or presence, an analysis which is developed throughout this thesis.

Likewise, when a study finds that major parties in a given political system have for example an online presence three times bigger than the smaller ones, it does not necessarily follow from this result the conclusion that major parties are dominating in the online realm, and that therefore the Internet is not introducing any equalising tendencies in the political system. Minor parties in the UK, to continue with the same example, are three times smaller than the three biggest ones. Their online presence will logically be at least three times lower than that of the major parties. What is interesting for the researcher is to analyse whether the distance between the presence of minor and major parties in cyberspace is smaller than that existing in the ‘offline world’. If this is to be the case, then it can be concluded that with the help of new media some equalising tendencies are indeed taking place, even if for the moment these can only be found in the online realm. As Gibson, Ward and Lusoli put it: ‘Perhaps it is the case that while not all mediums are equal, some are more equal than others and for the smaller parties the exposure granted them through the web is comparatively much greater that they can obtain in print or other electronic versions’ (2003c: 179). Indeed, already in 1998 Hill and Hughes revealed that one in five of the political pages that they found in their study of American political websites was of ‘extreme tendencies’ (as

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21 As it is the case in a study of UK and US parties, where Gibson, Margolis et al. found that in the UK links into the websites of the three biggest parties were at least three times greater than those into the most linked minor parties (2003a).
22 For instance, a study of UK party websites from 1998 revealed that the Progressive party, which is certainly a far smaller party than Labour or Conservative, had an equal number of links coming in from major party links sites than those of these two biggest parties (Gibson and Ward, 2000a). Findings from a later survey also confirmed that external networking (link-out towards external websites) seemed to be a low priority for British and American parties, except for certain small parties such as the Greens or Sinn Fein (Gibson et al., 2003a).
opposed to mainstream ones) (1998). This means that extreme, or fringe, groups were indeed overrepresented in the online world: not one in five political organisations found in the ‘offline world’ were of ‘extreme tendencies’. Weber and Murray also point out that minor parties have a much higher presence online than they do, proportionally, in traditional media (2002).

In fact, there are still scholars that conclude unambiguously that minor parties are making much more use of the Internet than the major ones: in a study of Australian political parties, Meikle came to the conclusion that whereas the bigger parties tend to use only what he calls a more ‘transmissional model of interactivity’ (where interactive elements are used with the only purpose of top-down style transmissions of information), the minor ones were taking advantage of the possibilities available by the new media to engage in fully conversational modes of interactivity (2002). Findings of an analysis of the behaviour of Japanese parties online in the 2000 and 2001 elections were also in line with the propositions of the equalisation thesis. This report claimed that the Internet had a lot of appeal for non-established political forces, it was clearly opening up new channels for smaller parties, and it had had a significant impact on the political system, opening up cross-party competition (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003). Pippa Norris concluded, after an exhaustive analysis of European political parties in 2000, that although the major parliamentary parties generally had the richest websites, minor parties were in fact not lagging behind: they scored 63% in a combined scale that measured information and communication components in the websites, whereas the major parties scored only one point ahead, 64%. What is more, it was the green parties the group that achieved, by far, the highest ranking: 72% (Norris, 2003). Indeed, many studies have suggested that green parties from around the world tend to be making a special, higher, use of ICT for their political strategies than parties from other families, something that has been reflected on their websites.23

The tendency in the literature nowadays has been to dismiss the claims from the equalisation thesis, using the evidence available to argue that, in the case of party competition, the scenario is that of a reinforcement or normalisation. The Internet, it is claimed, is either reinforcing existing patterns of the offline world, or simply replicating these models, where the major parties dominate and the smaller ones struggle to find a presence within the system. Nevertheless the picture is, as always, not black or white. While most of the propositions made by the earliest proponents of the equalisation thesis have indeed not been proven to date, neither

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23 For instance, in the European context (Gibson et al., 2003b), in the Canadian case (Hillwatch, 2005), in Australia (Gibson and Ward, 2003), and in New Zealand (Conway and Dorner, 2004).
have all the arguments from the normalisation thesis been indecisively supported by the data. There are many ‘grey’ areas, particularly in relation to the interactive content of party websites, where it would be difficult to deny that the new media have introduced some equalising tendencies, at least in intra-election or peacetime periods, as it has been suggested.

Similarly, it is necessary to analyse the potential equalising effects of the new media in different political systems according to a variety of contextual factors (age of democracy, type of electoral system, degree of political participation, and so on) as this thesis does. The few studies available suggest that the type of electoral system (Cunha et al., 2003) and the age of the democracy in question (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003) may be playing a role with regards to the equalising potential of the new media. This thesis provides, for the first time, data which allows for the comparative analysis of these and other variables. Its main argument is that if technologies do not act in a vacuum, then the contextual differences existing in the so called ‘offline world’ need to be taken into account when trying to explain patterns of change in the political processes introduced by new ICT, as this thesis aims to do.

This chapter has offered an overview of the state of parties as political organisations nowadays and in particular their relationship with the Web. It has started off with a discussion of the so-called decline of political parties in contemporary democracies. It has been argued that there are no grounds to talk of a crisis of parties in today's Europe. Parties continue to be an essential actor in European political systems. However, their popular legitimacy, based on their linkage relationship with citizens, has diminished in the past decades. The development of new media might be able to help parties in regaining this relationship with citizens. Parties may for instance use the Web to offer citizens spaces for political participation. These would in turn enhance the communication between party and public, as well as party’s accountability towards the public. Both of these are essential features of the relationship between party and citizens, and their enhancement would contribute to improve it.

Empirical evidence to date, however, shows that of all the possible functions that parties could give to their websites, that of information provision outdoes the rest. In other words, parties so far have preferred to use the Web as a top-down medium to offer unmediated information than as an interactive arena for citizens’ participation. This thesis offers new, updated data, about parties’ use of
the Internet, and particularly of their websites. It has a large, comparative scope, and so special interest is paid to the variances in party websites from different political systems, as well as those from different-sized or ideological parties. For this reason, particular attention has been given to the arguments and findings from studies regarding the equalisation thesis, which looks at differences in the use of new media by smaller and bigger parties.
Chapter 3: Analytical and Methodological Framework

3. 1. Lines of Investigation. Research Questions and Hypotheses

3.1.1. Party Websites as Means for Political Participation

This study deals primarily with party websites as means to enhance the relationship between citizens and parties. By increasing citizens' political participation through the use of websites, it is argued, communication between party and the public as well as party's accountability are augmented. In this way, the linkage relation between party and citizen can be improved. The focus of this investigation relies thus on the participatory potential of parties' websites, and not on other possible functions that party websites can aim to serve for. For this purpose, the existence or not of elements such as electronic forms, email addresses for contact, e-bulletins, electronic surveys, e-guestbooks, blogs, forums and intranets, as well as the number of in-links and links-out in these websites has been looked at. All of these can arguably help parties to fulfil more than one function, not necessarily exclusively a participatory one. Offering the possibility to sign up for a regular electronic newsletter, for instance, can be seen as part of the party's marketing or campaigning tactics. On the other hand, receiving a newsletter in regular intervals establishes a certain relationship with the party that, although one-directional and of a top-down nature, is already stronger than a one-off answer and question query done by e-mail. Furthermore, there is a degree of intentionality behind it, in that the citizen signs voluntarily up for it. As such, electronic newsletters can also be seen as a feature that promotes a certain extent of political participation by the citizen and that encourages the establishment of a relationship between them and the party. It is from this perspective – as features that encourage political participation, and thus, specifically, communication between party and citizen as well as accountability from the party – that the interactive elements included in party websites have been studied in this research.

The argument is that if websites incorporate interactive and networking elements that allow for a real dialogue between parties and the public, then the relationship between these two – public and parties – can be enhanced, and with it parties' popular legitimacy can be strengthened, at least to a certain degree. Crucially, parties could use their websites to open up spaces for citizens' political participation. In this sense, party and public would be able to communicate through
the Web, and in this way contribute to be perceived less remote and more accountable by citizens.

The complete list of the elements that have been looked at and consequently codified as part of the research for this study can be found in the Appendix III of this thesis. As outlined above, three main areas of party websites have been analysed, the three of them being crucial to increase a website's participatory potential. These are:

1. visibility or internal networking (number of links into the website).
2. interactivity (existence or not of a series of interactive elements).
3. and external networking (number of links out from the website).

Regarding interactivity, the premise is that the introduction of interactive features, such as open online debates, constitutes per se a contribution towards greater participation on a website. The inclusion in a website of online interactive elements which allow for bottom-up, many-to-many, and many-to-one types of dialogue – in opposition with the common top-down, one-to-many styles of communication existing in the traditional broadcast media – does increase the opportunities for participation among citizens. The presence – or not – of a series of interactive elements has been recorded: e-form and email for contact with the party, possibility of subscription to an electronic bulletin, online polls or guestbooks, links to official blogs or forums outside the website, spaces for online debate in the website (and whether these are open to all visitors or one needs to register to access them), and whether there is an intranet or electronic section exclusive for members (username and password protected). All of these allow for new ways of communication and participation that were unavailable before the Internet. Hence their capital importance in the analysis. According to how many of these elements are present in each website, the sites have been classified into a Scale of participatory interactivity, which is described further below in this chapter.

The networking aspect of party websites has been analysed by looking at the number of links into the party website as well as the figure for links out to external websites. It is argued that parties with websites that are more highly networked are also contributing towards greater participation: those with more links towards the site are more easily found; those with higher number of links out, in turn, contribute towards the formation of more politically informed and connected citizens. This would depend, of course, of the type of links that the websites are included; however desirable it is though this analysis goes beyond the scope of this research.
In any case, regardless of which organisation is the party website linking to or from, 'hyperlinks can be seen to promote a number of new and existing party functions' (Ackland and Gibson 2006: 12). These same authors, which in turn build on the work by Park et. al (2005), name the following:

1. The building of organizational alliances and networks.
2. More efficient and immediate sharing of audiences and potential supporters among like-minded groups.
3. Information provision – hyperlinks can point visitors toward additional sources of information.
4. The forging of indirect or implicit connections between groups that can help to strengthen or reinforce their identity.
5. Message amplification or 'force multiplication' (particularly useful for marginal groups with a low offline profile) whereby links convey a distorted sense of the extent of worldwide support for their message to users.

'While functions one to four are to varying extents already practised by parties in the offline environment, function five appears to be a new and unique capability made possible by the web' (Ackland and Gibson, 2006: 12). It has therefore important implications for issues of intra-party competition: following the equalisation thesis it can be claimed that smaller parties can become more visible online than they are in the offline media sphere, and thus become more equal in this respect with the major parties. The networking side of a party website has consequences that go therefore beyond extending its participatory potential: it can also contribute – or not – to levelling the playing field amongst different sized parties.

3.1.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

As discussed above, most empirical studies have shown that party websites around the world are not very interactive in their content. That parties are not fully utilising the participatory potential of the Internet to communicate with their citizens appears to be, thus, a common fact regardless of what political system parties operate in or the characteristics of parties themselves. There seems, therefore, to be a standardization or homogenization of party websites taking place, at least with regard to their (low) interactive content. Not all scholars agree however with this statement. Norris for instance has claimed that 'party websites vary substantially in their contents and quality' (2003: 29). Furthermore, following
the argument that ICT do not act in a vacuum, it would be logical to expect the content of party websites to vary depending on 'offline factors': the context where parties operate as well as parties' own attributes. Finding out whether this is the case in the context of the European Union constitutes one of the main aims of this thesis.

If party websites are to vary between themselves, and if this is explained through the differences between party systems and parties themselves, then it follows that these differences should be taken into account when analysing comparatively party websites. That is, a series of factors from the context where parties operate in, as well as characteristics from the parties themselves, are to be studied as independent variables to examine whether they affect or not the sophistication of party websites.

This thesis analyses the interactivity, internal, and external networking of European party websites from a comparative perspective. Party websites have been categorised according to specific contextual characteristics of the political system they are from, as well as according to attributes from the parties themselves. Specifically, the political systems existent in the EU have been classified according to the following variables: age of democracy; geopolitical area; rate of Internet access; date of last legislative election; type of electoral system; degree of voter turnout; level of economic wealth; and freedom of the press. In turn, parties have been divided according to their size (both in terms of seats and votes) and their ideological family (as well as their ascription to the political groups of the EP). This analysis allows the investigation of several lines of research in a way that has generally not been feasible before due to the aforementioned lack of large, comparative empirical studies in the topic. In this sense, this thesis does not only analyse the usage of the Web by European political parties in general, but also crucially the differences that can be found in this use by different types of parties and / or parliaments. It is indeed one of the main arguments of this study that technologies do not act in a vacuum, that is, the use of new media by political actors is determined by the characteristics of the 'offline world' in which these actors operate. Following this, it is expected that parties in the EU will be making a use of the Internet which will depend on the attributes both of the parties themselves, and also of the parliaments and political systems in which they operate. Or the other way round: that the differences found in the behaviour of European parties online should be explainable by the disparities of the types of parties, parliaments and political systems found in the EU.
As it has already been described in the Introductory chapter of this thesis, the research questions that this thesis aims to give an answer to are mainly of a comparative nature. In particular, these are:

- **RQ 1**: Do European party websites vary between themselves in terms of visibility, interactive content, and external networking? Or is there a standardization of party websites taking place among Europe, regardless of specific contextual factors and party characteristics?
- **RQ 2**: Which factors account for the variations between European party websites? Specifically:
  - Do country-specific contextual variables affect the visibility, interactive content, and external networking of party websites? And if so, in what manner?
  - Do party attributes such as size and ideology affect the visibility, interactive content, and external networking of party websites? And if so, in what manner?

So far, two broad hypotheses have been outlined, to be confirmed – or not – through the analysis of the findings of this research:

- In the first place, European party websites are expected to diverge greatly among themselves at least with regard to their visibility and external networking dimensions. It is not clear, however, whether this is the case also with regards to the websites' interactive content, as previous empirical studies have shown that low levels of interactivity is a common feature of party websites from around the world, regardless of the particular political system they come from.
- In the second, since ICT do not act in a vacuum, and what has been called 'cyberspace' is not an independent entity from the offline context, it is expected that party websites will be influenced by characteristics of the 'offline world' the parties act in.

  - Concretely, contextual factors of the political systems where the parties operate are predicted (and specifically the already mentioned variables of: age of democracy, geopolitical area, rate of Internet access, date of last election, type of electoral system, degree of voter turnout, level of economic wealth, and freedom of the press) to have an effect in the content and sophistication of these parties' websites.
  - Similarly, parties' size and ideological family should be found to have an effect on European party websites.
With regards to size, following the arguments from the equalisation thesis, and in line with Bimber's model outlined on chapter one, smaller parties are expected to be utilising the interactive and networking capacities of the Web at least as much, if not more, as the bigger ones. Most recent studies have shown that major parties dominate in terms of visibility or party websites' presence, however. It is thus expected that equalising forces will be taking place mostly with regard to the content (interactive and external networking) of party websites, but not so much in terms of their visibility. Regarding this latter dimension, bigger parties are expected to have more links coming into their websites than smaller ones.

In turn, differences are expected to be found between parties from different ideological orientations in their use of the Web. In particular, parties from the left are expected to make a more intense use of the networking and interactive capabilities of the web. Additionally, and based on findings from previous studies (Conway and Dorner, 2004; Gibson and Ward, 2000b, 2003; Hillwatch, 2004, 2005; Meikle, 2002; Norris, 2003; Ward et al., 2003b) as well as, again, Bimber's model, parties from the green or environmental ideological family are expected to have a more sophisticated use of the Web than the rest.

3.2. Focus of the Analysis: the Web, the Supply side, the EU

This thesis investigates the behaviour of European parties on the Web. For this, the unit of analysis is party websites, instead of other applications of the Internet such as the email. The World Wide Web has been chosen as the focus of research because of several key factors. One of the distinctive features of the Web is its public nature: the information is available on websites for everybody to be seen – and in some cases, also for everybody to edit. On a practical level, this public character of the Web makes its contents immediately available for the researcher. As Zittel puts it: ‘The World Wide Web is the most accessible element of the Internet so far it appears to be suited as an indicator for research’ (2003: 42). On the other hand, from the point of view of the user this openness makes the visit to websites an almost straightforward activity, which does not require any
specialised skills on the use of computers\textsuperscript{24}. This study is concerned with how the use of ICT by the party can enhance its relation with the ordinary citizen, or more precisely, with the opportunities available to the general public to participate politically and communicate with the party through the Net. Instead of studying more innovative uses of the new media for activism, this focus on party websites should provide us with a much clearer picture of how the new technologies can be used for political participation purposes by ordinary European citizens. From the party's side, the party website appears as one of the official public faces of the party\textsuperscript{25}. Furthermore, for the comparative approach that this thesis adopts, official party websites are more easily systematised and therefore comparable than, for instance, parties' platforms on social network websites.

On a different context, it has also been argued that the individual citizen communicates with the 'meso level' of politics (media, organisations, civic networks, parties, pressure groups, and so on) and with the governmental bodies mainly through websites, rather than emails (Gibson et al., 2003a; Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000). Indeed, the political organisations present themselves openly to the public via their websites, which are readily accessible for the user, who in turn reaches to the Web as a medium for public information – and sometimes debate – about the political world (Rogers and Zelman, 2002; Roper, 1998). This has led some to claim the dominance of the Internet by the World Wide Web (Graham, 1999), which brings along the prevalence of a broadcast, top-down, presentation (as opposed to discussion) style of making politics online (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Warnick, 2002). However, while reading a website is 'less participative' from the user side than taking part on a discussion via emails, we ought to keep in mind that on the Web many types of communication are – or can be made – available. The possibilities thus do not end with the passive visit to websites: on certain websites the user can also actively interact with both, the creators of the website, and/or other users. 'A website can be static information, similar to a book. It can be dynamic, offering streaming audio and video and hyperlinks beyond its borders. It can be a launching pad to send someone an email (...) A website can serve as host to a forum for people conversing with one another or talking with politicians.' (Stromer-Galley, 2000: 120). It is this particularity of websites, as spaces which can potentially be used to channel various ways of communication, which make them

\textsuperscript{24} 'The Web presents itself as the first and most exciting place for those new to Cyberspace' (Resnick, 1998: 49).

\textsuperscript{25} It is significant to note that on most public party activities such as conferences the URL address of the party website almost invariably is written on the speaker's stand so that it can easily be seen in television when the speeches from the politicians are broadcasted.
so interesting for this research. Any study looking into how new media technologies or ICT in general can help parties re-establish their communicative relationship with the public necessarily has to go through an analysis of party websites.

The object of research of this thesis is websites from political organisations (political parties) in the European Union and not the usage that citizens make of these sites. The focus is thus on the supply side (as offered by political institutions or organisations) of the technology, rather than on the demand (by the public). It can be argued, though, that the relevance of these websites is relative and that it ultimately depends to a large degree on whether citizens are visiting them or not. The Internet is, after all, a medium of choice26 (Norris, 2002b, 2003). This means that, for a website to be visited, the user has to have chosen to go there. Political websites are not among the most visited sites of the Web27. Why then focus on the supply side – the websites from political organisations – if the demand – from citizens – might not even exist? Many scholars indeed argue that it is necessary to evaluate what use the public is making of the Internet prior to any analysis of the content and type of the websites available28.

The view adopted here is a different one: both supply and demand are interdependent variables. That is, while it is valid to argue that if citizens are not interested in political websites, then political actors have no incentive to create interesting sites; and also that even if political sites are available, that does not mean that they will be used (Gibson and Ward, 2000d); the demand from the citizens will also in turn vary depending on what is made available for them by the organisations. As Margetts writes, when commenting on the evidence from surveys that keep showing that not many citizens seem to seek political information online, 'while some commentators view this as evidence of lack of demand for such information online, it could equally be regarded as lack of supply' (Margetts, 2007: 32). Indeed, 'some of the uses of the Internet are 'supply'/driven, notably what opportunities parties, groups and the news media offer supporters and activists via their online websites' (Norris and Curtice, 2006: 4). Without these opportunities, then online citizen participation is not possible (Weber and Murray, 2002)29. What is

26 'My Internet – where I go, what I read, what I do – is not your Internet.' (Norris, 2002b: 77)
27 See on this matter the final section of chapter four (4.2.2) in which data from Alexa comparing the traffic rank from party websites with other sites is presented.
28 Thus, a significant number of empirical surveys have been conducted which look at the patterns of use by citizens of ICT in general (such as: Kaye and Johnson, 2004) or of party websites in particular (among others: Boogers and Voerman, 2003; Lusoli and Ward, 2004; Ward et al., 2002).
29 The argument also works in the opposite direction: in a study of the online behaviour of activists from the global justice movement in Genoa 2001 and Florence 2002 (European
more, if these websites are not offering innovative, dynamic and interactive elements through which meaningful participation is possible, then it is likely that citizens will not be interested in them. Whilst it is undeniable that the existence of a political site does not guarantee that they will be visited; it is also plausible to suggest that if these sites consist only of static, top-down supply of information, then they will certainly not be visited a second time for participatory intentions or to try to establish a communicative relationship with the party. Hence the need to evaluate what channels for participation and communication these websites are effectively offering.

As it has been outlined, the study of the effects of new media technologies, and in particular the Internet, on political systems is becoming an important field of research within contemporary political science. New ICT are indeed transforming the way political processes take place in our societies, even if, as Agre put it, some actors and forces are being more altered than others (Agre, 2002). It is expected that with the further development and spread of the Internet, this impact can only become stronger (for a similar argument, see among many others: Colvile, 2008). The discussion nowadays for Internet researchers is therefore not so much about whether there is an impact, but rather, about in what ways the process takes place (Coleman et al., 1999; Chadwick, 2006). Thus the aim for Internet scholars today is not any longer to discuss whether new ICT affect or not the way democracy works, but rather to analyse concrete developments introduced by the new media. For this it makes sense to focus on how specific actors are using ICT and how political and social practices are being affected, rather than attempting to provide bold, global explanations about the effects of new media on democracy in general. This thesis analyses how a particular application of the Internet, the World Wide Web, is being used by European parties.

The importance of parties as political actors in contemporary democracies has already been discussed. Since they are one of the most relevant players in contemporary political systems it becomes compulsory for the discipline of Internet studies to get a clear picture of how they are utilising the Web. This thesis analyses the usage of the Web by parties from a very concrete geographical context: the European Union. Because the Internet started to develop in the US, and the spread of its use amongst the population took place at an earlier stage there than in the rest of the world, most previous research on the impact of the Internet in (Social Forum), Della Porta and Mosca discovered that if the organisation that an individual belongs to uses new ICT, then it is very likely that the individual will also use the new media for political participation (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005).
politics has focused in its impact in the political systems of Northern America, mainly the US, but also, to an extent, Canada (Gibson et al., 2005; Jansen, 2004; Norris, 2003; Ward et al., 2003b). To date there are very few studies that look at the usage of new media by parties from a comparative point of view going beyond the North American context. The works of Pippa Norris (2001, 2003), Gibson, Nixon and Ward (2003b), and Trechsel, Kies, Mendez and Schmitter (2003) constitute the main exception to the lack of large comparative studies in the area. However, none of these investigations, whose results need to be in any case updated, looks at the whole of the current European Union in the way this thesis does. There is thus a clear deficit of studies focusing on the influence of new media in the contemporary European context, which, given the rates of Internet penetration in Europe nowadays, needs to be fulfilled. Internet researchers cannot simply apply findings from the North American context to the European one: the political systems from North America differ greatly to those from the old continent, and so 'researchers should be wary of assuming that the US model of Internet use will predominate globally' (Ward et al., 2003a). This is even truer in the case of political parties, which function in a completely different way in both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Elections, it could be said, are "more party-centred" in Europe than in the US (Farrell and Webb, 1998) and so 'European countries that have a long tradition of mass-branch party organizations may develop party websites that differ sharply from their American cousins' (Norris, 2003: 24). New, updated, quality research on the usage of the Internet by European parties is therefore required.

Furthermore, even in the not so many cases where the research has focused in Europe, this has mainly centred around Northern and Western European countries, as these have been the first in which Internet usage among their societies has spread, mostly ignoring Southern and Eastern nations (Cunha et al., 2003). Data which allows for a comparison between the uses of the Web by parties from all geographical areas of the European Union is needed, and it is one that this thesis provides. Finally, the analysis of the potential differences between older, more established democracies – such as those from Western Europe – with newer ones – such as those from the Eastern countries belonging to the EU – is also an exciting area for research that has been under-explored (Bruszt et al., 2005). Taking the European Union as a whole as its area of research, with the addition in the research of trans-national parties from the European Parliament, this thesis is able to provide the analysis of all of these comparative variables. In this way, the problem of the 'most similar systems design' in comparative research – mainly, that it constrains extraneous sources of variance in the dependant
variable that is analysed (Peters, 1998: 57) – is overcome, as the object of research of this thesis is complex enough to offer scope for comparative analysis between very different types of areas: country-based versus transnational ones; parties from established political systems versus ones from new democracies; and so on.

3. 3. Units of Analysis: Websites from European Parties

This thesis examines the political uses of the World Wide Web being made by a specific political actor: the political party. Websites from parties from all twenty-seven members of the European Union have been looked at. Specifically, the analysis focuses on all parties that are represented in the national parliaments, plus two parties for each parliament who did not achieve parliamentary representation.

The selection of party websites included in the analysis has been done making use of a variety of online resources. The parties that are included in this research are:

- all of those which achieved parliamentary representation in the latest national legislative elections from each country;
- plus, for each parliament: the two parties with most votes out of those which did not gain parliamentary representation in the latest election;
- and, finally, the party groups represented in the European Parliament.

In various European parliaments, it is common for parties to form coalitions or groups for each election. Whenever it has been possible, the analysis has considered each of the parties in the coalition as separate, individual ones, and thus their websites have been analysed separately. This is the case for Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, and Romania. In two cases, Italy and Bulgaria, it has not been possible to find individual websites for each of the parties present in the coalitions. In these cases, the analysis has been done of the websites from the coalitions, without differentiating between the multiple parties included in them. The case of Lithuania constitutes an exception: only one of the coalitions has been divided into its parties for the analysis; for the rest, the coalitions’ websites, as a whole, have been analysed.

30 See Appendix I for a complete list of all parties looked at.
31 That of 'Working for Lithuania'.
The European Parliament is a special case, and thus here the selection of parties has been different to that of the national parliaments. It is particularly interesting for this research to investigate the possible differences that there are between national and trans-national parties, since it makes sense to assume that the Internet will be of special use for parties with an electorate who is more widely geographically dispersed than national ones. Also, the EU has become in itself an essential actor in European politics. 'In the European context it is no longer enough to focus on the politics of the nation state' (Webb, 2002b: 6). For these reasons, two different methods of selection of parties have been used. On the first hand, the big party coalitions present in the European Parliament have been selected. On the other, they have also been included in the research the individual trans-national parties included in each coalition.

When there are two different political parties by region, each with an official independent website, but who form one political group in parliament, we treat it as two separate ones. For example, in Germany, The Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union of Bavaria call themselves 'sister-parties'. They do not operate in the same regions and together form one group in the Bundestag. They are therefore treated as two separated parties, and the websites for both of them have been independently analysed.

Finally, in systems like France, where there are two rounds in the electoral process, the final total number of seats has been taken into account for the seats count, and the votes from the first round for the votes count.

To find out which parties are present in each parliament, as well as those two without representation with the highest number of votes, a variety of sources has been used. These include:

- the individual website of Dr Adam Carr (www.adam-carr.net),
- the website of Election Resources, a Spanish-based political database which links to official national statistical offices from around the world to provide electoral results (www.electionresources.org),
- and finally Election World (www.electionworld.org).

These three were particularly chosen because they give full details of their sources, which go back to the original official relevant institutions for each country.

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32 Such as EPP-ED, ALDE, and so on.
33 For instance, in the case of ALDE, Alliance of Liberal and Democrats, which is formed by two parties - ELDR, European Liberal Democratic and Reform Party, and EDP, European Democratic Party - these two have been analysed separately, as different parties.
34 The contents of Election World have been moved to Wikipedia. The content uses exactly the same sources and data banks that Election World has always done.
or parliament. For each of the parliaments, the results of the latest national election was looked in each of these sources, and then compared between them to check for any errors. In the few cases where the information was not available in all three sources, special attention has been put to look for the official results in the national electoral commissions of the country in question. In this way, 273 parties, and its correspondent websites when they had one, were selected and codified into a SPSS database.

3.4 Methods of Research

This research combines two perspectives of analysis: a quantitative, based on a web survey of all parties websites, and a qualitative one, based on an online forum and short interviews with officials from a selected number of parties.

Because of their own nature, large quantitative surveys cannot offer anything else that an overview of the situation or the problem that is explored. This is even truer in the case of website surveys. Due to the dynamic nature of the Web, any website survey cannot offer but a snapshot, a picture of the Web in a very specific moment of time: the sites that are analysed one day are more than likely to have changed in a few months time. The Web is thus at the same time ephemeral and permanent (Schneider and Foot, 2004). Its ephemerality derives from its dynamism, which means that websites are created, changed, or eliminated at a very fast race. On the other hand, websites do stay online for a given period of time – sometimes shorter, sometimes longer – which differentiates them from other purely transient media products such as radio or television emissions. But in any case, it remains true that any website survey offers nothing more than a snap of the situation online in a given moment of time (Norris, 2003). As another Internet researcher puts it: 'each static analysis can only provide for a snapshot in a dynamic process of change' (Zittel, 2003: 49). That is, the results of the web survey upon which this research is based will only apply to the very particular time when the websites were analysed. This is a problem that is common to any research on the Internet, qualitative or not, but even more in the case of larger surveys. However, this does not mean that the validity of websites surveys should be questioned. Even if only a 'snapshot', the results of websites surveys do offer a picture of what is happening at a given moment in the Web; or, in our case, how a certain political actor is utilising the Web in a certain time. To be sure, our results

can only be claimed to be valid for the period of time (Spring/Summer 2007) when the survey was carried out. They still provide us with a picture of how political parties' websites in Europe were looking at the time; and, what is more, they are also of high value to be used as a benchmark for comparison, both in future research in the same area and in studies about the use of the Web by other political actors or in other geographical areas.

Anyhow, there is a clear advantage in the use of larger surveys, and that is that they permit a generalisation of results that is not possible when using only a few case studies as a method for analysis. In such an in-depth comparative study as this one, a large survey is the most – if not the only – suitable method of research for the aims of this investigation. Furthermore, combining a quantitative web survey with more qualitative techniques (such as the online forum and the short interviews with party officials), as done in this thesis, allows us to overcome the problems inherent to each of these techniques of research.

3.4.1. The Websites Survey

The study of over two hundred party websites has been done following the technique of content analysis. Content analysis allows researchers to classify items objectively and systematically according to explicit rules and criteria, and it is therefore very appropriate for comparative studies. It is a method that has been highly used by scholars of media and communication (Jarvis and Wilkerson, 2005). According to Mc Millan (2000), the researcher must follow five steps when applying the method of content analysis to the Web:

- First, one or more hypothesis should be outlined, as was done above.
- The second step for the researcher is to find a sample. The sample for our website survey is constituted by all parties (and/or, in some cases, coalitions) present in all national parliaments in the European Union, plus in all cases the two parties with most votes in the latest legislative election from those which did not achieve parliamentary representation. Added to these, all transnational parties, as well as groups of parties, represented in the European Parliament are also considered.
- In the third place, categories, or units of analysis, should be carefully defined. The unit of analysis for the first part of research of this thesis (the web survey) is party websites from the EU. However, when studying the Web it is also necessary to establish how many levels of each website the researcher
looks at. For the website survey, only homepages and 'second-level webpages' – that is, pages that can be accessed through only a maximum of two mouse-clicks from the homepage – have been analysed. The homepage is the 'content gateway' of the website (Jarvis and Wilkerson, 2005): in the over-informative world of the Web, most users will decide whether to look further on a given website by looking only at the homepage. Given the fast pace at which visitors 'surf the Net' it is uncommon that users will explore further webpages in a site unless there is a specific interest. This thesis researches the possibilities for participation offered by parties to the general public, that is, citizens who are not necessarily politically engaged or partisan activists. For this, it makes sense to focus on those levels of a website that are more likely to be seen by the public, that is, the homepage and what we call second-level webpages.

- Fourth: coding the content. An explanation of the coding system used in this thesis is described further in this chapter. Appendix III shows in turn the full coding frame for the web survey.
- Finally, analysis and interpretation of data. This step should be undertaken in the same way as in any other field of social sciences; the fact that the content analysis is applied to the Web makes no difference here. The analysis and interpretation of the data both from the website survey and the case studies constitute the main part of this thesis (chapters four to seven).

Due to practical reasons, the researcher has been assisted by a series of online dictionaries in the content analysis of the party websites. Except for those websites written in English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese, the following online dictionaries were used in the research:

- Dutch, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, Hungarian: http://www.freedict.com
- Czech: http://www.slovnik.cz/
- German: http://dict.leo.org/
- Estonian: http://dict.ubs.ee/
- Latvian: http://dictionary.site.lv/
- Lithuanian: http://www.dicts.info/2/english-lithuanian.php
- Polish, Romanian, Greek, Slovan, Slovenian: http://www.ectaco.co.uk/free-online-dictionaries/
- Polish, also: http://www.poltran.com/
This research focuses on three particular dimensions of party websites:

1. Presence or visibility.
2. Interactive or participatory content.
3. And external networking.

Some features that have been traditionally included in the study of party behaviour online are not looked at in this thesis, for instance features included in the websites with regard to campaigning, resource generation, and so on. This is because this thesis does not deal with parties' use of the Internet in general, but specifically with the dimensions of party websites through which citizens' relationship with parties can be enhanced. On the other hand, elements that relate to offline participation (such as the possibility to join the party online or to volunteer distributing pamphlets in the neighbourhood) are not taken into account either. Again, the focus is on activities that take place on the Net, such as online debates, subscription to electronic bulletins, electronic surveys, and so on, that can help towards a better communication between parties and the public.

The aforementioned three dimensions of party websites have been analysed by looking at:

1. The number of inbound links to the party website in the case of the presence or visibility dimension. This was calculated using the software freely provided by Alexa (www.alexa.com). Additionally, the figures for the 'traffic rank' (again according to Alexa) for each of the sites provided extra data about the websites' visibility.

2. The presence – or not – of a series of interactive elements determines the degree of participatory interactivity of a party website. Moreover, a scale of participatory interactivity was designed and applied to all websites analysed, as explained below.

3. Finally, the figure for outbound links, or hyperlinks to external websites, was used as an indicator of the external networking dimension of party websites. These were manually counted by the researcher. Only hyperlinks included in the homepage and second-level-pages of each website and which were linking to external sites were taken into account.

36 The differentiation between the functions of each element included on a party website is not, however, straightforward. For instance, the use of interactive elements that allow feedback can be seen as a way of encouraging citizens' participation, but at the same time it could be part of the party's electoral campaign's strategy. This is the case, undeniably, of online polls.
To calculate the extent of participation opportunities available online, a Scale of participatory interactivity was designed and then applied to each of the websites analysed. A total of ten features were looked at and their presence or not in the website consequently codified into the database. These nine are, in order from less to higher interactivity:

1. Electronic forms for contact
2. E-mail address for contact
3. Availability of subscription to an e-newsletter or email list
4. E-surveys or polls (closed answers)
5. E-guestbooks (open posts)
6. Comments to content of the website (usually news)
7. Links to official blogs or fora in external websites
8. Exclusive blogs or fora: where registration (username and password) is required to access, and even read, these.
9. Open blogs or fora: where their posts are public for any user to read, even if registration might be required to post comments or initiate threads.
10. Intranet (exclusive space where registering is required to access it).

Depending on the presence or not of each of these features in the party website, these sites were categorised as having none, very low, low, medium, high, or very high participatory interactivity, in the way shown by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category in the scale</th>
<th>Websites included in each category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Those for which no kind of interactivity was possible at all between the user and the producer of the site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>Those that include an electronic form or an email address for contact but nothing else.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Those that provide the possibility of subscribing to a regular electronic newsletter or e-bulletin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Those that include some form of electronic surveys or e-polls (where the user can choose between a selection of closed answers).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Those that offer either direct links to official blogs or forums (from the party or MPs) in external websites, or the possibility for the user to express his or her opinions in an electronic guestbook (where comments can be posted, but they cannot be replied to by other users or by the producers of the site), or to comment to news or other sections of the site (but, again, without any possibility for reply).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>Those that allowed for real online debate between the users and also between users and producers, through the use of a blog or a forum where anyone could post and/or reply to other posts, regardless of whether registration was needed to read and/or to post in these.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The scale differentiates thus between three types of interactivity:
a. Bilateral (message form, email, ebulletin)
b. Feedback (online polls, guestbooks), differentiating in this case between closed answers (polls) and open answers (guestbooks / comments to news).
c. Multilateral (forum, blogs), distinguishing between exclusive and open spaces for online debate.

Besides these features, which serve as indicators of the visibility, participatory interactive content, and external networking of party websites, a number of other variables which contribute to contextualise these websites have been analysed. The comparative frames of this research go along two main dimensions. Differences among party websites are analysed from two perspectives: that of the political system the party operates in, and that of the particular attributes of parties themselves. In this sense, the political systems of the EU have been classified into different categories depending on:
  o The parliament the party operates in.
  o The geopolitical area the political system belongs to. The political systems of the EU have been divided onto the following areas:
    1. Western and North (including Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Austria and the UK);
    2. Mediterranean countries (Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Malta and Portugal);
    3. Scandinavian ones (Denmark, Sweden, Finland);
    4. Eastern (including the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania);
    5. and the European Parliament.
  o The age of democracy: parliaments were divided into
    1. 'Established democracies' (including all countries from the Western and North, Mediterranean, and Scandinavian noted above);
    2. 'Newer democracies' (which include all the parliaments that form part of the Eastern category above);

37 A complete list of these variables, as well as the coding frame of all of the survey, can be found in the Appendix III: Coding Scheme of the Web Survey.
- The rate of Internet access by households in 2007. (Source: Eurostat38).
  Based on this data, a variable of 'rate of Internet access by households aggregated' was built. In it, countries were grouped into six categories (from very low to very high) depending on their percentage of Internet access.
- The date of the last legislative election (up to Spring 2007) in the political system the party operates in.
- The type of electoral system: two systems of categorization are followed: that of International IDEA39 and the one proposed by Farrell (1997). Following these typologies, legislatures are classified, first, as proportional, non-proportional or mixed systems, and then more specifically as one of the following six categories: List proportional representation (LPR), First past the post (FPTP), Mixed member proportional system (MMP), Single transferable vote (STV), Two round system (TRS) and Parallel system.
- Turnout: average voter turnout in all elections since 1945 for that political system, in % of VAP (Voting Age Population). Again, the source for this data was International IDEA40. From this, a turnout aggregated variable was designed, in which countries were divided into five categories, from very low to very high, according to their turnout rates.
- Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita: with data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) referring to 2007, and in which GDP is expressed in US dollars per person41. A further GDP per capita aggregated variable was constructed, in which countries were classified from those with very low GDP per capita to those with very high, always in the context of the EU.
- Freedom of the Press: following Freedom House's 2007 survey, countries were categorized according to their degree of "Free Press"42. Systems were further divided according to their score in the survey from those with

officially a "Partly Free" press system to those with "Almost perfectly free"
one.

Four of these variables were not applicable to the EP case. These are: type of
electoral system, rate of turnout, level of economic wealth (GDP per capita), and
degree of freedom of the press. The websites from transnational political groups
operating at the EP level were therefore not taken into the account in the analysis
of these contextual factors.

Two attributes of parties have been considered for a comparative analysis:
size and political ideology of the party. Regarding size, the parties that are
analysed have been divided into the following categories:

- Major, minor, fringe and extra-parliamentarian parties, depending on the
  proportion of seats in parliament achieved by the party: the two parties that
  have most number of seats are labelled major; the third and fourth parties
  in proportion of seats are labelled minor; those parties that have achieved
  seats in parliament but are not within the top four are labelled fringe; and
  finally, the parties who did not achieve any seats in parliament are the
  extra-parliamentarian ones.

- According to the votes attained by the party in the latest legislative election
  (up to Spring 2007), the typology goes as follows: big parties are those who
  were within the two parties that achieved most votes in the latest election;
  medium parties are those who had the third and second places according
  to percentage of votes attained; those parties that were within the fifth and
  sixth with most votes were called small; and finally edge parties are those
  that, whilst achieving a percentage of votes, were not in within the six most
  voted parties.43

Regarding ideology, following Norris' (2001) typology44, parties have been
grouped into nine categories: extreme left, social democrats, greens, centre,
liberals, christian democrats, nationalists (far right), and others (including religious,
agrarian, and regional parties lacking another identification). Additionally, the
political affiliation of each party in the European Parliament has also been recorded
and is used as an additional indicator of the party’s ideological family.

43 In the cases where two parties had achieved the same percentage of votes/seats, they
were both put onto the same category. So for instance in some cases there are three “big”
parties (= within the “2” most voted parties).

44 Which in turn she took from “Elections around the world”, at the time included in Agora’s
website (www.agora.stm.it/elections/allinks.htm - the page does not exist any longer.)
3.4.2. The Online Forum (and Interviews)

Officials from nine European parties have been selected as the focus group for the more qualitative research method used by this thesis: the online forum and the interviews. These parties are:

- British Conservative Party (Con, UK): www.conservatives.com
- UK Liberal Democrats (L-D, UK): www.libdems.org.uk
- UK Independence Party (UKIP, UK): www.ukip.org
- Party of European Socialists (PES, EU): www.pes.org
- European Union Democrats (ED, EU): www.eudemocrats.org
- Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP; People’s Party of South Tyrol, ITA): www.svpartei.org
- Partidul Social Democrat (PSD; Social Democrat Party, ROM): www.psd.ro
- Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised (EER; Estonian Greens, EST): www.roheline.erakond.org
- Folkpartiet Liberalerna (FP; Liberal People’s Party, SWE): www.folkpartiet.se

These nine have been chosen so that a representation of different kinds of parties according to several criteria was achieved: see in this respect Table 2 below. In this sense, the case studies include:

- Parties that operate in trans-national (the European Parliament) as well as national (the British, Italian, Romanian, Estonian and Swedish) parliaments. All of these are parliaments that vary hugely in terms of their political system.
- Parties from very diverse geographical areas: Northern Europe (UK), Southern Europe (Italy), Scandinavia (Sweden) and Eastern Europe (Romania and Estonia).
- Parties that diverge widely in terms of their representational size: there is one extra-parliamentarian (UKIP), two fringe parties (EU Democrats and SVP), three minor parties (Lib-Dems, Estonian Greens and Sweden’s Folkpartiet), and three major parties (UK Conservatives, EU’s PES and Romanian’s PSD).
- Parties from all sides of the ideological spectrum (including Green, Liberal, Social-Democrat, Conservative, Regionalist and EU Critical parties).
Finally, the selected cases also reflect the differences that European party websites have in regards to their interactivity content. Almost half of the parties (four) scored “low” in the Scale of participatory interactivity created for the web survey undertaken as part of this research, whereas the rest achieved a “high” or “very high” label.

British parties are slightly overrepresented. This is due to a variety of reasons. On a practical note, British party officials were more willing to take part in an online forum where language was set to English. Additionally, it was considered that since most previous studies about party websites on the European context focused on the UK, British parties required special attention.

An online forum named “Use of the Internet by European Parties” ran online for four weeks from the 21st of January until the 17th February 2008. The forum was hosted in the University of Hull Virtual Learning Environment45, the language of communication was English, and it was only accessible to the researcher and the participants. The participants had been previously contacted by email and then invited to take part in the online debate. It is common in the literature when

Table 2: Main Characteristics of Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Interactivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives (Con)</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats (L-D)</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Independence Party (UKIP)</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>EU Critical</td>
<td>Extra-parliamentarian</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party of European Socialists (PES)</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>Social-Democrat</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Democrats (ED)</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>EU Critical</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People's Party of South Tyrol (SVP)</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Regionalist</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian's Social Democrats (PSD)</td>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>Social-Democrat</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonian Greens (EER)</td>
<td>Estonian</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden's Folkpartiet (FP)</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

45 Specifically, it was hosted in the Merlin group belonging to the MA in Legislatives Studies Online ran by the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Hull (http://merlin.hull.ac.uk/merlin). A group was created with the purposes of the forum, and each participant was given a username and a password to access the different features available (private messages, exchange area, which is where the forum took place, and so on.).
analysing the political uses of the Internet to focus on web surveys, on the one hand, or on interviews and/or surveys with citizens and/or political actors such as parliamentarians regarding their use of the Web. Officials, in this case party officials in charge of the IT policy or the website of the political actor in question – the party – tend to be overlooked. It is usually them, however, who take most of the crucial decisions about which features should be included – or maintained – in the party website, how this should be designed, how regularly updated, and so on. They have thus a lot to say about the intentions behind the inclusion – or not – of certain types of elements in their website, the functions attributed to these websites, and what are the main challenges faced by parties regarding their online strategies. For this reason, the participants invited to contribute to the online forum set up for this research were not just ordinary members of the party (in some cases, they were not even members) but instead personnel in charge of the IT policy or the website of the party. Some of them called themselves the webmasters of their sites, while others were the digital communications manager for the party, or for instance the person in charge of the online campaign strategy or of the communication area of the party46.

Following a presentation about the research project and the goals of the forum, questions were posted every three to four days and the participants were free to answer them at any time, with their contributions being openly visible by all the other members of the group. These questions ranged from an introductory “Who you are” to more specific queries regarding what features should a party website have, which were the functions of their own parties, and what did they think about the inclusion or not of interactive elements to encourage participation on their sites47. Discussions were facilitated by the researcher not only by setting up the questions, but also through replies to posts which opened up further lines for debate. Not taking into account the researcher's posts, a total of seventeen contributions were made, some of them of considerable length.

Online forums (effectively, online focus groups) make it possible for participants from different countries or locations to come together in one forum of discussion, with minimal costs both for the researcher and the participants. It is thus a method of research particularly suitable for large scope comparative studies as this one. However, it has been rarely – if at all – used by previous Internet scholars or political scientists in general. It is therefore worth singling out this

46 A comprehensive – though anonymous – list of all participants in the forum as well as their responsibilities within their party is included on Appendix IV.
47 Specifically, the online forum was structured around four broad themes: Who We Are, Features of Party Websites, Functions of Party Websites, and Interactivity and Participation.
innovative element of this thesis. Both the participants and the researcher felt that it was a very valuable experience, from which much was learnt not only by the author, but also by the party officials themselves.

In the week following the end of the forum, an email was sent to all participants thanking them for their participation and including five open questions to which they were asked to reply. Four interviews were successfully completed, adding valuable data to this research.

For reasons of anonymity, participants in the online forum have been given mock names (Mr A, Mr B, Mr C, and so on). In what follows, references to what any of them wrote either in the forum or through e-mail correspondence with the author will make use of these mock names. An explanation of which name belongs to which party – always in an anonymous way – is included in the Appendix IV of this thesis.
Chapter 4: Party websites: Online and Visible?

Parties are conservative organisations which take time to change their way of operating. This is why their relationship with the new media is, as it has been already described, a complicated one. On the one hand, European party officials have realised the vast potential opened up by the Internet and, as this chapter shows, have in their vast majority put their parties on the Net. On the other, however, there is no proof as to suggest that they have done this with any concrete strategy behind. The next chapter (five) analyses the content of European party websites with regards to their degree of interactivity and by doing so it will add some light to wether European parties rely or not on an online strategy. Chapter six looks in turn at the external networking of European party websites, according to the number of hyperlinks to external websites included in their sites. Prior to this analysis it is necessary to see however if parties in the EU have indeed gone online, and also the differences between their websites in terms of visibility or online presence. The first section of this chapter looks at the proportion of European parties with websites but it does not stop there. It also analyses the characteristics of those parties which did not have a website at the time the research was done (Spring 2007) to see if there are any patterns that may explain why a party decides not to setup a website.

The second, and largest, part of this chapter is dedicated to European party websites’ visibility. As a general rule, websites from political parties are not very visible when compared with other types of websites48. Online visibility can be measured by looking at the number of hyperlinks from other websites into a given website, which provides us with an indicator of the online presence or visibility of that site as well as of its traffic. Since much of Internet’s traffic is generated through search engines, websites with the highest number of inbound links attract more traffic than those with a lower number (Hindman et al., 2003). As such, ‘the number of links pointing to a site proves to be highly correlated with the number of visitors the site receives’ (Hindman et al., 2004: 4).

Party websites are expected to vary greatly between themselves, not only in terms of their actual content, but also of their degree of online presence or visibility. Looking at these differences between different kinds of parties and the

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48 See in this respect the final section of this chapter, which shows that on Alexa’s ranking of most visited websites, party sites lag very much behind other types of websites.
political systems they come from is of vital importance to understand how the
Internet is really affecting the way of functioning of European political parties. The
study of the Internet and its impact on contemporary politics cannot be analysed in
abstract, but instead by looking at how specific political actors are making use of it.
A first step towards understanding this use is by comparing the online behaviour of
parties that vary between themselves in terms of size or ideology. Seeing whether
these factors affect their use of the new media is of vital importance to be able to
make more general claims. Similarly, Internet politics do not act in a vacuum: they
are grounded on the specific offline contexts the political actors are based on. For
this reason, looking at the various characteristics from the various political systems
within the EU where parties operate in is also a necessary first step.

This chapter analyses the online presence and websites visibility of
European political parties through the presentation of original data that shows the
differences on party websites from various political systems, by grouping these in
the following categories: geopolitical area; age of democracy; rate of Internet
access; date of last legislative election; type of electoral system; voter turnout; level
of economic wealth; and degree of freedom of the press; and parties,
differentiating parties according to their size, both in terms of percentage of votes
and proportion of seats in parliament; the ideological family they belong to; and
their political adscription in the EP. When talking about party websites' visibility, the
differences between these depending on the size of the party are of great
relevance. One of the main propositions of the equalisation thesis has been that,
due to the special characteristics of the new media, the distance between bigger
and minor parties with regard to visibility will be reduced on the Web. Very small,
non-mainstream parties find it very difficult to be noticeable to the general public on
the traditional media sphere, where monetary resources are essential to be able to
be seen. Since these resources matter less on the Web, it has been argued, these
parties should be able to reduce the distance with the bigger, more powerful ones,
online. As this chapter shows, however, the findings from this study suggest that
money still makes a difference on the Web: major parties have websites that are
significantly more visible and that attract more traffic than those from the smaller
ones. This does not mean, per se, that the propositions from the equalisation
thesis are completely wrong: whereas major parties are more visible also on
cyberspace, further research is needed to evaluate whether the distance between
them and the smaller parties is actually reduced on the Web when compared with
the traditional media sphere. As Norris has put it, one of the main roles of party
websites may well be that of 'raising the visibility of minor and fringe parties' and
thus creating a ‘more egalitarian scenario’ (Norris, 2003: 23). Not an equal scenario in absolute terms, but a more egalitarian one compared to the situation in the offline media sphere.

Finally, the last section of this chapter presents a very brief overview of the visibility of European party websites when a different indicator than that of the number of links into a website is used: the traffic rank of party websites, as measured by Alexa 49.

4. 1. Which Parties are Online?

The vast majority of European political parties are online. Two hundred and seventy two parties were selected in the way described above for this study. Out of these, only eleven have been found not to have a website 50. In six cases the URL that was found for the party website did not work at the time when the research was done and so some of the data analysed in this research was not possible to be collected for these parties. In some parts of this analysis, these cases will be considered as missing ones. For the moment, they will be counted as parties having a website, as it is assumed that the sites were not working only temporarily.

Figure 1: Percentage of parties online

As shown on Figure 1, nearly 96% of the parties looked at had, thus, an official, individual website. These findings are in line with those from previous

49 www.alexa.com
50 To check whether parties had websites a variety of methods were used: search engines such as Google and MSN Search; as well as links from general websites such as Wikipedia.
studies (Jackson, 2004; Lusoli and Ward, 2003; Norris, 2001): parties in contemporary, established democracies have nearly all in block gone on to the Web. It is extremely rare for a party nowadays not to have a website.

Although it is safe to state categorically that the vast majority of parties have official websites, whether they have a clear – or common – strategy about what to do with this website or the functions they would like it to fulfil is a different matter. The first reason that comes to mind to explain why nearly all parties – major and minor, old and new, from all parliamentary systems in the EU – have gone to the Web is that of peer pressure: no party wants to be seen as staying behind in the new media race. New technologies have been received by parties, at the very least, and even by those who do not believe much in their use, as an added instrument for campaigning. Creating a website does, in principle, no harm in itself, whereas being seen as the only party without one could have negative electoral consequences. Hence, parties have jumped onto the Web, without necessarily having thought much about it, as authors such as (Gibson et al., 2003b; Roper, 1998) have already suggested. As is the case with other political actors such as parliamentarians, politicians within parties have felt the pressure of “everybody is doing it, so I have to.” It is what Trechsel et al. called the ‘bandwagon effect’: after their analysis of EU party websites they came to the conclusion that in the majority of cases is that a party starts building up sophisticated sites and the rest of parties in that country quickly follow (Trechsel et al., 2003).

Looking at the eleven parties that were found not to have a website in our survey may add some light into the reasons about why a party might decide not to have a website.

4.1.1. Differences on Parties Online according to their Political System

Regarding the political system the parties operate in, the eleven parties come from all kinds of legislatures: half of them from established democracies (such as France, Ireland or Italy), others from newer ones (Bulgaria, Lithuania), and there are two which operate in a supra-national system (the European

51 It has been argued that an important reason why European MPs have setup individual websites is simply ‘the need to have a website’ because ‘everybody else has one’ (Vicente-Merino, 2007: 449). The same argument can be applied to parties and other political actors.

52 These parties are: Démocratie Libérale (FR), Rassemblement par la France (FR), Comhar Criostai (IRE), Unione dei Democratici Cristiani-Nuovo PSI (ITA), Autonomie Liberté Démocratique (ITA), Hunter’s Political Movement (CYP), Lietuvos Lenku Rinkimu Akcija (LIT), Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty Group (EP), European Anticapitalist Left (EP), Balgarski Naroden Sajuz (BUL), Ebpopoma (BUL).
The type of parliament or geographical area a party operates in does not seem thus to make any difference on the chances of a party not having a website.

There are however some similarities between these parties regarding the rates of Internet access by household in the political systems where they operate. Most of the parties (eight) belong to legislatures where the rate of Internet access was either low (between 40 and 49%) or very low (less than 40%). The remaining three worked in systems where the rate of Internet access was average (Ireland and the European Union as a whole). Somehow logically, all of the parties from countries with high and very high rates of Internet access had a website.

The date of the last legislative elections (up to spring 2007) could in theory be an explicative factor of why parties decide to go online. If party websites are seen, primordially, as campaign tools and if it was found that all parties without websites operate in systems where the last legislative election had taken place a long time ago, then it could be claimed that the Internet was not yet sufficiently established at the time of this election, and thus parties had not felt the need to set up websites. Or the other way round: if it was found that parties operating in legislatures where the latest election had taken place a long time ago, and thus where a legislative election was due in a short time, an alternative reasoning could be that parties within those systems had more interest in setting up a website than those from within legislatures where there was no need to prepare a strong electoral campaign at that moment. Looking at the date of the last legislative election might be therefore of interest when comparing the actual features that European party websites actually have, an analysis that is developed later on. For the moment, however, it does not add any information about why certain parties had not set up a website at the time of the survey: there is no consistent pattern within these parties regarding this variable; as it can be seen on Table 4, there is a great variability. Half (five) of the groups act in parliaments which had their latest legislative election recently, in 2005 and 2006; whereas the other half (six) operate in legislatures which had been elected at an earlier time, in 2002 and 2004, and in which, presumably, elections were due in short time. This apparently made no difference on parties' behaviour regarding, exclusively, their online presence to the most basic degree (having or not a website). It remains to be seen, however, whether it had any influence on the actual content of party websites.

The type of electoral system of a legislature affects greatly the composition and behaviour of its party system. It is therefore logical to expect that parties from different electoral systems will behave in a diverse way also on the Web. At this
point, however, in terms of having or not a website, the type of electoral system a party operates in does not seem to make any difference: disregarding the political groups operating in the EP, the rest of the parties that did not have a website in spring 2007 belong to a wide variety of electoral systems: single transferable vote (one), parallel (one), two-round system (two) and list proportional representation (LPR) (five). There is no consistent pattern to be able to extrapolate from this data anything that may suggest that parties from a certain kind of electoral system have more or less chances to be online. These findings seem to be in line with those from Trechsel et al. (Trechsel et al., 2003) who showed that the nature of the electoral system made no difference in the sophistication of party and parliamentary websites from various EU countries. It remains to be seen, however, whether the kind of electoral system the party operates in has an effect or not regarding the visibility or content of party websites. At the moment, the data only tells us that this indicator is not affecting whether parties have decided to go or not online. Whereas those parties coming from LPR systems are proportionally more present in this subgroup of “parties not having a website”, LPR is the preferred system in European legislatures (74.1% of European parliaments have opted for it) and thus most of the parties (74.8%) of our total sample belong to it. No conclusions can therefore be drawn from the fact that more than half of the parties that did not have a website in spring 2007 belong to this type of system. If anything, they are underrepresented.

Voter turnout in elections is one of the most obvious indicators of the level of political participation in a country, if by no means the only one. Previous studies, most famously Pippa Norris, have shown (Norris, 2001, 2002a) that typically the most politically active citizens are the ones also making more use of the Internet for political purposes. On the other hand, Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (Gibson et al., 2005) proved that citizens who are utilising the new media politically are not the same that tend to participate the most through traditional, institutionalised channels. Keeping this in mind, the relationship between how active a society is in terms of traditional political participation (indicated by its most basic sign: voter turnout) and the behaviour of parties online might be a significant one. The studies mentioned above looked at this question from a demand point of view, that is, they looked at it from the viewpoint of the citizen. This thesis, as it has been explained, focuses however on the supply side. In this sense, it is of great interest to see whether party websites (supply) change according to the differences in political participation of the citizens they represent (demand). For the moment, the data shows us that in terms of setting up websites, the rate of voter turnout in the
systems the parties operate in at a first glance does not seem to exert much influence in whether parties set up or not websites. Not taking into account the groups operating at the EP level, the rest of parties without websites come both from systems with very high (in 2 cases) and low (in 3 cases) rates of voter turnout. Looking closely at the data, however, shows that the two parties from systems with a very high voter turnout are both Italian ones. Voting is compulsory in Italy, which explains its high rate of electoral participation (the highest of the EU, at 92.5%). It is therefore an atypical case. Not taking the Italian parties into account, the result is that all of the remaining parties without websites on spring 2007 come from systems with medium or low levels of political participation in terms of voter turnout. Or, in other words, that all parties (except the two Italian exceptions) operating in legislatures with high or very high turnout rates had set up websites in spring 2007.

The level of economic wealth of a country may well affect the behaviour of its political actors with regard to ICT. From her study in 2003, Norris concluded that in the case of Europe there was a clear North/South divide concerning the use of new media by parties (Norris, 2003), which she attributed both to the different levels of Internet penetration and economic development between the northern and southern areas of Europe. A different comparative study applying to the EU from the same year (that of Trechsel et al., 2003) concluded, however, that differences in economic wealth did not play a role in the sophistication of European party websites. In the US context, Farmer and Fender (2005) arrived to the same conclusion and did not find economic level to be a good predictor for the differences found in party websites. This seems to be the case also with regards to the question of which European parties had not set up a website by spring 2007: not taking into account the groups operating at the EP level, the rest of the parties (eight) are spread out from within a range of systems with various levels of GDP per capita. Slightly more than half (five) of them come from countries with high or very high rates of GDP per capita, while the rest are from countries with medium (one), low (one) and very low (two) levels of GDP per capita. Not only does our data tell us that the level of economic wealth is not a good predictor when looking at which parties had not set up websites in spring 2007, but if anything it shows that most of these parties without websites actually came from systems with a level of economic development above the average of the EU countries.
To date, no researcher has looked into the relationship between the level of freedom of the press\footnote{Freedom of the Press is a survey done yearly by Freedom House (http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16 Freedom House, Accessed October 2008) which looks at the degree of press freedom around the world.} in a democracy and the use of the Internet by its political actors, and yet the degree of press independence in a country is an important indicator of the state of the media environment in particular and its civic society more generally. It seems therefore logical to explore whether parties have a different relation with the new media depending on the level of Free Press the legislatures they operate in have. In the context of the EU, most countries have what the survey calls a situation of ‘Free Press’\footnote{With the exception of Bulgaria and Romania, which have a ‘Partly Free’ press according to the survey in 2007.}. For the purposes of this research, and to increase the degree of comparison, the category of ‘Free Press’ has been further divided into subcategories, ranging from ‘almost perfectly free’ systems to those with ‘free but almost partly free’. Not taking into account those groups acting at the EP level, it is significant to point out that all of the parties coming from systems with a ‘very free’ and ‘almost perfectly free’ scores had websites in 2007. In two cases the parties came from a democracy, the Bulgarian, where the state of the press is partly free. In other two cases they came from Italy, a country officially positioned within the ‘Free Press’ category but which borders the ‘Partly free’ one\footnote{Indeed, Freedom House’s report from 2008 (one year after the one utilised in this research), made public on the 1st May 2009, downgrades Italy to a Partly Free category (as published on The Guardian, 2nd May 2009, p.26.).}. The remaining parties come from legislatures with low (in three cases: one from Cyprus and two from France) or medium (one from Ireland and another one from Lithuania) levels of Free Press (always inside the Free Press category).

Summarizing, the characteristics of the political systems of those parties who did not have a website on spring 2007 are as follows:

Table 3: Characteristics of the political systems of the European parties without a website on spring 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Geopolitical area</th>
<th>Internet Penetration</th>
<th>Year of last election</th>
<th>Electoral System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balgarski Naroden Sajuz (BUL)</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>LPR Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebropoma (BUL)</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>LPR Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter’s Political Movement (CYP)</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>LPR Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Démocratie Libérale (FR)</td>
<td>Western &amp; North</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>TRS Non-proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rassemblement pour la France (FR)</td>
<td>Western &amp; North</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>TRS Non-proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comhar Criostal</td>
<td>Western &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>STV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\footnote{Freedom of the Press is a survey done yearly by Freedom House (http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16 Freedom House, Accessed October 2008) which looks at the degree of press freedom around the world.}
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>GDP Per Capita</th>
<th>Level of Free Press(^{56})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balgarski Naroden Sajuz (BUL)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebropoloma (BUL)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter’s Political Movement (CYP)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Démocratie Libérale (FR)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rassemblement pour la France (FR)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comhar Criostai (IRE)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unione dei Democratici Cristiani-Nuovo PSI (ITA)</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomie Liberte Démocratie (ITA)</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lietuvos Lenkų Rinkimu Akcija (LIT)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty (EP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Anticapitalist Left (EP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: rate of Internet penetration from Eurostat, type of electoral system and turnout from International IDEA, GDP from IFM and level of Free Press from Freedom House.

NOTE: No data relevant for the EP for some variables.

With regard to the parties that had not set up a website on spring 2007, the data shows that the kind of parliament they come from in terms of geopolitical area and age of democracy does not make any difference. Similarly, the indicators of type of electoral system, economic wealth and date of last legislative elections do not seem to be conditioning whether parties had decided to go online or not. There are some similarities between the parties without a website concerning three indicators: rate of Internet penetration, level of turnout, and of Free Press of their political systems.

- Concerning the rate of Internet penetration, all of the parties from countries with high and very high rates of Internet access had a website in spring 2007.

---

\(^{56}\) The values for this variable are as follows: 1 = almost perfectly free; 2 = 'very' free; 3 = 'average' free; 4 = 'low' free; 5 = free, but leading towards partly free; 6 = partly free.
With regard to voter turnout, all parties (except the two Italian exceptions) operating in legislatures with high or very high turnout rates had set up websites in spring 2007.

Finally, looking at the level of freedom of press, the data shows that all of the parties coming from systems with a ‘very free’ and ‘almost perfectly free’ scores had their own websites in spring 2007.

It remains to be seen whether these indicators will continue to play a role regarding the visibility, external and internal characteristics – most importantly, in terms of their interactivity or opportunities for political participation. For now, attention is paid to the characteristics of the parties themselves (size and ideology) in relation to those parties not having set up a website in spring 2007.

4.1.2. Differences on Parties Online according to Party Characteristics

Regarding the characteristics of the parties themselves, the main finding from this research is that there are two - related - features that do seem to be shared by all parties without a website in spring 2007: the eleven parties are what can be called marginal parties, both in terms of size (according to votes and seats obtained in the last legislative election) and ideologically.

In relation to their electoral size, all of these eleven parties are what is labelled in this study as edge parties.57 Regarding their parliamentary presence or representational size, all of these parties belong to the category of fringe or extra-parliamentarian parties. That is, none of these parties were within the four parties with most seats in their respective parliaments. Indeed, four of them had not achieved any seats at all in the latest election.

With regard to their position ideologically, the vast majority (nine out eleven) did not have an adscription to any of the political groups that operate in the European Parliament. In the case of those two that did, one of them belonged to the Confederal Group of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left and the other one was actually a group in itself, the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty Group. Both of these groups are far from being considered mainstream ones in ideological terms. In the case of the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty Group it is worth

57 Out of four possible categories, ‘edge parties’ are, in the typology used in this research, which was described in detail in the Methodological chapter above, those parties that are not within the six most voted parties in each system.
noting, however, that this was a very recently created group in the time of the survey, something which may have played a role for the fact of it not having a website at the time\textsuperscript{58}.

None of these parties belonged to a mainstream ideological family such as social-democrats, liberals or conservatives. Instead, the majority (seven) belonged to the category of “other” (which includes religious, agrarian, regional, one-item parties and all others lacking another identification) or “missing” (when it was not possible for the researcher to find any ideological adscription for the party with the resources available). The ones that were typified into a party category belonged to the Christian-democrats family (two cases), the extreme left (one case) and the nationalist-far right group (one case).

Summarizing the main characteristics of those parties and party groups operating in the European Union that did not have a website in spring 2007:

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Party & Size according to Votes & Size according to Seats & Ideological family & Affiliation in the EP \\
\hline
Balgarski Naroden Sajuz & Edge & Fringe & Missing & Missing  \\
\hline
Ebpopoma & Edge & Extra – parliamentarian & Missing & Missing  \\
\hline
Hunter’s Political Movement & Edge & Extra – parliamentarian & Others & None  \\
\hline
Démocratie Libérale & Edge & Fringe & Missing & Missing  \\
\hline
Rassemblement pour la France & Edge & Fringe & Missing & Missing  \\
\hline
Comhar Criostai & Edge & Extra – parliamentarian & Christian – Democrat & None  \\
\hline
Unione dei Democratici Cristiani- Nuovo PSI & Edge & Fringe & Christian – Democrat & Missings  \\
\hline
Autonomie Liberté Démocratique & Edge & Fringe & Others & None  \\
\hline
Lietuvos Lenku Rinkimu Akcija & Edge & Fringe & Others & None  \\
\hline
Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty & Edge & Fringe & Nationalist (extreme right) & ITS  \\
\hline
European Anticapitalist Left & Edge & Extra – parliamentarian & Extreme Left & EUL-NGL  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

NOTE that Missing cases in the columns of “Ideology” and “Affiliation in the EP” are those for which it was not possible for the researcher to find to which category, if any in the case of EP affiliation, the party in question belonged to. It should not be mistaken with the category of “None” when applying to EP affiliation: in this case it was found (using a variety of methods: search engines such as Google, information from the Electoral Resources

\textsuperscript{58} The group was approved in January 2007 (http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=EN&type=IMPRESS&reference=20070112IPR01903). The survey was undertaken only a few months after this. As far as September 2008, the group did not yet have a site. As from October 2008 they do: http://indemgroup.eu/7/.
Although the sample is too small to allow for generalisations – eleven parties out of two hundred and seventy two is not a big proportion – the data does tell us, quite strikingly, that in spring 2007 in Europe:

1. all of the major parties had set up a website, and
2. that the only common characteristics of those who had not an official website are that:
   a) most of them belonged to political systems where the rates of Internet penetration were low or very low, the level of turnout in elections medium or low, and the degree of press freedom was not very or almost perfectly free;
   b) they were very small parties in terms of size (both according to percentage of votes and seats in parliament); and
   c) that they were non-mainstream in terms of the ideological family they belonged to.

These results are in line with the normalisation thesis outlined above which states that the inequalities between political actors – in terms of strength, power, visibility, presence, etc. – will be replicated also in the online realm. Contrary to those who maintained that the arrival of new ICT would equalise the political sphere, at least its online face, and that it would be the smaller actors – such as minor and non-mainstream parties – who will make the most of the new media, our data suggest that in terms of the basic first step – having or not a website – major parties do dominate. In a study from British party websites in 1998 it was already found out that non-parliamentary parties had been relatively slow to set an online presence (Gibson and Ward, 2000a). Our data confirms this trend to the European level. This, could be claimed, is hardly surprising: the more the resources, the easier it is to set up and maintain a website. However, the cost of setting up a website is near to nothing, while the potential advantages that it offers for parties on the edge of the political spectrum to be used as a platform that cannot be found in traditional media – monopolised by the bigger actors – largely outdo these costs. Looking at the data, it seems that this argument cannot be applied to all smaller actors. For some reasons, these eleven parties had decided that not-creating a website was a better choice than creating one – for setting up a website nowadays is a matter of choice or political strategy; the costs are so low that they cannot be used as an argument not to be online. A different matter is that of maintaining their
website. On this matter, there is no limit to how much time and resources one wants to dedicate to their online presence. Perhaps these parties without website decided that it was better for them not to have a website at all, rather than to have too much of a basic, 'cheap' one. If we consider parties to be focused on electoral competition, then they may have thought that a website that looks comparatively bad to those of their competitors would do less for them in terms of campaign than no website at all. These parties were contacted (on the 27th October 2008) asking them for an explanation as to why it had been decided not to have a website at the time. However, nobody replied.

On the other hand, before concluding from this finding that the claims from the normalisation thesis were right, whereas those from the equalisation one were wrong, it is worth pointing out that there are in absolute terms many more very small parties in Europe than major ones. In our sample, there are 115 websites from parties that have been categorised as big or medium and 157 from small and edge parties. That the eleven parties which did not have a website in the EU on 2007 belong to these latter categories is thus proportionally logical.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that over a year after the survey, over half of these parties have set up websites. In October 2008 the only parties that remained without websites in the EU were the French Démocratie Libérale, the Irish Comhar Criostai, the Cyprian Hunter's Political Movement, and the Bulgarian's Balgarski Naroden Sajuz and Ebpopana.

Looking at the six parties whose websites existed but which were not working at the time of the study, most of them belong to the categories of small or edge parties according to the percentage of votes attained in the latest election for their parliaments. Also, most of them are parties operating in newer democracies from Eastern Europe. Regarding the rates of Internet access of the countries the parties belonged to, in four cases the systems had very low rates and in two of the cases, average. Therefore, all of the parties belonging to political systems with high or very high rates of Internet access had working websites in spring 2007. Nevertheless, this is probably mere anecdotic data: the number of cases is too low to make any generalisations possible, and, moreover, five out of the six websites were working on September 2008, which probably means that the fact that the

59 These parties are: Anorthotikon Komma Ergazemenou Laou (CYP), Enomeni Dimokrates (CYP), Latvijas Pirma Partija & Latvijas Cels (LAT), Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka (SLO), Obedineni Demokratici Sili (BUL), Partidul România Mare (ROM).
60 The only one that continued not to work was the Bulgarian Obedineni demokratisci sili’s website.
sites were not working on the specific time when the research was realised was only a temporary error and one should not look further into it. Even when it was found that the sites were working at a later time, they were not looked into and the data regarding their content was not taken into account, as it has been considered that to keep the same timeframe for all the data collection – and to obtain, thus, a real snapshot of the Web in a very particular time – was more important than to add supplementary data from these websites.

4. 2. Visibility of European Party Websites

Most European parties, in any case, regardless of their size, political system they operate in, or ideological orientation, have established a Web presence. A different matter, however, is how visible these websites are. Whereas new ICT facilitate in unprecedented ways the publication side of communication – it is extremely easy both in terms of skill and economic costs to create a website –, the new technologies do not guarantee that the message will make the full path from the emissary – the party website – to the recipient – the public. The vast majority of parties may be on the Web, but this does not mean that they are all equally reaching to the citizen: some websites are more visible than others.

4. 2. 1. Inbound Links

To measure the visibility of European party websites, the main indicator used in this study is the number of links into each site from other ones, which was calculated using the software freely provided by Alexa61. Following Hindman, the findings here presented are to be read based on the claim that the higher the number of external websites linking in to a party website, then the bigger the amount of traffic that it is being directed to this site. Thus as a result the more the visible the site is (Hindman et al., 2003, 2004).

European parties have on average 121 links from other websites. This figure is not representative on its own, though, as a small proportion of parties with a very high number of links coming into their websites distort the average. As it can be seen in Table 5, not taking into account the missing cases62 half of the websites

62 Those parties that did not have a website at the time of the study, or which website was not working, or for which Alexa could not find any links coming into them.
analysed had less than 75 links from other websites and the majority of websites are grouped on the 26 to 50 links-in category.

Table 5: Links-in into European party websites in 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of links – in</th>
<th>Frequency (websites)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – 10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 – 25</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 – 75</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76 – 100</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 – 150</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151 – 200</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>81.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201 – 300</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301 – 400</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>93.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>401 – 500</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>96.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501 – 750</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>98.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>751 – 1000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>99.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001 – 1500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The party which had more links into their website at the time when the survey was done was the British Labour Party, with a total of 1,040. Considering the number of links into a website as an indicator of its visibility, then it can be asserted that the British Labour Party had the most visible party website in Europe on spring 2007. This is, again, a major, mainstream ideologically speaking party. The political system it belongs to is an established democracy from the Western and North area of the EU, with a non-proportional electoral system (FPTP), a medium⁶³ rate of turnout (74.9%), a “medium” level of Free Press (within the category of “Free Press”), a high rate of Internet penetration (67%) and a very high GDP per capita. The date of the last legislative election for this system is 2005.

Before jumping to conclusions about how these characteristics may affect the visibility of a party website for a given political system, it is worth examining the number of links-in that the rest of the British parties have coming in. If it was the case that the rest of British parties do not have a high number of links into their websites, then it cannot be claimed that the British political system may be encouraging the creation of highly networked and visible party sites. The data tells us, however, that British political parties have on average 393 links coming into their websites. This is a very high average, so there is indeed some ground to suggest that the particularities of the British political system encourage parties to create highly visible websites. On the other hand, the standard deviation (332) is also quite high, which tells us that there are some extreme cases within the British party websites that are distorting the mean. In any case, not taking into account “Health Concern” which indeed is more of a one-issue political group than a

⁶³ According to the categorisation of political systems depending on their level of voter turnout, in which systems have been labelled from having a very low to a very high rate of voting turnout, as described on chapter three.
traditional party, no British party had less than 164 links coming into their websites. This is, again, a very high figure. In fact, taking Health Concern out of this sample of British parties increases the average number of links-in for British party websites to 423. The standard deviation continues to be high (326) though. Looking further into the data it is worth noting that:

- On the one hand, the websites from the three main parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal-Democrats) have all a very high number of links-in: respectively, 1040, 903, and 855. Staff in charge of the websites for both the British Conservative and the Liberal – Democrat party websites took part in the online forum developed for this study. Both, more so than the rest of participants, emphasised in more than one occasion the importance of a party website needing to fulfil the demands of a variety of audiences, and how challenging this was. Perhaps this greater acknowledgement of the diversity of audiences a party website attracts comes from the fact that British party websites are so highly visible. Such a large amount of links coming in to their websites means that their sites are highly viewed. Logically, the larger the amount of viewers, the greater the diversity of these viewers – the audience – and thus it makes sense for the staff in charge of these websites to be more concerned about the necessity to fulfil all these diverse demands.

- On the other, an extra-parliamentarian party with only a 1% share of the votes, the Green party, had also a highly visible website, with 499 links coming in. As it has been pointed out earlier on in this thesis, Green parties have been pioneers in using the Web for networking. The following chapters further confirm this.

At this point it is worth remembering a study from 2003 by Gibson, Margolis et al. which was already mentioned above and which found that in the UK links into the websites of the three biggest parties were at least three times greater than those into the most linked minor parties (Gibson et al., 2003a). Disregarding again Health Concern, our own data for 2007 confirms almost exactly those findings: the aggregated number of links into the three major parties (2,798) is almost exactly three times higher than that figure (925) for the three smaller

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64 Online forum *Use of the Internet by European parties* Jan-Feb 2008. For more details on this forum, please see the final section of chapter three, as well as Appendix IV.

65 See (Conway and Dörner, 2004; Gibson et al., 2003b; Hillwatch, 2005; Norris, 2003).

66 In a later study, from 2005, and also for the same, UK, context, the authors found that major parties continued to dominate the online political sphere in terms of presence or links into their sites (Lusoli et al., 2006).
parties. The implications of this, however, for the debate between equalisation and normalisation thesis are not straightforward. As it has already been argued, it cannot be expected – contrary to those first claims by the most utopians of the Internet scholars – that minor parties would ever achieve an equal presence to the major ones in the online political sphere. Resources matter, also on cyberspace. What is interesting is to see whether the new media are creating a “more equal” scenario between the parties, rather than a completely equal one in absolute terms. In this sense, the three major UK parties are more than three times more visible in the offline media than the three smaller ones. Therefore, as Norris suggests, ICT may well be thus introducing some equalising trends in which the visibility of minor and fringe parties is raised, compared to traditional media (Norris, 2003). Or, in Gibson, Ward and Lusoli’s words “the exposure granted them [smaller parties] through the web is comparatively much greater that they can obtain in print or other electronic versions” (Gibson et al., 2003c: 179).

Regardless of the differences between major and minor parties, it seems in any case that the characteristics of the British political system encourage all its parties to develop highly visible and networked websites. It remains to be seen which characteristics of the political systems are the ones that encourage – or not – their parties to create highly visible websites. This analysis is developed below from a comparative point of view taking into account all of the EU parliamentary systems.

On the other side of the spectrum, two parties had only one link each to their websites: the Communist Party of Luxembourg and the Socialist Group in the European Parliament. The latter case, however, is a special one. The PES (Party of European Socialists) has two websites, one for the group (www.socialistgroup.eu) and a different, much more used (www.pes.org) and also highly visible with 294 links from other websites, for the political group in the EP. The content of both sites was looked at when collecting data about the features included in party websites for this research. Disregarding, therefore, the Socialist Group’s site because of its special status, it remains the Communist Party of Luxembourg, which, according to the classification used in this research as explained in the Methodological section, is a small, edge, extra-parliamentarian party from an extreme ideological family, as having the less visible party website in

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67 The three smaller parties (according to our classification of parties in terms of size) are Respect, UKIP and the Green party. The later two are extra-parliamentarian ones.

68 Less than 10% of the parties had websites with over 200 links coming in, as it can be seen in Table 5, so with 294 links coming in it can be said that the PES has a highly visible website.
Looking at its political context, Luxembourg belongs to the same geopolitical group than the UK: Western and North. It is also an established democracy with a very high level of GDP per capita and its last legislative election was in 2005. It has a lower rate of turnout than the UK but a higher rate of Internet penetration. In terms of the electoral system it is very different than the British one, for Luxembourg's system is a list proportional system of representation one and the UK a first past the post, and thus non-proportional one. Looking at the links into the websites of all the parties selected for this study show that all parties acting in the Luxembourg parliament have indeed very low rates of links into their websites: the average figure is 32. The standard deviation is also relatively low, which confirms that there is not a great variance between Luxembourian parties in terms of visibility or online presence. The party with the highest number (77) of links coming into its website is a major, established one. The rest have all less than 40. The data so far thus suggests that differences in terms of online visibility of European political parties may have more to do with the type of political system they operate in – and crucially the electoral system – than with the size or ideology of the parties themselves. This hypothesis is explored more in-depth below.

4. 2. 1. a) Differences according to the Political System the party operates in

This section looks at the differences in visibility of political parties from various political systems within the EU. On a first place, these systems have been grouped according to their type of democracy (established, newer, or that from the EU itself). From here, countries have been subsequently grouped in four geopolitical areas (plus the EP). The rest of the comparative variables that are analysed are: rate of Internet penetration; date of the latest legislative election; type of electoral system; rate of voter turnout; level of economic wealth; and
degree of freedom of the press. For the last four, parties operating in the EP were not taken into account.

As illustrated on Table 6, parties in established European democracies⁶⁹ have on average almost three times more links coming in to their websites than those from newer ones⁷⁰, and more than double than those belonging to party groups operating in the EP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliamentary System</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Established Democracies</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>154(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newer Democracies</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>82(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Parliament</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>22(4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings confirm the need for comparative research: it is evident that there are structural, offline, factors that affect the behaviour of parties online. That parties from the most established democracies in Europe have websites as much as three times more visible than those from the newer ones cannot be due to mere chance. Looking at the most relevant characteristics from these systems, as this section does below, adds some light into which are those traits affecting online party behaviour.

Breaking down the “Established democracies” group, according to the geopolitical area of each parliament, we find that parties acting in the Western and the northern countries of the EU almost double those operating in the Mediterranean and the Scandinavian areas in terms of links into their websites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geopolitical Area</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western and North⁷¹</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>76(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediterranean⁷²</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>50(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian⁷³</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>28(0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern⁷⁴</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>82(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Parliament</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>22(4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁶⁹ Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, and the UK.
⁷⁰ The Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania.
⁷¹ Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Austria and the UK.
⁷² Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Portugal.
⁷³ Denmark, Sweden, Finland.
⁷⁴ Same as the group of “Newer democracies” above (see footnote 76)
Parties from parliaments in the Western and the Northern geographical areas of the EU are thus considerably more visible than those from other European regions. The most striking differences are between this zone and the Eastern one: parties from the Western and Northern Europe are almost four times more visible than those from the Eastern countries. Contrary to Norris, thus, who in 2003 had described a North/South divide in Europe regarding the characteristics of parties' websites (Norris, 2003), this divide nowadays seems to have moved towards the Eastern/Western axis, at least in terms of websites visibility.

According to data collected by Eurostat on November 2007\(^{75}\), Eastern countries had the lowest rates of Internet access per household in the EU in 2007: almost 70% of the countries scoring "Very low" in the variable "Rates of Internet access in the EU" belonged to the Eastern region. As Table 8 shows, none of the countries included in the Eastern area had high or very high rates of Internet access. Moreover, all of the Mediterranean countries had either low or very low rates. At the other side of the spectrum, only two areas had countries that classified into the "Very high" score of Internet access: those countries belonging to the Scandinavian and the Western and North areas. Indeed, most of the countries from the Western and North (40.5%) had a high rate of Internet access, whereas in the Scandinavian region most of the countries (64.3%) scored "Very high".

Table 8: Differences in rates of Internet access by households between geographical areas in the EU in 2007, % within geographical area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographical Area</th>
<th>Very low (&lt; 40%)</th>
<th>Low (40-49%)</th>
<th>Average (50-59%)</th>
<th>High (60-69%)</th>
<th>Very high (&gt;70%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western and North</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurostat and own classification of geopolitical areas.

These differences in the rates of Internet access among European regions appear thus to be a plausible explanation to the differences found in terms of visibility between party websites among EU areas. If this is the case, an earlier claim by Norris, stating that "the strongest and most significant indicator of the presence of all parties online is the technological diffusion, measured by proportion

of the population online' (Norris, 2001), would be confirmed \(^7\). Nonetheless, as we can see in Table 9, when one looks at the average number of links-in for each of the categories regarding rates of Internet access, there does not seem to be much of a relation between the two variables: on average websites from parties belonging to countries with a low rate of Internet access have, for instance, more than double the number of links of those from countries with an average rate. These findings are in line, once again, with studies such as those from Trechsel et al. (2003) and Farmer and Fender (2005) who found that the levels of Internet penetration rate made no difference in the quality of political actors’ websites. More accordingly with Norris’ thesis, however, the most visible websites were those of parties acting in areas with high and very high rates of Internet access.

Table 9: Differences in the average number of links-in by country’s Rate of Internet Access

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internet Access</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very low (&lt; 40%)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>42 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (40-49%)</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>70 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (50-59%)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>34 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (60-69%)</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>42 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high (&gt;70%)</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>45 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To be more precise, Table 10 shows the average number of links-in to party websites for each of the 27 EU countries plus that for political groups operating in the EU.

Table 10: Average number of links-in to party websites for each political system in the EU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Geographical Area</th>
<th>Internet access</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>7 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>12 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>7 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^7\) Gibson and Ward also came to the conclusion, after an analysis of Australian party websites, that the rate of Internet was an explanatory factor for the differences found between these websites in the various Australian states (Gibson and Ward, 2003).
As illustrated on Table 10, above, the UK and Germany are the two legislatures with the most visible party websites. The average number of links into their party websites is very high: 393 for the British case and 386 for the German. In line with what the data told us above, both countries belong to the North and Western geopolitical area and are both established democracies. It is safe to claim that they are quite alike political systems: they also share a very high level of GDP per capita and a "medium" level of Free Press, and for both systems the date of the last legislative election at the time of this study was 2005. Germany slightly outdoes the UK in terms of turnout and rate of Internet penetration. In terms of the electoral system, they diverge, with the British system being a traditional majoritarian one (FPTP) and the German a mixed system. Interestingly, none of them are proportional systems. Germany came also on top in terms of the
sophistication of their party and parliamentarian websites in Trechsel survey of European political websites (Trechsel et al., 2003).

On the other side, the legislature with the least visible party websites is Bulgaria. Again in line with what was described above, this country belongs to the Eastern geopolitical region of our survey and it is not an established democracy. It is however significant to point out that, once again, those countries with the most visible party websites are also those for which the standard deviation in terms of number of links-in is quite high. That is, it is in these systems where we find the most diversity between their party websites in terms of visibility. In the UK case, taking out the two extremes (the Labour party, with 1040 links into its website and Health Concern, with 26) still results on a very high mean in terms of links-in (368) with the standard deviation (275) remaining very high. For the German case, taking out the two parties with the highest (CDU, with 702) and the lowest (REP, with 55) numbers of links into their sites results on a very high mean (388) and a high, if however lower, standard variation of 210. It is therefore confirmed that party websites from both countries diverse greatly among themselves in terms of visibility.

Looking at the values for the standard deviation between the different countries, we find that as a general rule, the higher the average number of links into party websites, the higher the standard deviation. The relationship between average number of links into party websites for a given political system and the standard deviation is indeed of high statistical significance: with a value of Pearson's R of 0.934. The two variables are thus clearly correlated in a positive way. This means that in the political systems with the most visible party websites (the UK and Germany) these are also the most diverse between them (as they have the highest standard deviation values). This can be best illustrated looking at Figure 2, below:
Figure 2 shows in particular that:

- The relation between average number of links into party website and the standard deviation is a clear, positive one. The higher the mean value for links into party websites in a political system, the higher the standard deviation is for that same legislature. This may be due to the fact that in those systems where parties have highly visible websites, there is also a strong difference between parties. As it will be discussed below, it is interesting to note that the three legislatures with most visible party sites have non-proportional electoral systems (UK and France) or a mixed one (Germany). It may well be that in these systems the differences between minor and major parties are more striking than in the rest. An alternative explanation is that, contrary to the argument proposed by Trechsel et al. (2003), in systems where some parties have understood the importance of being visible online not all of them have followed. Instead of a “bandwagon effect” it would seem that in these legislatures only some parties have decided to make their websites more visible. Whereas the rest will
converge, only time will tell. Finally, this may not be due to the parties’ strategies at all but instead to the characteristics of the political and media spheres.

- The UK and Germany clearly stand out as the countries with the most visible websites by a strong difference. In both cases the average number of links into their party websites is higher than 380. The next legislature in the line, France, has “only” 235.

- Grouped in the bottom left corner we find those countries for which parties have less links into their websites. Most of these belong to the geopolitical category of “Eastern” countries.

- Approximately half of the countries, and also the European Parliament, have parties which have on average less than 100 links coming into their websites.

The date of the last legislative election in each of the European political systems did not seem to make a difference on whether its parties had decided or not to set up a website. Similarly, as Table 11 shows, the visibility of party websites does not appear to be affected by how close the next election was due.

Table 11: Visibility of party websites, according to Date of Last Legislative Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of last legislative election</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>17 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>15 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>74 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>54 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>80 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>18 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most visible websites are those from parties coming from legislatures where the latest election was in 2005 and in 2002. Looking further into the data, however, it is worth noting that those party websites with a highest number of links-in on average are those coming from systems where the latest election was in 2005. The standard deviation for this year is very high (almost double than that of the previous one). This may be due to the fact that the UK is included in this group of legislatures. As it was pointed out above, the UK is the legislature with the most visible party websites, but also that within which the websites diverge most between themselves in terms of visibility. Taking out the UK case from this group the average number of links into the websites goes down to 142 (with the standard deviation staying high, but lowering to 187). Furthermore, Germany, the country with the second highest visible websites, but also more diverse in terms of links-in,
is also included in this category. Taking out both Germany and the UK from the group gives as a result an average number of links into party websites of 83 (with the standard deviation going down to 108). The most visible party websites disregarding these two countries, thus, would be those for which the last election was at 2002. This means that it is in systems where an election was due in short time (the survey was done in 2007, five years after 2002) where party websites were most visible, a finding which confirms what seems somehow logical: that in campaigning times parties seem to be making more of an effort to increase the visibility of their websites.

An interesting finding from various studies by Gibson, Ward et al. referring to the UK case (for instance: Ward et al., 2005) also confirmed by scholars for other countries such as that from Cunha et al. (2003) suggests that the differences between major and minor parties regarding their use of the Internet are reduced in the ‘peacetime’ between elections. To test this claim with regard to the visibility of European party websites, Table 12 shows the average number of links for each type of party according to their representation size and the year of the last legislative election for the system they operate in.

Table 12: Average number of links into party websites according to Date of Last Election and Size of parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of party</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Fringe</th>
<th>Extra-parliamentaria</th>
<th>St Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of last election</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>76.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>121.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>49.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Dev</td>
<td>126.43</td>
<td>71.68</td>
<td>47.72</td>
<td>44.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at this data, no real conclusions can be drawn on whether smaller parties catch up with bigger ones in terms of visibility of their websites in-between elections times. Further research comparing the same actors in different periods of time would be required. If anything, these findings show that in those systems which had their latest legislative election in 2005 (a year that, at the time of the survey in 2007, could be considered an “in-between elections” one) the differences between major and minor parties were higher than at other times. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that the UK case is included in this group of countries and, as it has been pointed out throughout this chapter, this is a particular case. The only country from our sample that had the latest elections in 2003 is Belgium.
The figures for the standard deviation for each case\textsuperscript{77} show that it is the websites from the bigger parties the ones that change the most depending on whether an election is coming soon or not. It would seem therefore that major parties make more of an effort in adapting their websites for campaigning purposes when an election is on the near future. This finding adds weigh, a priori, to the argument suggested by Ward, Gibson and Nixon: that 'in peacetime, when sites have often become dormant, fringe parties can narrow the gap' (Ward et al., 2003b: 24). However, the bigger differences between the websites from parties with different sizes take place, as it can be seen on Table 12 are to be found on 2005 (standard deviation of 121.09), which for our study constitutes a date of peacetime period. This finding goes against what has been outlined above: if minor parties are to be catching up in between elections periods, then in systems where the last election had taken place on 2005 there should not be many differences between websites according to the size of parties in terms of their visibility. In fact the opposite should be true. These findings show, therefore, that the claim from Ward, Gibson and Nixon cannot be sustained for European parties in 2007. However, as it has been suggested above, further research is needed that fully analyses changes of party websites over time.

In the variables explored below – type of electoral system, rate of turnout, level of Free Press and GDP per capita – no data for the EP was gathered. The analysis that follows, therefore, cannot be applied to the political groups operating in the EP.

It was suggested above that the type of electoral system may well be playing a strong role in determining the degree of visibility of party websites. As Norris has pointed out and empirically proved, electoral systems affect the political behaviour of the actors that operate within it (Norris, 2004) and it is thus worth analysing their influence in the online behaviour of political parties. The data from all the EU countries seems to confirm this prediction. As Table 13 shows, parties from the classical majoritarian electoral system, FPTP, have the websites with the highest number of links in. Typically, however, it is also within this subgroup where websites seem to be more diverse among them in terms of visibility.

\textsuperscript{77} Not shown on the table, but available on request from the author.
Table 13: Visibility of party websites, according to Type of Electoral System (A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of electoral system</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List Proportional Representation</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>178 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Past the Post</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>13 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Member Proportional</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>16 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Transferable Vote</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>11 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Round System</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>9 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel System</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>9 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: International IDEA

The differences between electoral systems in relation to the visibility of the websites of parties operating in them are more striking when the systems are divided between proportional, non-proportional and mixed ones, as Table 14 does.

Table 14: Visibility of party websites according to Type of Electoral System (B)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of electoral system</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportional</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>189 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Proportional</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>22 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>25 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated from International IDEA and Farrell

Figure 3: Visibility of party websites according to electoral system

Party websites from non-proportional systems have on average more than three times the number of links coming in than those from proportional ones and almost double than those from parliaments with a mixed electoral system. It would seem, therefore, that the type of electoral system is a good predictor of the visibility of party websites: the most majoritarian the system is, the most visible its party
websites are. It has been claimed that non-proportional types of electoral systems emphasize democratic accountability by creating stronger relationships between representatives and the public (Norris, 2004), which may explain why parties in this kind of legislatures have felt the need to be more visible online. However, running a correlation (Eta) between the two variables (type of electoral system and number of links into the websites) gives a value of 0.43 for when the number of links is defined as the dependent variable. The value for Pearson (R) is of 0.259. These are not high figures and thus they do not amount for a high correlation. The small number of cases within the sample does not allow in any case to run a proper correlation test. In other words, there are simply not enough units to be able to find a pattern. The figures for Eta and Pearson mentioned above are thus not meaningful.

Another fact needs to be taken into account on this issue: party websites from those, non-proportional electoral systems are also the most diverse within themselves in terms of links coming in (with a very high standard deviation of 282). This may be due to the fact that majoritarian systems, it has been classically argued since Duverger, tend to contribute to the formation of two-party systems while penalising minor parties (Norris, 2004). If this is the case, then it is logical to find major differences in terms of visibility between major and smaller parties. The countries with non-proportional electoral systems in our sample are France and the United Kingdom. The UK case was discussed above. It is worth remembering at this point that major parties had in this legislature more than three times the amount of links coming into their websites than minor ones. In the French case, and not taking into account two minor parties who did not have a website at the time when the survey was completed, major parties also largely overdo smaller ones in terms of website visibility. The two bigger parties have more than double the number of links (449 and 501) coming into their websites than the rest. It is worth noting, however, the case of the Front National (FN), an extraparliamentarian party which, with 239 links into its website, stands out from the rest.

A final note of caution needs to be introduced before making any further claims about how the type of electoral system may determine the online visibility of the parties operating within it: in the EU context there are only two countries with non-proportional kinds of electoral systems. Extrapolating conclusions from such a reduced sample has to be done, thus, with over caution. The high number of links coming into the websites of these legislatures may be due to other factors particular to these countries. Furthermore, there are strong differences in the
number of links coming into the websites of these two countries, with the British parties largely overdoing the French ones. As it has already been discussed, it is worth keeping in mind that German parties, a legislature with a mixed electoral system, have also a very high amount of links coming to their websites.

The level of voter turnout in elections for each country may well be affecting the visibility of party websites. As it was argued above, parties behaviour online may vary according to the degree of political participation in a given society. Following a political market model\textsuperscript{78}, which claims that the overall impact of new media in politics depends both of the supply of information and communication from the political actors as well as from the demand in the use of this information and communication from the public, it would be logical to think that in countries with a strong tradition of political participation parties would try to answer this demand by constructing websites that are more visible. The data, as illustrated on Figure 4, seems to confirm this thesis: the average number of links coming into party websites increases in line with the rate of turnout for each country.

Figure 4: Visibility of party websites, according to Turnout rate

![Visibility of party websites, according to Turnout rate](image)

Source: International IDEA (all elections since 1945)

Vote / VAP %

Parties acting in legislatures with a very high level of voter turnout have on average almost double the amount of links coming into their websites than those acting in systems with a very low rate of turnout. What is more, it is within those legislatures with a very high level of turnout where party websites tend to be more alike between them in terms of visibility. These findings, however, although

\textsuperscript{78} As proposed by Norris and Curtice (2006), as outlined above.
important need to be tempered down. Systems with medium, high, and very high rates of turnout share almost the exact same figure in terms of “average number of links into party websites”. If voter turnout is to make a difference on the visibility of party websites, it appears that the dividing line is situated between legislatures with a very low or low level of voter turnout and the rest. Or, in other words, in societies where political participation in elections is situated below the 70% rate, party websites tend to be less visible.

Furthermore, running a correlation between the two variables (rate of turnout and number of links into the websites) offers a value of 0.130 when using Pearson’s R. This is by no means a significant value and thus one should be very wary of making generalisations regarding how the level of voter turnout may affect party websites’ visibility. However, it needs to be pointed out that, again, the number of cases is too low for a correlation to be able to be found. In addition to this, most of them are towards the middle. It is thus very difficult to be able to find any significant statistical pattern.

The level of economic wealth, measured in terms of GDP per capita, seems to positively affect the visibility of party websites, as it can be seen in Table 15.

Table 15: Visibility of party websites according to GDP per Capita

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GDP Per Capita</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very low (less than 10,000)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>15 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (10,001-15,000)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>44 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (15,001-30,000)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>41 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (30,001-45,000)</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>79 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high (over 45,001)</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>57 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IMF
In US Dollars

The higher the GDP per capita is for a country, the higher the number of links coming into its party websites is on average, but at the same time the most diverse these websites are in terms of visibility. This would confirm Norris’ claim (2003) that the level of economic development of a country plays a role in determining the online behaviour of its political actors. It would mean however that the findings from Trechsel et al. (2003)’s study, which found that party websites from countries with a higher economic development were not necessarily the most sophisticated ones, cannot be extrapolated when looking at the visibility of party sites. A note of caution is needed, though: those websites from parties operating in the richest countries are also the most diverse between themselves in terms of visibility. Furthermore, this group includes the UK, with all the particularities of this
case. Running a correlation between the variables of GDP per capita and number of links coming into the websites does not sustain Morris' thesis either: when running an Eta having 'GDP per capita' as the independent variable and 'number of links into website' as the dependent, the result is rather low: 0.400. Nevertheless, as always the very small number of cases does not allow for a correlation or a statistical pattern to be found. Because of this, no further measures of associations are run in the following chapters.

Independent media is as an essential part of a strong civic society. An indicator of the level of independence of the media in a given country is, as it has been seen above, the state's level of Free Press. Table 16 shows the visibility of party websites grouped according to the level of Free Press of the country the parties act within.

**Table 16: Visibility of party websites according to the Level of Free Press**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Free Press</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost perfectly free</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>10 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very free</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>65 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium free</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>65 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low free</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>61 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free, but almost partly free</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>20 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partly free</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>15 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Freedom House

There does not seem to be any relationship between the level of Free Press of a country and the visibility of its parties' websites. The most visible sites are those coming from political systems that had a "Medium free" level of Free Press. In the context of the EU, however, where the vast majority of countries have a high level of Free Press this may not be such a good indicator for comparative analysis.

Summarising, the main findings from this section are:

- Those countries with the most visible party websites in the EU are the UK and Germany.
- There is a strict relationship between the average number of links into the party websites of a given country and the standard deviation for that country. That is, countries with the most visible party websites on average, absolute, terms are also those where party websites diverge more between themselves in terms of visibility.
• There are clear differences between party websites' visibility among groups of countries, and so as expected there are no grounds to talk of a homogenization taking place amongst European party websites in terms of their visibility. Specifically, party websites from established democracies within the EU have on average three times the amount of links coming into their websites than those from the newer ones, and twice those websites from parties operating at the EP level. Regarding the geopolitical area, there is a clear Western / Eastern divide: party websites from the Western and Northern area are two times more visible than those from the Mediterranean and the Scandinavian ones, and four times more than those from the Eastern zone.

• Somehow surprisingly, there are not many differences between parties from different political systems according to their rate of Internet penetration. Party websites from those systems with a high and very high rate remain the most visible, however.

• The date of the last legislative election does not seem to make much a difference in the degree of visibility of party websites.

• In terms of the type of electoral system, websites from parties from non-proportional electoral systems are three times more visible than those from proportional ones, and twice as much as those from parties operating in countries with mixed electoral systems.

• With regards to voter turnout, the higher the participation rate, the most visible were the party websites in general. This is particularly true for parties operating in systems with a turnout rate below 70%, which had the least visible sites by a difference.

• The level of economic wealth does seem to be a good indicator for party websites' visibility: the higher it is, the most visible the websites are.

• Finally, the degree of freedom of the press of a country does not have much relevance in the level of party websites visibility. This could be interpreted as a sign of the 'independence' of the online media sphere from the offline one. It remains to be seen, however, whether the degree of freedom of the press constitutes a good comparative indicator for the state of media within European civil societies.
4. 2. 1. b) Differences according to Party Characteristics:

Gibson et al. (2003a) concluded from a study of party and individual candidates' websites in the US and the UK that, whereas all parties and candidates were present on the Web, there were strong and clear differences between the amount of traffic being redirected onto the websites. Those from the bigger parties had considerably more links in than the rest. Cunha et al. (2003) arrived to a similar conclusion for the Southern European context. Our data confirms these findings for the broader European context (see Table 17, below): major parties (the two parties with most seats in each parliament) had on average 194 links coming in; minor parties (third and fourth parties with more seats) had 133 links-in on average; fringe parties (those who had achieved seats in parliament but were not within the four with most seats) had 107; and extra-parliamentarian parties (those which had achieved no seats in the latest legislative election) had on average 54.

When we look at the differences according to percentage of votes attained by each party, instead of at the proportion of parliamentary seats, the picture does not change, although the differences are slightly smaller: bigger parties (the two parties with a highest proportion of votes in the latest election) had on average 185 links coming in; medium ones (those within the third and fourth parties with most votes in the latest election for each system) had 139; small parties (those on the fifth and sixth positions according to votes) had 105; and edge parties (all parties for a system who were not within the six parties with most votes) had on average 78 links coming in from other websites, as Table 17 shows:

Table 17: Visibility of party websites, according to Party Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Party</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>According to Seats:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major</strong></td>
<td>194</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>58 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minor</strong></td>
<td>133</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>56 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fringe</strong></td>
<td>107</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>91 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extra-parliamentarian</strong></td>
<td>54</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>53 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>According to Votes:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Big</strong></td>
<td>185</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>58 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium</strong></td>
<td>139</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>57 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small</strong></td>
<td>105</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>55 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Edge</strong></td>
<td>78</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>88 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL PARTIES</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own categorisation of parties according to rates of votes and seats achieved in last legislative election for each political system.
These results seem to be in line, once again, with the normalisation thesis and its described scenario of major parties dominating on the Web, as much as they do in all other media. According to our data, and as predicted, considerably more traffic is guided towards the websites from medium and bigger parties than to those from the smaller ones. Major parties are thus significantly more visible in cyberspace than fringe ones.

This does not necessarily mean, however, that there are no equalising forces taking place. The presence of a major party on the Web might be roughly four times more visible than that of an extra-parliamentary one. However, on the traditional media this proportion is much, much higher. The Internet may not be creating a political platform where all parties, independently of their 'offline strength' are equally present and visible, as the first wave of Internet scholars might have believed; but it is however undeniably more egalitarian with regards to the exposure of smaller political actors than traditional, offline media. As Norris has pointed out, party websites thus function as 'pluralistic civic fora' in which the visibility of minor and fringe parties is raised, compared to traditional media (Norris, 2003). The same idea is made by two of the main exponents of what has come to be known as the 'politics as usual' thesis: Margolis and Resnick. The authors found that, in the US context, major parties had a higher online presence than smaller ones, and thus claimed from this that the Internet was not levelling the playing field in terms of party competitions. However, they also recognised that 'the Web gives them (minor parties) more exposure relative to the Democrats and the Republicans than they receive in the mass media' (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 61). A major study that reviewed journal articles on this topic arrived to a similar conclusion: that minor parties appear more frequently on the Internet than they do in traditional media (Weber and Murray, 2002). The playing field of inter-party competition, thus, may not be equalized on the Web, but there is ground to claim that it may well be re-balanced (Ackland and Gibson, 2006).

What is more, the bigger the party is – both in terms of seats and of votes – the more differences in terms of links coming into its website there are. The standard deviation for the subgroups of major and big parties in our sample is

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79 For this research, a party has been considered not to have a website when typing in the name of the party in various search engines (Google, Yahoo and MSN) did not come up with any links towards an official website for that party.
considerably higher than that for the extra-parliamentarian and edge ones. Websites from smaller parties tend to be, thus, more alike, at least in terms of number of links coming in from the rest of the Web, while those from the bigger parties vary more between themselves. Because of this, we ought to be careful when taking the average number of links-in as a sign of visibility. It could be that there are a few major parties with a very high number of links into their websites, which makes the figure for “average number of links-in” rise disproportionately, and so generalisations ought to be taken with some caution.

In any case, the fact remains that, according to what had been expected, larger parties attract more links into their websites than smaller ones. The political playing field may be widened on the Web, when compared to traditional, offline media, ‘but there is little evidence so far that it significantly levels it’ (Lusoli and Ward, 2003: 168). The results from this study fully confirm this claim.

_Ideological orientation_ has not been found to play a role in the sophistication of party websites in recent comparative studies of party websites (for instance: Farmer and Fender, 2005; Nixon and Johansson, 2002; Trechsel et al., 2003). Earlier scholars of Internet studies had found, however, that political websites from within a liberal orientation were more highly networked than the conservative ones (Hill and Hughes, 1998). More recently, Ackland and Gibson found that parties from the left had more visible websites than those from the right; and that in particular the environmental parties had much more visible websites than those from the far right (Ackland and Gibson, 2006). The data in this study as shown on Table 18 below confirms, to a degree, these findings. The combined average of links into parties from the extreme left, social democrat and green political ideology (162) is considerably higher than that from parties from the Christian-democrat, conservative and right-wing nationalists (106). Furthermore, parties coming from the extreme left are on average more than twice more visible than those from the extreme right. Contrary to the argument from the normalisation thesis, the major differences in terms of the visibility of party websites are not between mainstream and extreme parties but instead between the left and the right ends of the ideological spectrum.
Table 18: Visibility of party websites, according to Ideological Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideology Family</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Left</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>35 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democrat</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>35 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>22 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>13 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>25 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian – Democrat</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>18 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>45 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist (extreme right)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>30 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>29 (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: party’s ideological self-position as stated on their website and Electoral Resources.

It has been argued in the literature\(^{80}\) that Green parties have consistently been among those those making a better use of the new media technologies. In terms of website visibility, Ackland and Gibson found that green and left-wing parties had the largest amount of inbound links (links-in) of all the group of parties that they analysed (2006)\(^{81}\). Our data (both in Table 18, above, and Table 19, below) confirms that they are the second group of parties with the highest number of links into their websites. What is more, compared with the party family with the highest number of links into its websites (the Social Democrat), the websites from the Green family are considerably more similar between themselves: not only the standard deviation for this category is significantly lower, but also the lowest amount of links coming in for a Green party website is ten, which is a relatively “high minimum”.

Table 19: Visibility of party websites, according to EP Affiliation Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EP Affiliation Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>48 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPP-ED</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>59 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>30 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>37 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens / EFA</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>25 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUL-NGL</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>22 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UEN</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>15 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indepl/Dem</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>8 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITS</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>5 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When parties are grouped in terms of their political affiliation in the EP, the results suggested above are confirmed: parties belonging to the EUL-NGL, from the extreme left, have the most visible websites in the EU context. Their websites

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\(^{80}\) See for instance (Meikle, 2002), (Ward et al., 2003b), (Conway and Dorner, 2004; Hillwatch, 2005; Norris, 2003).

\(^{81}\) 118 party websites were the object of research of these authors. The parties belonged to six Western democracies: Australia, Austria, France, Germany, Italy, and the UK (Ackland and Gibson, 2006: 19).
are also significantly more similar between themselves in this respect than those from the Socialist group (the group that scores second in terms of number of links into its party websites). It is also confirmed that parties coming from the left have more visible websites than those coming from the right. Political ideology does, therefore, seem to make a difference, contrary to what the most recent studies had been suggesting.

The major findings that need to be emphasized from this section are all in line with the predictions outlined as hypothesis on chapter three. Specifically:

- Major parties have more visible websites than smaller ones.
- Parties from the left have more visible websites than those from the right side of the political spectrum.
- Green parties have particularly visible websites.

4. 2. 2. Traffic Rank

An alternative indicator of the visibility of party websites is the Traffic Rank. This figure is "based on three months of aggregated historical traffic data from millions of Alexa Toolbar users and is a combined measure of page views and users (reach). As a first step, Alexa computes the reach and number of page views for all sites on the Web on a daily basis. The main Alexa traffic rank is based on the geometric mean of these two quantities averaged over time (so that the rank of a site reflects both the number of users who visit that site as well as the number of pages on the site viewed by those users)." Alexa calculates thus its traffic rank taking into account the page views and the users. It then proceeds to rank the websites in order, so that those with a low value are the most visited as this means that they are located higher up on the rank. For instance, a traffic rank score of 100,000 means that there are 99,999 websites more visited than that one.

Because of its limitations – it only looks at traffic from Alexa toolbar users, sites with relatively low traffic are not accurately ranked, and it can change

83 'There is some controversy over how representative Alexa’s user base is of typical Internet behavior. If Alexa’s user base is a fair statistical sample of the Internet user population (e.g., a random sample of sufficient size), Alexa’s ranking should be quite accurate. In reality, not much is known about the sample and possible sampling biases. Alexa itself notes several examples. A known source of bias is the self-selecting, opt-in nature of Alexa traffic tracking software installation, but the significance of this bias on rankings is not reported.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexa_Internet (Wikipedia, Accessed in November 2008).
considerably even from one day to another— it cannot be but a secondary indicator of visibility and so this thesis dedicates only a very short section to its study. It helps however to give an idea of how some websites attract more traffic than others, and for this investigation the differences between the traffic ranks of party websites from various political systems, and size, may be of great interest, given the results discussed on the previous section.

Alexa was able to calculate the traffic rank for 231 party websites from the total sample on which this research is based. The average traffic rank for the total of these websites is 1,749,384. According to this ranking system, party websites are, thus, certainly not within the most visited ones on the Web. Websites from social networks such as Facebook or MySpace score five and seven respectively on the rank. The website for the CNN scores 50, and the rank position for that of the BBC is 2,717. The traffic rank for the University of Hull website was 52,231 in November 2008. That party websites are not, by a distance, within the most visited sites on the Web does not come out as a surprise. It has been widely argued that political websites in general do not attract much attention from the general Internet user. European party websites do not seem to be, thus, an exception.

From our sample, the most visited website according to Alexa (with a traffic rank of 55,119) is that of the Hungarian Civic Union party. This is a major party which had a relatively high number of links into its website: 181. The party which had the most links into its website, the British Labour, scores well on Alexa’s traffic rank: 128,209. It is worth noting that the party with the least visible website (traffic rank of over 9 million) is also a big, major party: Latvia’s People party. Based on these results, it is therefore not possible to draw any conclusions according to how parties’ size may affect the traffic rank of a party website. Nor do they allow to make any interpretations about how party websites from a certain geopolitical area may have attract more or less traffic, since both the website with the highest rank and that with the lowest belong to the area of Eastern political systems.

Because of the caution with which Alexa’s traffic rank as an indicator ought to be treated, differences between party websites on this manner will not be analysed to the same detail as it is done in the previous section and in the chapters that follow. In this case, variance on party websites’ traffic rank is examined taking into account only three variables: the age of democracy of the political system the party operates in; the type of electoral system of this political system; and the size of the party.
Table 20 confirms that party websites operating in the Established Democracies area have the most visible sites in the EU. Not only did they have the higher number of inbound links on average, but they also have the lowest figure in Alexa’s traffic rank (and so, the highest position within the three groups analysed).

Table 20: Differences on Traffic Rank according to Age of Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliamentary System</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Established Democracies</td>
<td>1,424,515</td>
<td>1,663,029</td>
<td>56,523</td>
<td>8,236,655</td>
<td>138 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newer Democracies</td>
<td>1,989,038</td>
<td>2,307,390</td>
<td>55,119</td>
<td>9,172,156</td>
<td>74 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Parliament</td>
<td>3,175,576</td>
<td>2,731,144</td>
<td>695,110</td>
<td>8,935,199</td>
<td>19 (7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike the results in the previous sections showed, it is the websites from parties operating at the EP level those who attract the less traffic, according to Alexa’s ranking system, and not those from the Eastern region. The data confirms that it is a party operating in an Eastern political system or Newer Democracies the one with the highest amount of traffic directed to its website (as the lowest minimum belongs to this category).

The type of electoral system of a country is one of the variables that has been found to have a stronger effect on the visibility of party websites. As shown in the previous section of this chapter, party websites from non-proportional electoral systems had much more visible sites (when visibility is measured according to the number of links-in that a website has) than the rest. This is one of the clearest findings discussed in the previous section, and it is thus worth further testing it using an alternative indicator such as Alexa’s traffic rank. When this indicator is used, the results – as shown in Table 21 below – do indeed confirm this finding: party websites operating in non-proportional electoral systems score much higher on Alexa’s traffic rank than the rest (always keeping in mind that the lowest the figure for traffic rank, the higher the position within the rank). Furthermore, they have the lowest standard deviation, as well as a very low maximum, which implies that the websites in this group are quite similar between themselves with regard to their traffic ranks. This is a very relevant result, as it confirms one of the most important findings from the previous section.

Table 21: Differences on Traffic Rank according to Type of Electoral System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of electoral system</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportional</td>
<td>1,700,401</td>
<td>1,962,870</td>
<td>62,633</td>
<td>9,172,156</td>
<td>166 (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Proportional</td>
<td>979,741</td>
<td>1,125,897</td>
<td>56,523</td>
<td>3,775,007</td>
<td>22 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>1,664,827</td>
<td>2,280,345</td>
<td>55,119</td>
<td>7,684,778</td>
<td>24 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated from International IDEA and Farrell
Surprisingly, party websites from mixed and proportional electoral systems have very similar scores on the rank.

Finally, websites from major parties are more visible than those from the smaller ones when visibility is measured according to the number of inbound links the websites have. When Alexa's traffic rank is used as an indicator, these findings are further confirmed. As Table 22 illustrates, websites from major parties have a higher position on Alexa's traffic rank than those from extra-parliamentarian or edge parties. The relationship is, with the exception of big and medium parties when parties are classified according to their rate of votes, clear: the bigger the party, the higher its average position within Alexa's traffic rank. Furthermore, this relationship works both for when parties are categorised according to the percentage of seats attained on parliament as well as the rate of votes, except for the categories already mentioned of big and medium parties.

**Table 22: Differences on Traffic Rank according to Party Size**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Party</th>
<th>According to Seats:</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>According to Votes:</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,273,150</td>
<td>57 (1)</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>1,382,434</td>
<td>57 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,442,967</td>
<td>53 (3)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>1,287,125</td>
<td>54 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,952,180</td>
<td>81 (20)</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>1,803,347</td>
<td>48 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-parliamentarian</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,423,403</td>
<td>40 (17)</td>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>2,350,607</td>
<td>72 (9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own categorisation of parties according to rates of votes and seats achieved in last legislative election for each political system.

When Alexa’s traffic rank is utilised as an indicator of websites' visibility, three of the most relevant findings discussed in the previous section of this chapter are confirmed:

1. That party websites from the Established democracies group are more visible.
2. That party websites from non-proportional electoral systems are considerably more visible.
3. And finally, that the bigger a party is, the more visible its website tends to be.
Chapter 5: The Interactive Content of European Party Websites

When looking at the use of interactive elements in party websites throughout the Western world, previous studies have been overwhelmingly unanimous in their verdict: political parties are not making the best of the potential that new ICT provide in terms of interactivity. As it was pointed out in chapter two, the analysis of the content of political parties websites has shown that, to date, most parties have failed to use the Web in an innovative fashion and have instead tended to build up websites that reproduce the ways of communication of other traditional broadcast media: one-way and top-down. Nevertheless one should be wary of making strong statements about parties not using the Web in any interactive manner. For instance, in a study based in New Zealand, Roper showed that in 1996 none of the political parties from this country had elements for online debates in their websites (Roper, 1998). As it will be shown throughout this chapter, some change has taken place within a decade. While parties could have opted to develop simply flashier though remaining static websites, a significant part of them have also decided to include in them interactive elements that allow for citizens' participation to a degree or another. Furthermore, in a study comparing websites from various kinds of political organisations in the UK context, Lusoli, Ward and Gibson found that out of all the political actors analysed, it was political parties the ones who offered more opportunities for participation through their sites (Lusoli et al., 2002a). A different question is whether the public is actually making any use of these features, or even if it is interested at all in them\(^{84}\).

This chapter focuses, as the rest of this study, on the offer side of the equation, and not on the demand. That is, it presents information and analysis about the content of European party websites with regard to interactivity. The objective is not to investigate whether citizens are making use of these features but rather, what is actually on offer within EU party sites for the general public. Interactivity in party websites is needed, because it is the most direct way through which participation can be incorporated into these sites. Only through interactive elements can citizens participate through the Web. There are various degrees of interactivity, and much has been written about it in the past few years. In this study,

\(^{84}\) See for instance (Boogers and Voerman, 2003) for a study on how citizens make use of the interactive elements available on party websites.
Stromer-Galley's position is followed in that the defining characteristic of interactivity is feedback. For her, feedback occurs when communication is responsive – when the receiver takes the role of sender and replies directly to the original message (Stromer-Galley, 2000). The elements that encourage a higher degree of feedback are thus considered to be more interactive in this study.

In any case, interactivity is one of the most important features – if not the most important one – between those that distinguish the Internet from other media. Unlike other forms of communication, where the information can only go from one source to the other in a top-down, one-directional sense, the use of interactive elements in websites allows for a bottom-up style of communication. This can lead to a change in power relations, because the insider/outsider dichotomy in the communication process can be overcome. Through the use of interactive elements in party websites, citizens and party officials are therefore able to establish a less hierarchical relationship, which can in turn enhance the interest and participation from individuals in their communication with representatives (Vicente-Merino, 2007). Furthermore, the possibilities are not reduced to a one-line communication between the party and the citizen: through spaces for online debate included in these websites, citizens can also find a space in which they can discuss between themselves.

There remains, in all cases, the same question: do parties really have a strategy when going online? Do they know what they are doing? Are their websites the result of a previous, offline plan, or are they instead random products which functions are not clear to the party officials themselves? Previous studies have suggested that the adaptation to the new media by political actors does not depend on the technology itself, but rather on previous strategies (Lusoli et al., 2002a: 25). As it has been repeated throughout this study, technology does not act in a vacuum. Previous strategies, but also offline factors and parties' own characteristics with regards to size and ideology are expected to play a role in determining the usage given to the new media by political actors. This chapter studies the content of European party websites taking into account these factors. Analysing the differences between party websites from different political systems, but also between parties from various sizes and ideological families, provides some answers into how external variables affect – or not – the content of these websites. This data is complemented with what European party officials have explicitly said – in the online forum and on e-mail personal interviews with the author – about the elements included in their own websites. In this way, both the

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85 Among others: Kutner (2000) and Smith and Smythe (2001).
ulterior strategies of party officials as well as how institutional offline factors affect parties' behaviour on the Web are taken into account.

For the sake of clarity, this chapter follows a clear structure, very similar to the previous one. On the first section, an overview of European party websites' interactivity is presented. This is followed by an analysis of how each interactive element that has been researched is present on these sites. The rest of the chapter looks at the differences in party websites in the EU between parties from various political systems (by grouping them according to geopolitical area, age of democracy, rate of Internet penetration, date of the last legislative election, type of electoral system, rate of voter turnout, level of economic development, and freedom of the press) and also between parties from various sizes (both in terms of votes and seats in parliament), ideological families, and political adscription in the EP. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the views and perception that party officials have on the inclusion and use of interactive elements in their websites.

5. 1. Interactivity in European Party Websites. General Findings

Contrary to what was expected, European party websites diverge greatly among themselves also in terms of their interactive content. Almost a third of these have a 'very high' degree of interactivity, whereas at the same time over a quarter score 'low' in this same variable. To measure the overall level of interactivity of a political website this research has made use of an originally designed 'Scale of participatory interactivity'. Websites were grouped from those having 'none' to 'very high' interactivity depending on the elements included in them, as it was shown on included in chapter three.

Using this Scale of participatory interactivity as an indicator, there is a high diversity in the degree of interactivity among European party websites. As it is shown on Table 23, just below half of the websites analysed (43.9%) had none, very low or low levels of interactivity with the remaining (56.1%) scoring medium, high or very high in the scale.

These are, for each website: electronic forms, e-mail address, e-newsletters, e-surveys, e-guestbooks, links to official blogs or forums in external websites, presence of blogs or forums (with open or restricted access) within the website, and an Intranet.
Table 23: European party websites’ interactivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of participatory interactivity</th>
<th>Percentage (valid)</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
<th>Total number of websites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Somehow surprisingly, given the findings from previous studies, the category with most websites within it is the ‘very high’ one: 31% of the websites belonged to it. Almost a third of European party websites included, thus, spaces for online debate in the form of blogs or forums (regardless of whether registration was needed or not to access them. In 26.3% this was not required, while in the remaining 4.7% a login was required not only to post but also to view the forum / blog.) These results can be best appreciated when looking at Figure 5, below.

Figure 5: Interactivity in European party websites

As it can also be seen in this figure, however, almost the same amount of websites had a low degree of interactivity. Thus rather than declaring that European party websites have a very high degree of interactivity, the main conclusion to be drawn from this data is that there is no consistent pattern among those websites regarding their degree of interactivity, and thus (and contrary to what had been predicted) no homogenization taking place. This would confirm a claim already made elsewhere by Internet scholars: that party websites vary greatly among themselves (Norris, 2003) and, further on, that parties in general lack a common strategy for their behaviour online (Gibson et al., 2003b).
at which parties – their characteristics and also those from the political systems they operate in – have the websites with the higher and lower levels of interactivity, as this chapter does, provides some answers to whether European parties nowadays are indeed using the Web in a rational manner or not.

In four cases (see Table 23) the websites analysed provided no means for any kind of communication between the users (citizens) and the producers (the party), not even an email address or electronic form for contact. Reading this data the other way round, it can be firstly stated thus that the vast majority of European parties allow for some kind of – however minimal this may be – communication from citizens through their websites. The four parties that did not provide even this minimum degree of contact come from various political systems (Italy, Lithuania, Romania and the EP). One of them, the European Democrats, which is a political group operating in the EP, has not what can be called a proper website on its own. Acting with his ‘sister organisation’, the European People’s Party (EPP), to form the group of the EPP-ED in the EP, its website is technically included in the larger EPP’s one. However, even taking this special case into account, the rest of the parties without any kind of interactivity at all in their websites do not share almost any particular traits. One of them is a medium sized party, with the other two being a small and an edge one, respectively. All major or big parties, thus, allowed for at least a minimal degree of communication throughout their websites. It is also remarkable to note that all the parties not providing any kind of means for communication in their website come from the right rather than the left side of the ideological political spectrum. As it was seen in chapter four, the websites from parties from the right were also less visible in general than those from the left. Moreover, the evidence from this research continues to confirm this trend both regarding the interactive content of party websites and their external networking. There are thus grounds to talk of an ideological divide in terms of parties’ online behaviour, something that had been denied earlier by other Internet scholars (Farmer and Fender, 2005; Trechsel et al., 2003). This will be further discussed below.

Regarding the political systems these parties come from, there is one particularity shared by all four of them: their comparatively low level of Internet penetration. Romania has the lowest Internet penetration rate of the EU (22%), while Italy and Lithuania are both, with 43% and 44% respectively, within the countries having a low level of Internet penetration according to the categorisation used in this research. These results are in line with Norris’ claim that the degree of
technological diffusion, measured in terms of the Internet penetration in a given society, is one of the best predictors of the extent of sophistication of party websites' contents (Norris, 2003).

Looking further into the contents of the 255 European party websites analysed in 2007 (the rest of the sites that are part of the sample were not working at the time the survey was done), Table 24 and Figure 6 below show the distribution of interactive elements across websites. These are total percentages, taking all websites analysed into account, without differentiating by type of party or the political system they come from, an analysis which is done below in this chapter.

Table 24: Interactive elements in European party websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electronic message form</td>
<td>51.0% (130)</td>
<td>49.0% (125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email address for contact</td>
<td>84.3% (215)</td>
<td>15.7% (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>63.5% (162)</td>
<td>36.5% (93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-surveys / polls (closed answers)</td>
<td>16.5% (42)</td>
<td>83.5% (213)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbooks / Comments to news</td>
<td>5.1% (13)</td>
<td>94.9% (242)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link to official blog or forum in another site</td>
<td>26.7% (68)</td>
<td>73.3% (187)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog / Forum (registration needed to read it)</td>
<td>4.7% (12)</td>
<td>95.3% (243)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog / Forum (registration may be needed to post but not to read it)</td>
<td>26.3% (67)</td>
<td>73.7% (188)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Blog / Forum</td>
<td>31.4% (79)</td>
<td>68.6% (176)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member's space or Intranet (need to login to access it)</td>
<td>36.1% (92)</td>
<td>63.9% (163)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Interactive features in European party websites

All percentages are valid percentages, that is, not taking into account missing cases. This is the case also for all the tables included in this chapter: percentages will always be the valid ones, not taking into account the missing cases. The reader should therefore look closely at the
number of missing cases (always presented in brackets, within the "N" cell) before taking his/her own conclusions from the data.

The publication of an email address for contact is the most popular 'interactive element' among European party websites. More than three quarters of the sites analysed provided this feature. This may seem a high figure at a first glance. Looking at it closely, however, it tells us that over 15% of parties (40) did not offer even an email address through which they could be contacted on their websites. To be sure, the vast majority of these offered an alternative, in the form of an electronic or web-based contact form; only in four cases, as it has been said, the parties offered no means whatsoever to be contacted. Nevertheless, the figure is still low. Today, the least one expects from any kind of website is an email address to contact. Electronic forms are not substitutes: citizens cannot send attached documents through them, for instance, while one of the reasons the public may want to contact a party is to tell them about a particular issue or problem for which attached files may most probably need to be sent. These forms are also more anonymous and give the impression of being more impersonal than an email address which, however neutral it may be, gives at least the feeling that there is a person, rather than a machine, at the other end. Taking all of this into account, that 15% of European parties in 2007 were not giving the public the chance to send them an email is a striking finding. Even more when the figure is compared by that of a study from 2001 in which Norris already noted that of the party websites analysed worldwide for her research, 'more than three quarters provided email addresses to contact party officials' (Norris, 2001)p170. Although the Internet has spread exponentially around the world in the years between Norris' study and ours, the proportion of party websites containing an email address for contact has not increased that much. This would confirm the thesis that parties are resilient organisations which fail to embrace the opportunities for communication offered by the new media and thus those findings from previous studies which have mostly concluded that party websites are top-down, non-interactive and focused on information-giving features. Indeed, when the participants from the

97 Whether they can really be named 'interactive elements' is not clear. As Jansen has put it, e-mail and web-based forms are more reactive than interactive, in that their use does not imply a change in information contained in the website (Jansen, 2004). In this study they are treated as the feature that allows at least a minimum degree of feedback and aids to create thus a certain relationship between citizen and party. In this sense, websites that have them are considered to be – only slightly – 'more interactive' than those that allow no interaction at all between publisher and audience. However, it is recognised the almost inexistent level of interactivity (at best, only very rudimentary forms of it) that they allow for and thus party websites offering only this kind of feature are labelled in this research as having a 'very low degree of interactivity'.

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online forum which took place in February 2007 as part of this research were asked for the main function of their party's website, most responded "information giving" as the main, primary purpose of their websites.

Most citizens — particularly, but not only, a web-savvy audience — will expect nowadays the inclusion of, at the very least, an email address in any political actor's website. After all, "email has quickly become a ubiquitous tool which citizens are increasingly comfortable with in their everyday lives." (Jackson, 2004: 1). One could thus wonder why as much as over 15% of European parties have decided against including this feature on their sites. It is after all the minimum that can be demanded from any political accountable organisation, it could be claimed: to have a public electronic address to which anybody can write to. But the argument is not so straightforward.

Making an email address available is not without problems for a party: if anybody is able to send emails, then the load of email that party officials may receive cannot be dismissed. Considerable time and resources will need to be dedicated to dealing with this. Furthermore, it would be even more disappointing for citizens to be able to contact a party through email and then not to get a reply. Making an email address available entails the responsibility of dealing with the incoming messages in an adequate manner: the emails will need to be reply to. This is something that, as it has been pointed out in other studies concerning the use of email by parliamentarians for instance (Dai, 2007), political actors may struggle with. Some of them may, as a consequence, consider the email as a problem to be added to their already busy agendas rather than as an advantageous medium through which communication could be enhanced. There is also the problem of spam, which cannot be dismissed.

These are all issues that a priori would affect more the smaller parties, with lesser resources, than the major, richer ones. As it has already been pointed out, however, minor parties may compensate for their relative lack of financial resources with a strong base of activists or volunteers (Nixon and Johansson, 2002). Within the parties selected as case studies for this research, it is very significant to note that when the discussion was centred explicitly on the importance of including or not interactive elements in party websites, it was the officials from the major parties the ones that showed more enthusiasm in these features, whereas the ones from the smaller ones tended to show more caution. This goes against what has been suggested on previous studies. Gibson, Nixon and Ward, for instance, found that the officials from minor parties were more enthusiastic than those from the major ones when talking about the political
potential of the Internet (Gibson et al., 2003b). It seems that, with the development
and spread of the new media, European party officials may have changed their
mind: those from organisations with the resources that allow them to deal with the
added responsibilities and workload that the new media have incorporated can
claim, as an official from the British Conservative party does, that “there is always a
risk with such things (interactive features) but the potential of positive engagement
always far outweighs the negatives”88. Officials from the smaller parties may have
realised by now that money, after all, does matter in cyberspace. These issues are
further discussed below in the final section of this chapter.

Nevertheless, the data from our survey tells us that there are no significant
differences between the various-sized parties regarding the inclusion or not of an
email address in their sites. In other words: size does not seem to be a factor
influencing whether parties have decided to not include an email address in their
websites. Slightly over half of the websites analysed that did not include an email
belong to big and medium parties (52.5%). Moreover, when looking at the size of
parties in terms of seats, only 12.5% of the websites without an email address
come from extra-parliamentarian parties. Further characteristics of the type of
parties, and the political systems they come from, which did not include an email
address in their websites will be explored below, in the following sections of this
chapter.

**E-newsletters** are a popular feature within political parties’ websites. 162
(63.5%) parties included the option of subscribing to a regular electronic
newsletter, bulletin, or email list through their websites. It is not surprising that e-
newsletters are widely used by political actors: it is a very cheap and easy to
manage medium through which actors can send out information directly from
themselves (unmediated by other actors or mass media) to specialised or even
targeted audiences. This may be one of the most interesting characteristics of this
feature for parties. Several party officials emphasized on the online forum the need
for party websites to satisfy different audiences, and how challenging this could be.
The arrival of new ICT has meant that, for the first time in political communication,
the message can now be tailored to suit different audiences. Electronic newsletters
in particular can serve to reach out a very particular section of citizens, a
specialised group – though not necessarily members of the party89 – differentiated

88 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr A), 29 Feb. 2008.
89 In this sense, through the development of features such as the one discussed here, the
Internet may well be contributing to the trend of diminishing the differences between
members, voters, supporters, and sympathisers of a party.
from the general public. Parties can then focus on different aspects than from those that they treat on their websites, opened for anybody to see. For instance, their message in the e-bulletins may be radicalised, compared to what it is shown in other media; or they may centre on party-based activity and news that are not so appealing to a wider audience.

Furthermore, because of their periodic nature, electronic newsletters can potentially create a sense of loyalty or continuity; they can in this sense help to build up a feeling of relationship between sender and receivers. They "could help develop lasting dialogue between politicians and citizens." (Jackson, 2004: 1). Even if one is aware that these updates are sent out mechanically by a centralised computer, and that the receiver is only one of a group, there is still a subjective feeling that remains when receiving this kind of bulletins by email: that there is a person sending this out to you in particular. This feeling may contribute to encourage long-term supporters or the retention of already members. Furthermore, regular bulletins are likely to increase the sense of engagement in the citizen, and certainly of those already politically motivated.

Taking all of this into account – how cheap and easy they are to use; their potential advantages in terms of creating a sense of relationship or linkage with the reader because of their periodic nature; or how they can be used for the always challenging task of targeting different audiences to name their main benefits – it is surprising to find that almost 40% of European parties were not making use of e-newsletters in 2007. This finding is even more striking considering that also party officials – from the UK – themselves have recognised elsewhere that there are very few downsides to providing an e-newsletter; on the contrary, it was seen as a very cost-effective means of reaching existing and new audiences (Jackson, 2004). Also in private correspondence with the author, an official from a British political party confirmed that 'in terms of targeting audiences' an online newsletter was used by the party 'which is tailored to various groups, from party officers to casual enquirers.' Because it creates at least a minimum sense of relationship between party and subscriber, it has been considered in this study to offer a level of interactivity higher than the mere inclusion of an email address or electronic form for contact. Party websites including the possibility to subscribe to e-bulletins have been thus classified as having a level of interactivity higher than those that only offered an e-mail address or an electronic form for contact. However, in their vast

90 Hence their use as part of their marketing strategies by companies. For these, "an e-newsletter is a means of encouraging a contact to first become a customer and then conversion to a life-long loyal customer" (Jackson, 2004: 11).
91 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr C), 29 Feb. 2008.
majority they remain a unidirectional, top-down tool, controlled completely by the party and through which no opportunities for real feedback or multilateral communication exist. This is why websites offering them have been labelled as having a "low" level of interactivity. The level of control when using newsletters is almost absolute: the party decides what to include in it and there is no space for the public to openly reply or debate this information. To be sure, Jackson mentions that officials from various UK parties stated, when asked about this particular topic, 'that their e-newsletters generated responses from both members and non-members' (Jackson, 2004: 14). Nevertheless, and although admitting the higher degree of linkage created by an e-newsletter – which may provoke in the reader a response of some kind towards the party, and thus creating feedback – than by an e-form in a website, e-newsletters are far from being able to develop the kind of engagement that a political discussion or debate can. The relationship is between the party and the reader – if s/he responds, this is most likely to be done in a closed form. The relationship, thus, when created remains a private one. There is ground for some level of communication between party and citizen but not for deliberation between citizens and party officials, for instance.

Furthermore, when created, a hierarchical relationship remains: the message always comes from the party to the reader. As Jackson puts it, e-bulletins 'allow headquarters to send out, and reinforce its key messages' (Jackson, 2004: 17). Even in the cases when feedback is possible or even encouraged, the power balance in this communication remains unchanged. E-newsletters are by nature a tool primarily used for the delivery of information in a top-down manner.

Online polls or surveys were included in 16.5% of European party websites in 2007. The majority (over 80%) of websites did not have this kind of feature. Again, it is surprising to note this, since e-polls are arguably one of the easiest techniques for parties to use and which offer clear advantages in terms of political marketing or campaigning. Although the scientific value or real statistical meaning of these surveys remains to be discussed, they still are an easy to manage, cost-effective tool through which party officials can get to know what the public in general – or supporters, sympathisers, members, or whatever other specialised group in particular – think about specific policies or topics. The control keeps remaining on the party's side, and thus the relationship is still a hierarchical one: the public can choose only between a given set of answers for it is the web designer who decides both which questions and replies are made available. The website's content is unaltered; the user has no real opportunities for structuring it
(Jansen, 2004). Their level of interactivity is therefore still quite limited, although higher than that of the features previously discussed (e-mail, e-form, and e-newsletters)\(^92\). One of their most interesting characteristics lies on their public nature: all visitors to the site can see the responses from previous users and normally — though not in all cases — anybody is able to take part in the survey. But this does not mean that citizens will necessarily participate. An official from a British party stated in the online forum: 'We have found that the take up of polls, surveys and petitions has been limited.'\(^93\) Later, on personal correspondence with the author, the same official reiterated this idea: 'We have tried online polls and found little interest in them. In fact the responses were very disappointing.'\(^94\) This may explain the low proportion of European parties including this feature in their websites. Furthermore, it has been argued that there are parties who will not make use of these polls based on ideological reasons. Green parties, for instance, have been found to have some form of ideological hang-up about the use of surveys (Farrell and Webb, 1998). As Table 37 and Table 38 show further below, the findings from this research confirm that Green parties have the lowest proportion of e-surveys in their websites when compared to sites from parties from other ideological families.

Just slightly over five per cent of the websites analysed had electronic guestbooks or offered the possibility for the user to publicly post commentaries on certain sections of the site. Both these features share their openness: one can post whatever s/he likes, without being constraint into choosing from a given set of answers, as e-surveys do. Normally, but not always, what is written appears automatically on the site, even though it might be removed later on after monitoring. In this sense the user is able to alter the content of the website, and thus the level of interactivity is considerably higher than in the precedent elements\(^95\). Furthermore, being posts of a public nature the relationship goes beyond party-individual user. Instead, it potentially involves all users from a website. Nevertheless, real opportunities for debate or deliberation do not take place— unlike in blogs or forums. The individual posts either a commentary directly related to the information presented by the party or, in the case of electronic

\(^92\) This why websites including this type of feature have been considered as having ‘medium’ level of interactivity in this study.

\(^93\) British party official (Mr C), ‘Interactivity and Participation’, online forum Use of the Internet by European parties, 14 Feb. 2008.

\(^94\) E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr C), 29 Feb. 2008.

\(^95\) Websites including this type of element have been categorised as having a ‘high’ level of interactivity.
guestbooks, leaves some kind of ‘greeting’. Although ulterior users may reply to these posts, this is not the intention behind these features and the structure of the comments – how they are exposed in the site, with one post directly underneath the last one in a list – usually do not facilitate this practice.

Party websites that did not contain a forum or a blog but that had links to official blogs from members of the party in external sites were also considered as having a high degree of interactivity (though not a ‘very high’ one). It is suggested below that this is a trend that may well be setting itself as a viable alternative for parties. Keeping the official site not very interactive, the apparent risks associated with online forms of debate are thus reduced; pointing out citizens where they can find spaces for debate however, satisfies the demands for interactivity from the most interested users. In this way, parties not only reduce these perceived risks, but also attempt to solve one of the most challenging phenomena with party websites: how to satisfy the demands of very different audiences, from the most politically active – and demanding – citizens or journalists, to the uninterested user that arrives to the website maybe by chance and who needs to be kept interested. Parties may well think that overloading their websites with too many Web 2.0 types of features may push these latter publics away.

Forums, or message boards, and blogs allow the most complete form of interactivity in a political website96 (Jansen, 2004). Using this feature, citizens can communicate directly with the party, but also crucially with each other, and thus in theory political participation and engagement can be enhanced. 31% of the party websites analysed contained either a forum or a blog. In most (26.7%) cases the forum or blog was open: any user was able to see it (even if, in some cases, previous registration was required to post). Only in less than 5% of the websites the view of the messageboard or blog was restricted to registered users. Almost a third of websites, thus, had a dedicated space for debate. This is a relatively high figure and an important finding, for it questions the general conception of party websites as mere static information-givers. Through the inclusion of message boards or blogs, almost a third of the European parties have created websites that go beyond the mere top-down delivery of information and offer instead spaces where communication between citizens and their political representatives can take place in a public manner. The mode of communication that is allowed through these instruments, furthermore, is bottom-up, it comes from the public rather than

96 Therefore, party websites which included either a blog or a forum have been labelled as having a ‘very high’ degree of interactivity.
being directed by the party. Of course forums may be monitored, but this does not change the bottom-up nature of the dialogue that is maintained through them.

Both academia and the media have widely written about the spread of blogs throughout the political world in recent years. It is mainly the blogs maintained by candidates in times of electoral campaigns or by individual representatives\(^97\) which have attracted the attention of journalists and scholars. European parties, it would seem, have wanted to jump onto the blogging revolution. Most studies from the beginning of the 2000s concluded that party websites lagged behind in terms of interactivity\(^88\); to find out that a third of them were incorporating highly interactive elements in 2007 means, thus, that this is a recent development. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for this is the hype that has surrounded the blogs in the past few years. However, blogs and forums are not without its problems. There are two main challenges, which defy their potential to be used as tools for political engagement. These will be further discussed at the end of the chapter. For the moment it will just be pointed out: on the first hand, are citizens really that interested in them? Do they use these interactive features when they are made available? After all, it may well be that, as it has been put elsewhere, “blogging may be intriguing to the academia but it fails to excite the body politic more generally” (Ferguson and Griffiths, 2006: 366). And it may also be that the citizens who do use them are only a very particular, already politically engaged, type of citizens and not the general public. Secondly, is the quality of dialogue high enough to be able to talk of real deliberation taking place? If this is not to be the case, then a lot of the arguments that have been used to claim that the use of interactive features can encourage engagement or participation will be lost. These questions were also discussed in the online forum done with party officials from the selected case studies on February 2007. As we will see below, both problems were mentioned explicitly by the participants as important obstacles towards the fulfilment of the potential of the Internet as a participatory technology.

A final feature that has been analysed in this research regarding the interactivity of websites is whether the site had or not an exclusive space – or intranet – which could only be accessed by logging in with a username and a password. Over a third (36.1%) of European party websites had included this feature in 2007. This is a high proportion when the figure is compared to the rate at

\(^97\) In the UK context, see the special issue by Information Polity, Volume 13 (1-2), and particularly the article by Francoli and Ward on British MPs’ use of blogs (Francoli and Ward, 2008). In Spain, see the report of Campos Domínguez (2007).

\(^88\) But also other political actors such as parliamentarians (see Francoli and Ward, 2008).
which other features are present in these websites (see Figure 6 above). Offering an exclusive space is thus within the most popular interactive elements available in European party websites. Why is this feature so attractive to European party officials? One of the points that came up repeatedly during the online forum\(^99\) was the emphasis made by party officials that party websites needed to satisfy a variety of audiences. An official from a mainstream British party came as far as to argue that what is included on a party site 'is (or should be!) driven by your audiences'\(^{100}\), which, the official claimed, made very difficult the creation of a single space (the party website) able to satisfy all these publics. Similarly, another official — also from a British party but not the same one — told the author that 'our website exists for a number of reasons and to satisfy a number of different audiences — perhaps, like other political websites, too many different audiences to fully satisfy the needs of any particular one of them!'\(^{101}\) While various types of audiences were named in the forum and on personal interviews as the recipients of party websites (the general public, members of the party, sympathisers, potential voters, journalists, researchers...), the main distinction is made between ordinary citizens and members/supporters. The inclusion of an exclusive space for a particular section of the public is a solution with which party websites have come up to try to satisfy these different needs. This explains the popularity of such a feature on European party websites, and it is expected that more websites will be including these spaces as the Internet continues to establish itself.

The existence of these intranets raises two different sets of questions depending on their accessibility:

- On the one hand, they can be open to anyone who wants to register. That is, any user of the website may create an account and obtain a login and a password to enter the intranet, without needing to be an official member of the party. In this case, the line between official members and supporters is, on practice, being reduced online. The existence of such spaces is thus a sign that points towards a broader discussion: that of the nature and role of membership in contemporary parties. Are parties trying, through the use of these intranets and other tools, to attract 'those who do not commit to old-style party membership, or those who do not engage with traditional face-to-face participatory structures?' (Anstead and Chadwick, 2009: 65) Is the development of new ICT contributing towards the transformation of European

\(^{99}\) Use of the Internet by European parties, Jan-Feb. 2008.

\(^{100}\) British party official (Mr B), 'Features of Party Websites', online forum Use of the Internet by European parties, 23 Jan. 2008.

\(^{101}\) E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr A), 29 Feb. 2008.
parties into looser organisations, which would base themselves not so much on a solid membership but instead count on the mobilisation of sympathisers to gain elections, like the American parties? And, further on, the discussion could follow: do parties nowadays still 'need members'? What are the benefits of having a large membership?102

On the other hand, these intranets can be restricted and be available only for members of the party. In this case, the debate is a different one: does the existence of these private spaces within public websites actually contribute to the creation of barriers between the general public and the members? Are parties using the technology to reinvigorate the opportunities for participation and engagement of members, creating thus a core of strong supporters ready to be mobilised on campaign times? Or do these intranets simply respond to the point made above: that parties need to fulfil the needs of different audiences and that these spaces provide the easiest, most practical means towards achieving these demands?

Finally, it is worth mentioning the relevance of these spaces for the specific case of the political groups operating at the EP. These 'pan-European parties' have arguably much more difficulties than the rest in creating a sense of community among its members or supporters. Configuring private intranets as a means of reinforcing the feeling of network or group may be one of the solutions available by the Web to these parties. The empirical data confirm this idea: as Table 25 and Table 26 show below, EP political groups have indeed a considerable larger proportion of intranets in their websites than the rest of European, national, parties.

5. 2. Differences on the Interactive Content of Party Websites according to their Political System

One of the main conclusions from the previous section, and contrary to the hypothesis outlined on chapter three, has been that European party websites vary greatly among themselves in terms of their content, and specifically, in terms of their level of interactive content. But what are these differences due to? Is it possible to establish a pattern between party websites from various political systems? Do these websites change according to contextual factors? This section analyses the content of European party websites from a comparative geographical

102 For a more in-depth discussion on this issue see Scarrow (2001).
perspective. Its aim is to find out whether certain attributes from the 'offline world' play a role, or not, in the degree of interactivity of party websites.

As in chapter four, the findings of our survey are presented according to certain characteristics of the political systems the parties operate in; characteristics which can be expected to have an effect in the content of their sites. These are: age of democracy, geopolitical area, Internet penetration rate, date of last election of the legislature, type of electoral system, degree of voter turnout, level of economic wealth, and of Free Press. Data was not available in the EP case for the last four variables, and thus in these ones the websites from political groups operating at the EP level have been excluded from the analysis.

The first one of these factors that is looked at is the age of democracy of the political system in question. Are websites from parties operating in established democracies more sophisticated than those from newer ones – in our context, Eastern European countries? Table 25 below illustrates these differences. The table is structured around the series of interactive elements that have been looked at in the survey upon which this research is based and which were discussed above. The percentages show the proportion of websites for each of the categories that did contain the element in question\(^{103}\). All following tables in this section will follow this structure.

**Table 25: Interactive content of party websites according to the Age of Democracy of their political system**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Established democracies</th>
<th>Newer democracies</th>
<th>European Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>81.7%</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at the data, one unexpected result stands out: websites from parties operating in newer democracies outdo their counterparts from most established systems in the majority of the features looked at. More party websites from newer democracies contain e-mail addresses for contact, electronic surveys,\(^{103}\) All percentages are valid ones, not taking into account the missing cases. What we are interested in are not the absolute values but the relative ones for comparison.
guestbooks, blogs and forums than those from the most established democratic systems. To be sure, the differences in rates are not very high. However, it is a very important finding as it was expected that parties from the newer democracies bloc would have the least interactive websites in Europe. It is worth remembering that in terms of online presence and visibility, websites from Eastern parties were more than three times less visible than those from parties operating in the established democracies group. Eastern countries have also the lowest rates of Internet penetration in Europe (as it could be seen in Table 8, above). According to Norris well-known thesis (Norris, 2003) on the influence of the rate of technological diffusion in a society on party websites, it would be expected that parties operating in countries with a low degree of technological diffusion (and so in this case, Eastern European countries) would produce less sophisticated and/or interactive websites. This is, however, not the case. It seems therefore – as it was already the case in terms of websites visibility – that the level of Internet penetration of the political systems the parties operate in does not influence the content of their sites. This proposition is further backed up with the data shown on Table 27 further below.

On the other hand, an argument going in the opposite direction can be made concerning political actors' behaviour in newer democracies. Since practices are not well established in these political systems, it could be expected parties and other actors from these legislatures to be more adventurous in their use of new media than their counterparts from established democracies. Among others, Ward, Gibson and Nixon have argued a similar point: 'in newly democratised countries... the Internet may be able to make more of an impact, since party systems ad the parties themselves are less well entrenched and more susceptible to technological change' Ward et al (2003b: 26). The results from this study confirm this claim.

Another interesting finding is that parties operating in the context of the European Parliament have considerably more websites with closed blogs or forums (for which logging-in is needed even to read them) and intranets or exclusive spaces for registered users. It may well be that party groups operating in such a political system, with all its particularities (geographical distance, size of the population, EU's democratization challenges, and so on) have decided to make use of the Web in a manner that emphasizes the sense of belonging for the user. One of the most well-known accusations of the EU institutions is that these are seen as even more remote and separated from the citizen than those from the member states (which are already undergoing important challenges concerning their legitimacy, as it has been pointed out.) New media technologies can
potentially provide European political actors with instruments to help citizens feel more integrated. In this sense, dedicating specific sections of their websites, and most importantly those highly interactive ones such as blogs or forums, to users who need to previously register may well enhance the sense of belonging to a group for these users. This is a very much needed sentiment for parties who are operating with such vast populations and which are regarded generally as distant, remote actors (to an even larger extent than parties acting at the national level).

Indeed, an official from one of the party groups operating at the EP mentioned explicitly on our online forum that: ‘I would say that an internal network (or social networking among users) is important. The PES has a network of activists spread out over Europe. ... We try to provide them with virtual meeting places’\(^{104}\) through websites (the PES has two official sites: a main one, which is the one analysed in this study, and another, more interactive one, which is considered as the campaign one\(^{105}\)) and social network sites such as Facebook. For these party groups, thus, the Web may be seen as a tool to reinforce their relationship with a public composed mainly of already sympathisers or supporters, and to offer them a space for meeting and discussion. For other parties, operating in national contexts, the opposite may be true. For instance an official from a British party told us that

'It seems to me that constructing a site that appeals mainly to members and supporters of the party is rather a waste of time. ... The point of a party site is surely to engage people who are not already members and to deliver messages to them that might bear fruit in the form of future membership, support or, most important, votes.'\(^{106}\)

These two views confirm one of the particularities of the Web, and thus of party websites: that there is not one single public but instead multiple audiences. Trying to satisfy all of them is one of the most important challenges for parties and some, as we have seen, have intentionally decided to target a specific one.

Looking at the Scale of participatory interactivity, the data tells us that websites from both older and newer democracies have a very similar average level of interactivity: a medium one, with scores of 3.25 and 3.23 for each group respectively. Websites from parties operating in the EP lag behind, with an average score of 2.71 (which positions them between the categories of low and medium in the scale).


\(^{105}\) It is interesting that what is considered to be ‘the campaign site’, in the party official’s own words, is the much more interactive one...

Table 26 separates the group of countries from the ‘Established democracies’ category into three geopolitical areas. Norris (2003) has talked of a North/South divide in Europe regarding the sophistication of content of party websites. As it has been shown in chapter four, such divide did not apply to the visibility of European party websites in 2007. Instead, the major differences were found between the West and the East of Europe. Looking at the interactive content of such websites denies, again, Norris’ claim.

Table 26: Interactive content of party websites according to their Geopolitical Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Western and North</th>
<th>Mediterranean</th>
<th>Scandinavian</th>
<th>Eastern</th>
<th>European Parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>76 (3)</td>
<td>49 (5)</td>
<td>28 (0)</td>
<td>78 (7)</td>
<td>24 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whereas Mediterranean websites clearly lag behind those from the Western and North and Scandinavian areas in terms of electronic newsletters and e-guestbooks, they actually outdo all areas in a much more interactive feature: open blogs or forums. More party websites from the Mediterranean area have open blogs or forums than those from any other European area. They also score the highest in the Scale of participatory interactivity: 3.55. Furthermore, the only other geopolitical area where more than a third of party websites included a blog or a forum (open or closed) was the Eastern one. In all other zones, less than a third of party websites had incorporated an interactive element for online debate. This is, again, a counter-intuitive finding whose relevance should not be dismissed.

To be sure, Scandinavian parties have the most sophisticated websites in terms of e-mail: all of their websites included an e-mail address for contact. Although the publication of an e-mail address is not a very interactive act per se, it is however worth emphasizing that this is the only European area in which all party websites did include at least one e-mail address. Interestingly, the area that comes next in terms of e-mail availability is the Eastern one.

Scandinavian parties were also the ones who were linking the most to external websites where official blogs or forums from the party or political candidate/s were
available: almost 40% of them did so, compared to 12.5% of party groups operating at the EP. This may explain their relatively low figure (higher than for the Western and North and the EP areas, anyhow) regarding how many of them had blogs or forums within their actual site. As it can be appreciated on Figure 7 below, over three quarters of Swedish party sites contained links which pointed the user towards external websites containing official blogs or forums from candidates or the party. This data, compared with the relatively low figure that the websites from this country also present in terms of proportion of actual blogs or forums within the actual sites point towards the following argument: it may well be that a trend that is establishing itself within parties is to have an official, not very interactive site, and direct citizens who are interested in further participation towards external websites where spaces for debate are set up. In this way, parties would be playing it safe with regards to their actual site but at the same time would be offering interested users alternative spaces where they can express themselves and communicate with one another and the party. This is the case, as it is explained above, of the socialist group at the EP, the PES, which has two websites: the official one and another much more interactive one. It is also the case of the Romanian socialist party which had a different website for the campaign for the EP in 2007 'with the sole purpose to debate'\(^{107}\). Parties may in this way be attempting to sort out the challenge of having to satisfy very different audiences through their websites. In this respect it is significant to note that a participant in the online forum, who had already made great emphasis on the necessity of party websites to satisfy a variety of audiences, stated, when talking about the possible functions of party websites that ‘they can act as a useful staging post to other sites – so providing a route through to finding local party sites, individual campaign sites, blogs run by party members and so on.’\(^{108}\)

\(^{107}\) E-mail correspondence with Romanian party official (Ms G), 03 Mar. 2008.

One of the most unexpected findings from this research: the high degree of interactivity of Mediterranean party websites is confirmed with the data shown in Figure 7. These results tell that the country with the highest proportion of parties which had included the most interactive features in their websites (forums and blogs) is Greece, where 66.7% of its parties had these elements in their sites. Moreover, all of these blogs/forums are open, that is, there is no registration needed to visualise them, any visitor of the site is able to read them (though not necessarily to post comments in them). Following closely there is Spain, with over 60% of its party websites having these elements, and the vast majority of these...
also being of an open nature. Spain is indeed the legislature which scores the highest in the Scale of participatory interactivity, with an average score of 4.38, as Figure 8, below, shows.

Further analysing the countries included in the Mediterranean geopolitical group, the data for Portugal show a different story to that of Greece and Spain. The proportion of Portuguese parties which included blogs or forums at the time of the survey was comparatively very low: 12.5%. Half of the Portuguese parties, however, do direct users towards linked spaces for online debate elsewhere. The case of Cyprus, which for the purposes of this research is also included in the Mediterranean geopolitical area, is a special one109. Three out of the nine parties looked at for this legislature had websites which were not working at the time when the survey was done110. The percentages of interactive elements in party websites on the Cyprus case have thus to be handled with prudence.

Furthermore, this is a note of caution that can be extended to the whole of the analysis on this particular section. The total number of cases (websites) analysed for each political system is too low to allow for meaningful conclusions to be drawn. When it is said, for instance, that 66.7% of Greek party websites include blogs or forums, what the data is telling is that four sites out of the total six had these elements. One ought to be cautious when taking conclusions or making statements when the figure of total cases is as low as six. However, given the very low number of comparative studies looking at these features, the importance of this data must not be overlooked. The reader should avoid making bold assumptions from it, but the data is still relevant.

Additionally, it is worth pointing out that in the particular case of Greece, none of its party websites included e-surveys, e-guestbooks or links to blogs or forums in external sites. Moreover, these percentages rates say nothing about the quality of the elements included in the site, whether these are read by citizens, or to what extent they are used, or not.

Taking all of this into account, one should be wary of proclaiming that Mediterranean party websites are the most interactive ones in Europe. This notwithstanding the relevance of these results, which by showing the high degree of interactivity within party websites from this region, have proved wrong most predictions and claims from earlier comparative studies (such as Norris, 2003)111.

109 Previous studies (such as that from Trechsel et al., 2003) have already shown the particularity of the Cyprus case.
110 With Bulgaria, it forms part of the countries in which most parties had websites which were not working on spring 2007.
111 Although the study by Trechsel et al. had also positioned Spain very high (the second after Germany, although by a considerable difference) in their e-party index ranking, which
What is more, whereas the total number of cases for each country is too low to allow for generalisations, the data is still relevant in comparative, rather than absolute, terms.

Since the field of Internet research is a relatively new one and, particularly, there has been a lack of empirical studies until relatively recently, there is not much data from other studies with which these findings could be compared to and thus be able to analyse trends in time in European party websites. In the UK context, a study from 2004 (Jackson, 2004) looking at British party sites found that in these countries eight parties with parliamentarian representation plus one extra-parliamentarian offered the possibility to subscribe to e-newsletters in their websites. Our data, from 2007, shows that the proportion of British parties offering this feature in their sites has, surprisingly, fallen: just slightly over half of them did so. To be sure, Jackson's findings were based on what party officials had declared and not on actual content analysis by the researcher, which may explain this difference.

Still on the British context, an investigation of party websites in the 2001 general election brought to light the fact that only around 8% of the sites contained either a public guestbook, bulletin board or live chat fora (Ward and Gibson, 2003: 199). Our own data confirms that this figure has not changed at all in the period of six years from 2001 to 2007 (date of our own survey). According to our research, 7.7% of British party sites included electronic guestbooks. Exactly the same rate, 7.7%, had spaces for online debate such as blogs or fora.

In turn, Wring and Horrocks have argued that British political parties were less willing to utilize interactive, participatory, features than their continental European counterparts (Wring and Horrocks, 2001: 202). Sudulich, on the other hand, found that the opposite was true. In her comparative analysis of British, Irish, Italian, and Spanish party websites, it was those from the British parties the ones scoring higher in terms of participatory and interactive content (Sudulich, 2009). Evidence from this research supports however Wring and Horrocks' claim: the UK, with an average score of 2.62, is within the five countries where political parties have websites which score the lowest in the Scale of participatory interactivity (see Figure 8 below). Moreover, the average score of all websites analysed in the EU is of 3.20, considerably higher than that for the UK case. Interestingly, the country which has the party websites with the lowest score in the scale is also an Anglo-
Saxon one: Ireland. This may be a mere anecdotal data, or there may well be characteristics in the Anglo-Saxon culture that make parties develop not very interactive websites. However, since Anglo-Saxon countries such as the US have typically been at the forefront in the usage of new media for political purposes, not much should be read into this.

With regard to another country, France, a study from 2003 claimed that almost all French party websites included an email address for contact (Villalba, 2003). Our data, however, contradicts these findings. According to our survey, only 55.6% of French party sites included an e-mail address for contact on 2007. More in line with what had been suggested by Villalba, however, the vast majority (88.9%) of those sites offered the possibility to subscribe to an electronic newsletter. The same author maintained that the use of online polls by French parties was, in his own words ‘very rare’ (Villalba, 2003: 133). In our study, 11.1% of French party websites had an active online poll at the time of the research.
Following Spain in the mean scores in the Scale of participatory interactivity, there is Germany, with a score of 4.00, as it can be seen from Figure 8. As it was pointed out on chapter four, German parties were among the most visible ones in the European context. It remains to be seen whether they are also highly networked, something which is looked at in the next chapter, but for the moment it is safe to claim that German parties have on average the most sophisticated websites in Europe, both in terms of presence and interactive...
content. Earlier studies, particularly that from Trechsel et al. (2003: 26), had also arrived to the same conclusion and had positioned Germany in the top of their indexes regarding party website sophistication.

There are some interesting points to be made when these results are compared with those from Trechsel et al. (2003). On the one hand, the analysis made by these authors concluded by stating that Germany, Spain, Austria, Sweden and the Czech Republic were the five countries where parties had the most interactive websites. Our own research maintains three out of these five political systems at the top of those countries in which parties have the most interactive websites of the EU: Spain, Germany, and Sweden. Parties from Austria and the Czech Republic are no longer among those with the most participatory websites. The biggest discrepancy is to be found in the case of Estonia. Whereas the study by Trechsel et al (2003) claimed that Estonian parties were among those with the least interactive sites in the EU (Estonia came third from the bottom in their ‘E-Party Index’), Figure 8 shows that in 2007 Estonian parties were clearly amongst the top of the EU in their use of the interactive facilities of the Internet in their websites. Estonia is one of the democracies with the highest development of ICT in the world\(^\text{112}\). The level of services that can be done through e-government features is considerably higher than the rest of Europe\(^\text{113}\). They have also started to experiment with electronic voting before than most nations\(^\text{114}\). It is therefore not surprising that its party websites are within the most interactive ones of the EU. The case of Latvia, the other Baltic country positioned at the top of our figure, however, is a different one: Latvia has never stood out as a country particularly ahead in the use of new media technology. Perhaps the particularities of Nordic European cultures explain why within the five countries scoring top at the scale, three belong to this area: Sweden, Estonia and Latvia. This investigation goes beyond the scope of this study, but it is worth keeping it in mind for future research.

Not many characteristics are shared between the countries that score lowest in the scale. The lowest five (Ireland, Luxembourg, Hungary, UK, and the

\(^{112}\) This researcher has experienced it personally: lost in a deep wood in the middle of Estonia in the summer 2006, the only sign that regularly appeared hanging within the trees was the one stating that it was a “wi-fi area”.

\(^{113}\) For instance, all of state taxes are paid online (online version from El País, www.elpais.com, 05 May 2009). The great reliance of Estonia in e-government services is something which Russian hackers were aware of when in spring 2007 allegedly attacked Estonian governmental websites in an attempt to create chaos in the country, in what has been labelled as “The first cyberwar” by the media. See for instance the BBC report on this issue at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Europe/6665145.stm (last accessed January 2009).

EP) come from various political systems, with different types of electoral systems, rates of turnout, or level of Internet penetration, to name a few of these characteristics.

As it has been pointed out in the previous chapter, the level of Internet penetration in a given society is very much related to the claims that authors have made regarding the different use of the new media in diverse geographical areas. In other words, when Norris (Norris, 2003) talked of having found evidence to support the thesis that there is a divide between the Northern and the Southern regions in Europe concerning their political use of the Web, she pointed at the level of technological diffusion in these regions as the variable explaining this difference, instead of other factors such as the type of electoral system or how active the civil society was. Even if our data so far has not confirmed Norris' thesis\textsuperscript{115}, it is worth analysing whether the proportion of the population online plays or not a role in the variances found in the content of European party websites.

Table 27: Interactive content of party websites according to the Internet penetration rates of their political systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</th>
<th>Very low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
<td>91.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results seem to confirm our previous findings\textsuperscript{116}: the rate of technological diffusion in our society does not influence the sophistication of party websites, at least regarding their interactive content. There is no relation at all between these rates and the average scores in the Scale of participatory interactivity of the websites analysed. Furthermore, although those parties from systems with the highest Internet penetration had the websites which included e-mail addresses, subscription to e-newsletters and links to official blogs or forums in the highest proportion, the rest of the data shows that there is no linear progression: the highest the Internet rate did not imply the highest percentages.

\textsuperscript{115} The rate of Internet penetration did not affect the visibility of party websites, as it was explained on Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{116} As well as those from Trechsel et al. (2003) and Farmer and Fender (2005).
The only case where some relationship can be found is in the case of electronic newsletters: here, with only one exception, party websites from systems with the highest Internet penetration had this element in a higher proportion than the rest. Regarding availability of e-mail contact, the vast majority of parties from systems with a very high Internet penetration rate offered it in their websites (91.1%). This is worth calling attention to since, as it was seen on Table 26, the Scandinavian countries (which are those for which the Internet diffusion is highest) were the only ones where parties offered in all cases an e-mail address for contact in their websites. A highest technological development does logically mean a highest use of e-mail among the general public, and parties seem to have recognised this. However, one should be cautious in wanting to read more into this finding: the next group of parties with the highest proportion of websites offering an e-mail address was precisely the one in which parties came from systems with a very low rate of Internet penetration (87.2%).

What is interesting to point out is that those parties operating in the systems with a high and a very high rate of Internet penetration all had working websites at the time of the survey. This could mean that parties from these systems do pay a more regular attention to their websites and make sure that these are always available to their citizens. Again, it was the Scandinavian countries the only ones for which all party websites analysed were working at the time when the research was done (see Table 26 above).

If party websites are mainly used for campaigning, then it would be logical to expect that websites from legislatures in which an election was due in a short time (those which had had the latest election in 2002 or 2003, then) would be more sophisticated ones than those for which 2007, the year when this research was done, was a normal, non-campaigning, 'peacetime' period. Findings from a study of Australian party websites by Gibson and Ward confirmed that the websites acting in states when an election was due soon were more sophisticated than the rest (Gibson and Ward, 2003). However, the date of the last legislative election did not make much of a difference regarding visibility or presence of party websites and at first glance, Table 28 seems to confirm that this is the case also regarding the interactive content of those websites. Those sites from legislatures where the last election had taken place on 2002 or 2003 are, by no means, within the most interactive ones. If anything, it is exactly the opposite: they are the less sophisticated ones in terms of interactivity. Only regarding the proportion of sites including links to official blogs or forums elsewhere do the parties operating in
legislatures with an election due in a short time, and thus on campaign-state, outdo the rest: parties from systems where the last election had been on 2002 had the highest proportion of websites including these links (41.2%). This finding confirms a trend already discussed: that parties may well be turning into directing users to external sites in which they can participate to a larger degree, while keeping their official websites relatively simple and unsophisticated, and thus more accessible to all kinds of audiences.

Table 28: Interactive content of party websites according to the Date of Last Election of the legislature they operate in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>87.8%</td>
<td>83.0%</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>17 (3)</td>
<td>15 (0)</td>
<td>74 (5)</td>
<td>53 (3)</td>
<td>78 (6)</td>
<td>18 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The group of parties with the most interactive websites is that in which the last legislative election had taken place in 2007. They have both the highest proportion of sites including elements for online debate (38.9%) and the highest mean score in the Scale of participatory interactivity. This finding points towards the hypothesis that the presence of an election nearby does make a difference in the content of party sites. The survey having been done in 2007, it can be claimed that the high degree of interactivity found in these sites are left-overs of the campaign. On the other hand, seeing that there were only two countries having elections on 2007 (Estonia and Finland), extra caution is needed when interpreting this data. It may well be that the highest interactivity found in party sites from these two political systems is due to country-based factors rather than to the date of the last legislative election. More research would be needed to fully explain these results.

In any case, intuitively it is logical to expect party sites to change their contents when an election is due. Furthermore, it is likely that parties are using their sites mainly as campaigning tools rather than as instruments to enhance their relationship with citizens, for instance. When officials from various parties around Europe were asked about whether their party site changed when elections were due in a short time, all of them answered that they did117. However, these changes

117 Online forum Use of the Internet by European parties, Jan-Feb. 2008.
seemed to not affect the interactive content of the websites. Instead, all officials said that the changes are directed mainly to emphasize the information on the manifesto, candidates or the campaign itself. As an official from a British edge party put it: 'In an election period the focus of the site changes to emphasize the important aspects of the party’s manifesto and draw attention to its candidates.'

At the same time, none of them declared increasing the interactivity or the possibilities for participation of their sites as an important issue to be changed on election times. In the words of a member from a major British party: ‘All other information would become pretty much irrelevant for that period and would take a back seat.’ The solution, an already familiar one: move the most participatory or Web 2.0 types of elements elsewhere, to alternative party websites or even social network sites such as Facebook or MySpace.

Table 29: Average scores in the Scale of participatory interactivity of party websites according to date of last election of the political system and size of parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of last election</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Fringe</th>
<th>Extra-parliamentarian</th>
<th>St Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 29 shows above, extra-parliamentarian parties vary considerably more between themselves in their interactive content than any other types of parties depending on the year when the last election took place. This is shown by the standard deviation, which in the case of extra-parliamentarian parties almost doubles those than for the other groups.

The two groups in which there was more divergence between parties from different sizes (with standard deviations almost doubling those from all other years) were those for which the last legislative election had taken place in 2002 (and thus a next one was coming soon) and 2007. In this latter case, websites may have well still been in ‘just-post-campaign’ states, with rests of the campaign included in there. That is, in campaign times the content of party websites does tend to diverge mostly between parties from various sizes. In ‘peace-time’ periods these differences get considerably reduced. This is different from what had been found

118 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr C), 29 Feb. 2008.
119 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr A), 29 Feb. 2008.
120 Such as the case of the PES, with its campaign site running alongside its official one for the European elections of 2009.
out regarding not content but visibility of websites (see chapter four). There, the biggest differences among parties were found in systems for which the last legislative election had taken place in 2005, and thus systems in 'peace-time' period. Here the opposite takes place. It may thus well be that minor parties do catch up in peace-time periods in terms of interactive content, but not at all in terms of visibility. The power/resources of bigger parties may play a bigger role in visibility of sites, which is logical: they have more money and resources, more influence, more visibility in offline media sphere, and so on. These factors appear to play a bigger role with regard to websites' visibility, but not necessarily in the interactive content of the websites.

Differences in the type of electoral system affected the visibility of party websites to a larger extent than any other factor. As it was explained, parties from non-proportional systems had websites three times more visible than those from parties from proportional electoral systems. It is logical to expect, thus, the type of electoral system to be also playing a role with regards to the content of those websites. However, as Table 30 shows, this does not seem to be the case:

**Table 30: Interactive content of party websites according to the type of Electoral System of their countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proportional</th>
<th>Non-proportional</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>86.4%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>184 (12)</td>
<td>22 (2)</td>
<td>25 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: International IDEA and Farrell

Not only parties from non-proportional electoral systems do not have more interactive websites than the rest, but instead the contrary is the case. If any generalisations are to be made from this data, then the evidence points rather towards the higher degree of interactivity found in party websites operating in mixed and proportional electoral systems. The differences are most striking when looking at the proportion of party websites including elements for online debate on

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121 As it was the case on Chapter 5, in the tables that follow (those looking at differences according to electoral system, voter turnout, GDP and degree of Free Press) party groups operating in the EP have not been taken into account.
their sites: while this rate is lower than 10% in the case of parties from non-proportional systems, those from proportional and mixed systems largely exceed this proportion (with 32.6% and 40% respectively).

The level of voter turnout had an impact on the visibility of party websites in a positive way: the higher the rate of turnout for a political system, the more visible the websites from parties operating in that system were. The same cannot be said, however, about the relationship between turnout level and interactive content of party websites. As Table 31 shows, there does not seem to be any relation between these two, confirming thus previous claims made by Trechsel et al. about the non-impact of voter turnout on European party websites (Trechsel et al., 2003).

Table 31: Interactive content of party websites according to the level of voter Turnout of their countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E-form</th>
<th>Very low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>78.0%</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
<td>87.2%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
<td>70.9%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>17 (0)</td>
<td>41 (4)</td>
<td>73 (8)</td>
<td>86 (1)</td>
<td>14 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: International IDEA

To be sure, parties from countries with a very high level of turnout in elections had the largest proportion of websites including spaces for online debate: 35.7% of them did so. However, the category that comes next in terms of interactivity of their party websites, very closely, is that from parties operating in political systems with a very low rate of voter turnout (35.3% of their party websites included blogs or forums). What is more, it is also this group (political systems with a very low level of turnout) the one for which the party websites score highest in the Scale of participatory interactivity on average. The only really significant finding regarding this data is the very high proportion of websites including a private space or intranet for which logging in after an initial registration is needed in the group of parties belonging to countries with very high rates of turnout. In this case, the differences are striking: 57.1% of websites coming from this group had this element, a proportion that is 20 points higher than for any other category. In societies with a politically active citizenship, parties may thus be making an effort in
offering special, more participative, spaces within their websites to satisfy the demands of the most active citizens.

The level of economic wealth of a country was found to be a factor affecting party websites visibility: the higher the level of GDP for a country, the most visible the websites from its parties were. Concerning the content of these websites, the data (see Table 32 below) shows that the relationship, if there is one to be found, is in this case more complex.

Table 32: Interactive content of party websites according to the GDP level of their countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E-form</th>
<th>Very low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>88.4%</td>
<td>94.9%</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
<td>84.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>13 (4)</td>
<td>43 (2)</td>
<td>39 (4)</td>
<td>79 (4)</td>
<td>57 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IMF

Up until the category of 'very high GDP level', there is a linear relationship between the interactive content of party sites and the economic development of the countries they operate in: scores for the Scale of participatory interactivity increase as the level of GDP does. However, parties from countries with a very high level of GDP have, somehow counter intuitively, the least interactive websites of Europe according to their average score on the Scale of participatory interactivity.

Although the state of the civil society in a given political system will undoubtedly affect its actors' usage of the Web, it is however very difficult for the researcher to look at tangible indicators capable of showing the degree and nature of this influence. As it was stated in chapter four, the level of Free Press is a good indicator of the degree of independence of the media, which itself is a sign of a strong civil society. Table 33 below shows how the level of Free Press of European countries affects the interactive content of its parties' websites.
Table 33: Interactive content of party websites according to the level of Free Press of their countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Almost perfectly free</th>
<th>Very free</th>
<th>Average free</th>
<th>Low free</th>
<th>Free, but leading towards Party Free</th>
<th>Partial Free</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>81.3%</td>
<td>89.8%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>10 (0)</td>
<td>65 (0)</td>
<td>64 (3)</td>
<td>59 (6)</td>
<td>20 (2)</td>
<td>13 (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Freedom House

These findings show that the different levels of Free Press of EU countries do not explain the differences in interactive content found in European party websites; just as they did not account for the diversity in party websites visibility. In other words, there is no relation at all between the degree of Free Press of a given country and the sophistication of its parties' websites regarding their interactive content or their online presence. If anything, what the data shows is that those websites coming from political systems with lower levels of Free Press scored higher in the Scale of participatory interactivity. But as it is shown in the next chapter, the level of Free Press in a society did not have any influence on the external networking of party websites either. The interpretation to be made from these results is, thus, that the differences on degree of Free Press between European societies do not account for the variances found in the content and sophistication of European party websites in the respective political systems.

The main findings that have been discussed in this section have mostly been unexpected ones. Summarizing, these are:

- The majority of factors that can be expected to play a role regarding the diversity in content of European party websites have been found not to be exerting any influence. Characteristics of the political systems parties operate in such as the rate of Internet penetration, the level of turnout\(^{122}\), the date of the last legislative election, and the degree of

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\(^{122}\) Except, as it has been discussed, in the case of intranets: the proportion of party websites including this feature increases as the level of turnout of the country parties operate in rises.
Free Press have not been found to be affecting the content of the websites of political parties, at least not in any clear, sound manner. Country-specific institutional variables or the degree of ICT development do not seem to matter much with regards to the interactive content of party websites, as Trechsel et al (2003) had already shown. However, some relation has been found between the type of electoral system as well as the level of economic development and the interactive content of party websites, more in line thus with previous findings by Norris (2003).

- Geographically, two unexpected results are worth pointing out: on the one hand, it is parties from the newer democracies (in our case, Eastern European countries) who have the most interactive websites; on the other, Mediterranean parties had the biggest proportion of websites including spaces for online debate (forums, blogs) of the entire EU. Furthermore, Spanish party websites are those scoring highest in the Scale of participatory interactivity and Greek ones are the ones including blogs and forums in a highest proportion.

- If a country is to stand out, however, then this is Germany. Its party websites score second to best on the Scale of participatory interactivity and, as it has been shown, they are the most visible of the EU.

- Somehow unexpectedly, although previous studies had already pointed this out (see Wring and Horrocks, 2001), UK parties have amongst the least interactive websites in the EU.

- Providing spaces for online debate elsewhere, in external websites, through the use of hyperlink seems to be a practice that is establishing itself along European parties. That Scandinavian parties are the ones making most use of this feature, for instance, is significant. If parties from the most technologically developed areas are doing this, it is reasonable to expect that most will follow. The participants of our online forum confirmed this prediction. Directing users to external websites for the most interactive element was also a practice popular when elections were due soon, and thus may set the direction of future e-campaigning. There are important implications if this practice is to be confirmed as the rule. One of the most talked-about characteristics of the Internet is that it allows for direct, unmediated communication between citizens and representatives. If parties redirect users from their websites to external ones to establish this relation, this dialogue will stop being unmediated.
Finally, some interesting results were found when analyzing the interactive content of websites from different sized parties looking at the date of the last election of the systems they operate in. The smallest parties, the extra-parliamentarian ones, were the ones that changed the most between campaign and peace-times. In systems when an election was not due soon, fewer differences were found among party sites from various sizes in terms of interactivity; whereas these differences grew higher in systems where there was a campaign or pre-campaign going on. This confirms Gibson, Nixon and Ward's thesis that minor parties tend to catch up with major ones in 'peace-in between elections times' (Gibson et al., 2003b).

5. 3. Differences on the Interactive Content of Party Websites according to Party Characteristics

Variables relating to party characteristics, in particular size and ideology, have been found to make a difference with regards to the visibility of party sites and, furthermore, to whether parties had a working website at all or not (as shown in the first part of chapter four). In line with the claims from the normalisation thesis, smaller parties had considerably less visible websites than bigger ones. What is more, the majority of parties which did not have a website at the time when the survey was done, or which had a non-working one, were also minor ones. As it has been discussed, however, from these findings does not necessarily follow that smaller parties make a lesser use of the Internet than major ones. There are considerably more fringe parties than major ones, and thus logically in the absolute figure of parties without a site the proportion of smaller ones will be higher. Regarding visibility, the challenge for the researcher is to prove that in the online political sphere parties are 'more equal' than in the offline one, but not 'absolutely equal'. It cannot be expected, not even by the most enthusiastic proponents of the equalisation thesis, that parties will become equals in absolute terms in cyberspace.

In any case, a major claim of the equalisation thesis has been that smaller parties would be making a more interactive use of the Internet. The characteristics of the new media, it has been claimed, are more suited to be exploited by looser,
on-the-edge organisations than by established, traditional political actors\textsuperscript{123}. Following this argument, it would be expected that minor parties would have more interactive and participatory websites than the bigger ones. These parties have also fewer risks than the most established, mainstream, ones for allowing free online debate to flourish in their sites. As it will be described below, facilitating spaces for free debate on their pages could imply a loss of editorial control that, in theory, is feared more by party officials from major parties than from those more marginal ones with much less at stake. However, and somehow surprisingly, the officials who showed more enthusiasm in the use of interactive features in their parties' websites in our forum\textsuperscript{124} were those from the major parties. Officials from edge parties seemed much more cautious and reluctant about the possibilities for engagement about this kind of elements. An official from a fringe Estonian party pointed out, for instance, that they do not seem to serve to motivate uninterested citizens into getting involved ('some people will always be passive'\textsuperscript{125}) and that, in any case, the quality of participation in the online debates remained quite poor. These points will be further discussed in the following chapter. For now, it is interesting to see what the data shows about the degree of interactivity in European parties when these are divided by their size.

Regarding the size of party in terms of percentage of total vote, Table 34 below shows that bigger parties score higher in the Scale of participatory interactivity than any other type of party. They also have a higher proportion (38.3\%) of elements for online debate in their websites than the rest. Edge parties have, on the other hand, the highest number of non-working sites. This, however, may be explained with the same argument already developed above: that the number of edge parties being higher (89, compared to 57 big parties, for instance) then it is logical that more websites will not be working for them than the rest. Overall, nevertheless, these findings are, once again, more in line with the claims from the normalisation than the equalisation thesis. Bigger parties have the highest proportion of electronic newsletters, e-surveys, e-guestbooks, blogs / forums, and intranet within their websites.

\textsuperscript{123} See chapter two.
\textsuperscript{124} Online forum \textit{Use of the Internet by European parties}, Jan-Feb. 2008.
\textsuperscript{125} Estonian party official (Mr H), 'Interactivity and Participation', online forum \textit{Use of the Internet by European parties}, 14 Feb. 2008.
Table 34: Interactive content of party websites according to Party Size (a): in terms of share of total Vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Big</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Edge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>84.2%</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>57 (1)</td>
<td>57 (0)</td>
<td>52 (4)</td>
<td>89 (12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own categorisation of parties according to rate of votes achieved in last legislative election for each political system

Looking closer at the data, however, it is found that while the proportion of big parties having elements for online debates in their websites is, as it has been pointed out, higher than for any other type of party, the differences with edge parties on this particular feature are not so sound\textsuperscript{126}. 38.3% of big parties had blogs or forums in their sites, compared to 31.4% of edge parties. Maybe the propositions from the normalisation thesis do work for mainstream parties (understanding by mainstream big, medium and small parties) but not so much for differences between these and the most extreme, edge parties. These ones, for instance, have the highest proportion of websites offering an e-mail address and, anyhow, they score second (with small parties) on the Scale of participatory interactivity.

When parties are separated in terms of the proportion of seats they have in parliament, the findings from above are confirmed, as Table 35 shows.

\textsuperscript{126} A result that goes in line with what Cunha et al. found out in the Mediterranean context, in which party size did make a difference on party websites' sophistication and design, with websites from the major parties scoring higher in the indexes that measured several indicators from the sites (design, sophistication, accessibility, freshness and targeting) than those from the smaller ones. However, this difference was quite low, which led the authors to claim that the influence of party size 'could hardly be said to be considerable'. (Cunha et al., 2003: 74).
Table 35: Interactive content of party websites according to Party Size (b): in terms of proportion of Seats in parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Major (%)</th>
<th>Minor (%)</th>
<th>Fringe (%)</th>
<th>Extra-parliamentarian (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>80.7%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>90.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
<td>63.7%</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guestbook</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity (mean)</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>57 (1)</td>
<td>55 (1)</td>
<td>91 (10)</td>
<td>52 (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own categorisation of parties according to rate of seats achieved in last legislative election for each political system

Once again, it is the major parties the ones that score highest on the Scale of participatory interactivity, and also the group which has websites including blogs / forums, electronic newsletters, e-surveys, e-guestbooks and intranets at the highest rate. Once again, however, the differences in terms of proportion of elements for online debate (blogs / forums) are not very strong, particularly between major (for which 33.4% of their websites included these features) and extra-parliamentarian parties (30.8%). The argument outlined above, thus, which suggests that claims from the normalisation thesis may work out mainly for mainstream parties, but which do not apply to differences between the biggest and the very small parties, is corroborated. This argument is nevertheless not valid neither in the case of visibility – as it has been shown on chapter four –, nor in that of external networking – as chapter six illustrates. In these two cases, the distance between the biggest and the smallest parties is the highest one. In other words, the bigger the party, the most visible and externally networked its website is likely to be.

There is one final point worth discussing regarding these results. As it can be appreciated both in Table 34 and in Table 35, and thus regardless of what method is used to categorize parties according to their size, there is a clear relation between the size of a party and whether its website includes or not a private space or intranet, in which signing in (with a username and a password) is required for access. The bigger the party is, the highest the proportion of websites having this feature. This is not an irrelevant finding, for it intuitively tells something about the different perspective parties have about the audiences they direct their site to. Bigger parties, it would seem, try to develop a long-term relation with users – though not necessarily members – through their sites. The fact that they are also
the group that offers users the possibility to subscribe to an e-newsletter through
their sites at a highest rate also points towards this idea. For fringe or very small
parties it would seem that developing a strong relationship with a particular
segment of society is not so relevant or at least not a primary function of their
websites.

When looking at the differences on party websites’ visibility between parties
from different ideological families, it has been found that parties from the left are
generally more visible (i.e. had more links into their sites) than those from the right
side of the ideological spectrum. In terms of interactivity content parties from the
left continue to have more sophisticated websites in general than those from the
right. As Figure 9 shows, parties situated towards the left side of the spectrum
have websites that score higher on the Scale of participatory interactivity than
those from the right.

Figure 9: Interactivity in party websites according to their Ideological Family

![Figure 9: Interactivity in party websites according to their Ideological Family](image)

Source: party’s ideological self-position as stated on their website and Electoral Resources

The average score in the scale for party websites from the extreme left,
social democrat and green ideological families is of 3.56. The same figure for party
websites from the extreme right (nationalists), conservative and christian-democrat
families is considerably lower: 2.87. Contrary to previous studies, thus, who found
that ideological orientation was not a good predictor for the sophistication of party
websites (Farmer and Fender, 2005; Nixon and Johansson, 2002; Trechsel et
al., 2003), but in line with results from recent studies (such as: Sudulich, 2009), a
divide has been found between left and right parties regarding their usage of the web. *Parties from the left have more visible and more interactive websites than parties from the right.*

Cunha et al. (2003) are one of the few scholars to have claimed that ideology (as well as size, institutional and party-system features) plays a role in the online behaviour of political parties. They analysed political parties’ websites from Southern European countries and found out that there was an ideological divide operating in the case of Italy and Greece regarding the website sophistication of political parties. In these countries, parties from the left had websites which contained more participatory elements than the more conservative ones. However, this was not the case in the rest of the countries (Portugal and Spain). Because of the limited existence of empirical studies on this subject, it is very interesting to compare the findings from this research with those from previous ones. Looking exclusively at the same four countries that Cunha et al. had analysed, Table 36 below shows the differences found between party websites from the left and those from the right for each of the four countries. The table shows the mean score in the Scale of participatory interactivity for each of the party websites belonging to what has been considered as left or right according to the party’s political affiliation in the EP.

**Table 36: Differences on the interactive content of Mediterranean party websites according to ideology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Left</th>
<th>Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: parties’ political affiliation in the EP
Parties affiliated to the Socialist, the Green/EFA and the EUL-NGL groups have been considered to be from the left side of the ideological spectrum.
Parties affiliated to the EPP-ED, UEN, Independence/Democracy, and ITS group have been considered to be from the right side of the ideological spectrum.

As it can be appreciated, there is indeed a clear ideological divide in the cases of Italy and Greece, where parties from the left have more interactive websites than those from the right, as Cunha et al. had claimed. However, and unlike what these authors state, the divide continues to exist in the case of Portugal, where, again, parties from the left score on average higher in the Scale than those from the right. Consistent with the authors’ claim, an ideological divide has not been found in the case of Spain concerning party websites’ interactivity.
Looking further into the findings from this study, Table 37 below shows the proportion of websites including a series of interactive features according to the ideological orientation of the party.

Table 37: Interactive content of party websites according to party's Ideological Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extreme left</th>
<th>Social dem</th>
<th>Green</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Christ-dem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>82.9%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guest-book</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/ forum</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale of participatory interactivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conserv</th>
<th>Nationalists (ext right)</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>82.8%</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-newsletter</td>
<td>70.5%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guest-book</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/ forum</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale of participatory interactivity

Source: party's ideological self-position as stated on their website and Wikipedia.

The party family with websites with the highest proportion of spaces for online debate (blogs / forums) is, surprisingly, the Christian Democrat one, followed closely by the Social Democrats. It is also the Christian Democrats who have the highest rate of websites including a private space or intranet. However, taking all the data into account, the party family that stands out is clearly the green one.

**Green parties** have websites including e-mail, e-newsletters, links towards official blogs or forums in external sites, and open spaces for online debate at the highest rate, regardless of other contextual or institutional characteristics. Furthermore, they score the highest in the Scale of participatory interactivity, as Figure 9 has shown. As it has been pointed out throughout this thesis, Green parties have been consistently referred to as the ones making the most sophisticated use of new
media technologies\textsuperscript{127}. They were the second group with most visible websites, and they seem to be the group with the most interactive ones also. To verify this result, Table 38 looks at the interactive content of party websites according to the party’s affiliation in the EP. When parties are classified in this way, Green parties continue to stand out.

Table 38: Interactive content of party websites according to party’s Political Affiliation in the EP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>EPP-ED</th>
<th>Socialist</th>
<th>ALDE</th>
<th>Greens / EFA</th>
<th>EUL - NGL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
<td>86.2%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td>88.0%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-news-letter</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guest-book</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>47 (5)</td>
<td>58 (1)</td>
<td>30 (0)</td>
<td>36 (2)</td>
<td>25 (0)</td>
<td>22 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UEN</th>
<th>Indep / Dem</th>
<th>ITS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-form</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-news-letter</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-survey</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-guest-book</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked blog/forum</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (closed)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog/forum (open)</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blog/forum</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intranet</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale of participatory interactivity</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (missing cases)</td>
<td>15 (0)</td>
<td>8 (0)</td>
<td>5 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, Green parties have the highest rate of websites including e-mail, e-newsletters, links towards official blogs or forums in external sites, and open spaces for online debate. Taking these results and those from chapter four into account, it can thus be confirmed that Green parties have the most sophisticated websites in the EU, at least at the time when the survey was done. This was an expected finding which relevance should not be dismissed. Norris had already found out that, among party families, party websites from the Green were by far the most sophisticated ones already in 2003 (Norris, 2003). Similarly, in a comparison of the use of the Web by Australian parties at different territorial levels, Gibson and Ward concluded that ‘the Greens emerged as the best all-round performers,\textsuperscript{127} See for instance Meikle (2002), Gibson and Ward (2000b, 2003), Ward et al. (2003b), Norris (2003), Conway and Dorner (2004), and Hillwatch’s report (2005).
particularly in the area of interactivity' (Gibson and Ward, 2003: 132). That Green parties tend to make a very innovative use of new media technologies was something that an official from an Eastern European Green party confirmed in our forum. His party website, he told us, has 'a lot based on open source software as many key members of the party are involved with IT-related jobs or have some kind of IT-related education.'128 This would confirm Norris' proposition that the sophisticated use of the new media by Green parties is maybe due to the educational and generational profile of their membership (2003). This same idea has been pointed out by Ward, Gibson and Nixon, who, explaining the relationship of Green parties with the new ICT, suggest that the incentives for using the new media technologies are probably higher for these parties than the rest because 'their traditional bastions of support tend to be the very people with access to the technology' (Ward et al., 2003b: 24). Finally, Cunha et. al. mention the fact that Green parties are what can be considered 'new politics' parties, as well as the social characteristics of their members and sympathisers (young, well-educated), as reasons to explain why the Green Italian party had a website which matched those from the major Italian parties in sophistication (Cunha et al., 2003).

In addition, the history of European Green parties, most of them coming from the social movements or protest groups' tradition, may well be playing a role here also. Many Internet scholars have argued that the new ICT are better suited for looser, less formal organisations such as social movements than to the more institutionalised of the political actors. For instance, Lusoli, Ward and Gibson came to the conclusion, after analysing the usage of new media by different kinds of political organisations in the UK that 'protest networks/campaigns have a better understanding of the originality of ICTs than other political organisations' such as traditional political parties, trade unions, and pressure groups (Lusoli et al., 2002a: 11).

There is another group that is also worth mentioning: the Independence and Democracy group. Over 60% of the party websites ascribed to it include spaces for online debate. Furthermore, they have the highest score in the Scale of participatory interactivity. Due to the very small number of cases belonging to this category, though (eight), further generalisations cannot be made from these results. The same applies to the very high proportion (60%) of websites from the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty group having intranets in their sites: with only

128 Estonian party official (Mr H), 'Who We Are', online forum Use of the Internet by European parties, 29 Jan. 2008.
five working websites (compared to, for instance, 47 of the extreme left) included in
the analysis, one should be cautious in reading too much from this finding.

To conclude this section, it is worth emphasizing the main findings that have
been discussed here. These have been:

- On the one hand, regarding size, our data shows that bigger parties have
  more interactive sites in general than the smaller ones, and also dedicate
  private spaces (intranets) in their websites to a higher degree. The
differences, however, between the major and the most smaller parties are
not so striking, suggesting that the propositions of the normalisation thesis
work better when analysing differences between parties that are within the
middle of the big-small spectrum than when they are referred to the online
distance between very small and very big parties.

- On the other hand, with regards to ideology, a divide between left and right
  parties, which was already pointed out in the precedent chapter (four), is
  confirmed also with respect to the interactive content of party websites.
  Parties from the left have in general more interactive websites than those
  from the right. The particularity of Green parties, and how these make use
  of the new media to a larger or more profound extent than the rest of the
  parties, is confirmed.

5. 4. Perceptions on Interactivity

One of the main predictions of this thesis is that websites from major parties
would be more visible, but not necessarily more interactive. The results shown in
the previous section have, however, refuted this hypothesis. Contrary to the claims
of the equalisation thesis, party websites from minor parties are less interactive
than those from the bigger ones. This finding might be explained by analysing the
perceived problems that party officials, as well as citizens, have regarding
websites' interactivity or elements for online debate.

Officials from smaller parties all around Europe are probably all conscious
of the risks that the inclusion of spaces for online debate in their websites imply.
They are aware, notwithstanding the country they operate in, that the inclusion of
interactive elements in websites entails a certain degree of resources in terms of
staff and money. Moderation of online debates, for instance, can be expensive. As
an official from an edge party put it simply: ‘We just do not have the resources to
maintain a forum, which would, of course, have to be pre-moderated." Another official from a minor party emphasized this idea: 'to moderate is usually just impossible as no one has the time." In previous studies by other scholars, party officials have also made reference to these problems. Lusoli et al. record, for instance, that various officials had told them that the management of open online fora can be 'a complete disaster' (2002a: 13).

Officials from bigger parties are also aware of these problems, but, crucially, major parties have the resources to deal with them. Furthermore, because they are dominant in all other media, they are not as much 'at risk' as the smaller parties if the discussions turn nasty. After all, their public image is being constantly built throughout the mass media. To put it bluntly, their message is going to get through, even if the online forum or blog in their websites gets messy. Smaller parties, which rely to a higher extent on their websites to have their voice heard, precisely because they lack this coverage on the traditional media, have to be more cautious. The problem goes beyond the possibility of users being offensive or abusive in their posts, but also that they may just simply not add anything to the discussion, and thus lowering the quality of it.

As the same official from a minor party quoted above stated:
'There are always people who will say and write a lot without saying anything meaningful. Maybe 90% of more of the feedback and discussions in party mailing lists and internet forums are mainly something that would have been better not said... sad, but true. Just because people get the false sense of anonymity in the internet... (...) As a result you get more passive members and non-members, as they get tired of the meaningless spam (let's call it that) and that spam generates even more similar spam as a response.'131

Which raises another issue: how to make sure that the quality of the content of online debates will remain high? Or at least interesting enough to encourage other citizens to engage themselves in the discussion? These are not irrelevant questions, as another major problem of spaces for online debate is how these are used by the public. Who uses these features? Furthermore, are they actually used at all? The officials of our online forum commented that 'the take up (of interactive features within their website) is limited" and that 'the responses were very

129 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr C), 29 Feb. 2008.
130 Estonian party official (Mr H), 'Interactivity and Participation', online forum Use of the Internet by European parties, 14 Feb. 2008.
131 Estonian party official (Mr H), 'Interactivity and Participation', online forum Use of the Internet by European parties, 14 Feb. 2008.
132 British party official (Mr C), 'Interactivity and Participation', online forum Use of the Internet by European parties, 14 Feb. 2008.
disappointing. Previous studies have confirmed these views: Boogers and Voerman state that when interactive features were available in political websites in the Dutch 2002 elections, these were only used sporadically (Boogers and Voerman, 2003). What reasons can be given to explain this? One has already been pointed out above: if the quality of the discussion remains low, then few citizens would be willing to participate. An official from a minor party was quite forceful in stating that, when asked about whether the importance of interactive elements was overstated, 'I would say, yes. One of the reasons is that there are always people that were, are, and will always be passive, no matter what you do to try to make them participate and let their opinions be heard more.'

In-depth research on this topic has shown that the problem goes beyond whether online fora are being used or not. Himelboim has demonstrated that in these spaces, a hierarchical mode of participation is constructed: a small number of participants ends up by having the control over the content of the information that is posted, the topics that are discussed (Himelboim, 2008: 173). Furthermore, 'as the number of participants in a political discussion increases, it becomes less likely for a participant to evoke a discussion. These results support the preferential attachment argument; highly replied-to participants are more likely than others to be replied to.' (2008: 172). Not only these features may be not widely used, then, but even if they were – or in the cases when they are – they tend to reproduce a hierarchy in which a few predominant posters get the control of the content and distribution of the debate.

This argument reminds us of Norris’ well known thesis which stated that participation in politics through the Internet was replicating a virtual circle in which the already engaged and most active citizens utilise the new media to participate, while the rest remain as apathetic or uninterested in politics as always (Norris and Curtice, 2006). One party official said that the online forum in her party’s website was mainly used by members of the party, which gives further evidence to this idea. As it has already been explained, however, the analysis of this question would require further in-depth analysis which is beyond the scope of this study.

133 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr C), 29 Feb. 2008.
135 E-mail correspondence with Romanian party official (Ms G), 03 Mar. 2008.
136 As it can be considered that a citizen who is a member of a party is more politically active than the average.
Not only party officials are aware of these issues, citizens are as well. In a study from 2002, Stromer-Galley and Foot asked focus groups composed by users of online political fora which obstacles they believed political actors may encounter when including these features in their websites. They came up with five: (a) increased monetary cost in designing the website; (b) need for dedicated staff to manage the features; (c) content accountability; (d) antagonistic use of the features by non-supporters; and (e) the scale/volume of traffic that these features might generate (Stromer-Galley and Foot, 2002). All these five correspond to concerns that have been expressed by scholars elsewhere, and also by party officials in our research, as well as in other studies.

The solution that some parties have come up with, to overcome these potential risks and obstacles, has already been discussed: setting up alternative, more interactive websites (or profiles in external social network sites), separated—but linked to—the party’s official one. This trend is more than probably going to establish itself as the norm for European parties, and as such that more and more parties are going to move their spaces for interactive communication with citizens in these alternative spaces. This will raise extra questions regarding the responsibility of parties vis-à-vis these websites, as well as other issues such as the further individualization style of campaigning in European democracies.

In any case, an unavoidable question comes up after noticing all these problems associated with the usage of elements for online debate: can real deliberation take place online? If, as it has been put elsewhere, the perceived sense of anonymity may depersonalise the discussion and allows some individuals to use abusive, or plain insulting, language; if the speed at which communication takes place may invalidate the chances of real reflection taking place; if users may be more interested in reinforcing their own ideas than in listening to others (Vicente-Merino, 2007: 451), can we really talk of ‘elements for online debate’? Again, a proper analysis of this topic would require an in-depth research which goes beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the question remains: if the inclusion of interactive elements on political websites is associated with so many problems, then why should parties incorporate them into their websites?

To start trying to give an answer to these questions, it is worth noticing firstly that not everything that was mentioned by party officials—in the online forum or through e-mail interviews—with regards to interactive or participatory features in party websites was negative. Below is a list of some of the arguments given by party officials in the online forum when asked why the inclusion of interactive elements was important in a party website:
• People go to the website often when they need to ask a question or communicate with the party, so we need to provide them with spaces to do so.
• It is important to be seen to be listening to people.
• Feedback is very important: it is a sign that the message is read and understood.
• The inclusion of interactive features is what any web-savvy audience expects from us.

On the one hand, there is an emphasis on communication. These party officials see their websites as a space for communicating with the citizen (so that the message is read, for instance) but also through which the public can, in turn, communicate with the party (to ask a question, for example). On the other, there is also a reference to accountability: as a public actor, parties need to be at least perceived as accountable to the people they represent (they need to be seen to be listening to people). Finally, there is a more pragmatic view: to be able to compete in a wired world, parties need to be seen as up-to-date with the technology (it is what any web-savvy audience would expect). Party officials themselves do see the inclusion of participatory elements in party websites as a means to increase party's communication with citizens as well as its own accountability. These two are essential features of the relationship between party and citizen. If they can be enhanced through the use of interactive online elements, then it follows that, also in the eyes of party officials, party websites can be utilised by parties to improve their relationship with citizens. The Web becomes, thus, a source of popular legitimacy for parties.

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137 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr B), 27 Feb. 2008.
138 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr A), 29 Feb. 2008.
139 E-mail correspondence with Romanian party official (Ms G), 03 Mar. 2008.
140 E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr A), 29 Feb. 2008.
141 As Norton has put it, 'there is little political capital for the MP or the party in being seen to reject a form of communication that is increasingly being employed by citizens and, indeed, for many becoming the principal form of communication with others' (2007: 358).
Chapter 6: External Networking in European Party Websites

With interactivity, the capacity for networking is one of the most talked about features of the Web. Through hyperlinks, websites can be found (links-in) but can also point towards other ones (links-out) and thus create networks of sites all interconnected one to another at various degrees. They are not, as it has been put elsewhere, 'accidental, nor value free. They provide a new range of communicative possibilities to parties' (Ackland and Gibson, 2006: 5). Some scholars have tried to draw maps of these networks or web-spheres, in an attempt to understand the direction and nature of these linkages\textsuperscript{142}, and it has been argued that an analysis of political actors' websites which does not look at the links on these sites is limited and static, failing to account for one of the most significant features of the Internet: its dynamism (Ackland and Gibson, 2004). Although the nature of this study does not allow for the kind of in-depth analysis of the hyperlinks included in party websites that the mentioned authors would have liked\textsuperscript{143}, it is nevertheless important to point out the main characteristics of European party websites regarding their networking function or, in other words, their links-out content. Otherwise, the analysis of EU party sites, and thus this study, would be incomplete.

As it has been explained, the number of links-out included in each of the 255 valid party websites investigated were manually counted and recorded by the researcher. There is thus some space for error which is inevitable in this kind of study. However, the process was done as rigorously as possible and it can be stated that this space for error remains marginal. Only hyperlinks to external websites were counted as 'links-out'. Thus from now on, when referring to 'links-out' the reader should understand that this term refers to hyperlinks included in party websites connecting to external websites. Links to documents archived within the party website, for instance, were not recorded. Again, this study does not differentiate between the types of websites that the party site is linking to. The importance of the results presented in this chapter should not, however, be

\textsuperscript{142} For instance, Foot et al. (2003) or Ackland and Gibson (2004).

\textsuperscript{143} The counting of hyperlinks included in party websites towards external sites has been done manually by the author. As Ackland and Gibson have argued, this is a highly time consuming process, 'since not all links would necessarily be listed neatly in one location on a site'(2006: 8). A call for further research in this area, with a more appropriate methodology and adjusted to the researchers' resources, is therefore of obvious necessity here.
underestimated. Even without knowing the internal characteristics of the network that each party website creates through the hyperlinks included within it, analysing the degree to which a party website actually creates – or not – an external network is of essential significance to understand the online behaviour of European parties. The amount of links-out from a website, and thus the extent of external networking that a website has, says potentially a lot about that website. It can be for instance argued that a website which dedicates extra effort in guiding its visitors towards other sites has an intention of making their visitors more politically informed and well-connected. In any case, websites with a high degree of external networking are no doubt more sophisticated, in the sense that they make a better use of the opportunities available by new ICT, than the rest. It would be logical to expect, thus, that those websites that were more interactive would also be more externally networked. Those parties that have decided to make the most of the Internet by increasing the interactivity of their websites should also have opted to do this by raising the external networking of their sites. This question is explored at the end of this chapter.

As it has been claimed that smaller parties are the ones having more to win from new media technologies, it is also reasonable to expect them to have more sophisticated websites than the major ones. This is one of the arguments from the equalisation thesis, as this study shows throughout. However, the findings discussed up to now from this research have proved that in general the online behaviour of European parties goes more in line with what the proponents of the normalisation thesis have announced than with that of the equalisation school. Specifically regarding external networking, advocates from the equalisation thesis would argue that smaller, less hierarchical, looser party organisations are much better suited to make the most of the networking possibilities of the Internet than the stronger, more established, traditional party organisations\textsuperscript{144}. The data presented further below in this chapter, however, goes against these claims.

There is another group of parties that is expected to be particularly interested on the external networking capabilities of the Web: those operating at the EP level. Because of their pan-European nature, these political actors have a lot to gain from the incorporation of hyperlinks in their website through which they can connect with national likeminded organisations in the specific countries. The results discussed below fully confirm this hypothesis.

Green parties in particular are also an interesting case to pay specific attention to. Because of their similarity with social movements, they appear to be a

\textsuperscript{144} On this subject, see particularly Castells (2000, 2001).
priori the parties that would be more interested on the networking capacities of the Internet. The last section of this chapter confirms this hypothesis to a point only: Green parties have a very high average number of links-out in their websites when compared to the rest, but they are not the group of parties with the highest rate of links-out.

This chapter follows the same structure as the previous one. In the first section, an overview of the state of EU party websites with regard to their external networking is presented. Special attention is paid to those parties which had no links at all towards other sites. To try to find out why these parties decided not to make any use of the networking possibilities offered by the Internet, the characteristics shared by these parties, and the political systems they come from, are analysed. The second section looks at the differences between party websites from various political systems with regard to their external networking. As in the precedent chapters, the influence — or not — on this by a series of factors (geopolitical area, age of democracy, electoral system, and so on) is analysed. Finally, a comparison is made between parties with various sizes and ideological families.


General Findings

European party websites had on average 42 hyperlinks to external sites in 2007, the time when the survey for this research was done. This figure is almost three times lower than that for the average number of links into party websites, which was of 121. The results from this study are thus not in line with those from Conway and Dorner for parties from New Zealand: they discovered that their websites had considerably more links into them than out towards external ones (Conway and Dorner, 2004). In Europe in 2007, parties seem to be less interested in networking towards other websites (and thus in offering visitors direct links to external organisations or actors) than in being visible or easy to find.

The number of links to other websites ranges from none (which was the case on 13 occasions) to 425. As Table 39 shows, most of the websites had a low number of hyperlinks, in between 1 and 10.
Table 39: Links-out from European party websites in 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of links-out</th>
<th>Frequency (number of websites)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-25</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-75</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>85.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76-100</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-150</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>91.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151-200</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>94.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201-300</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>98.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301-400</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>99.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 401</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>255</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE that 17 missing cases have not been taken into account for the production of this table. Percentages are, thus, all valid ones. The missing cases correspond to those websites which were not working at the time of the survey and for which the manual count of hyperlinks within them was, thus, impossible.

The vast majority of European websites (over three quarters, 77.3%) had 50 or less links to external sites. The website with the highest number of hyperlinks is that from the PES, the Group of the Party of European Socialists in the European Parliament, with 425 links. Coming closer, with 401 links to external websites, is the French Socialist Party. These two are the only party websites having more than 400 links. Whereas the fact that they both belong to the ideological family of the Social Democrats has something to do with them having such a high amount of links or whether this is just due to chance it is something that is explored later on. The next website in line in terms of number of hyperlinks is also a party group operating in the EP: the Group of the European People's Party and the European Democrats. The number of links, though, is considerably lower: 319. Again, the relationship between the number of links from a party website and the parliament the party operates in is analysed below, to see whether the fact that two out of the three European party websites including most links operate in the EP is a significant result or not. Instinctively, it would make sense for these party groups operating at the European level to use their websites for networking at a larger extent than the rest, given the particularities of the legislature they operate in.

At the opposite side, there are 13 party websites which had no links at all to external websites. Most of these are websites with a low degree of interactivity: eight out of them scored low or very low in the scale of participatory interactivity, although somehow counter-intuitively, two of them actually had very high interactive sites according to their score in the scale. The characteristics of the political systems these parties operate in are pointed out below, in Table 40:
Table 40: Characteristics of the political systems of the parties with no links to other sites in their websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Geopolitical area</th>
<th>Internet Penetration rate</th>
<th>Year of last election</th>
<th>Electoral system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parti Socialiste Beige (BE)</td>
<td>Western &amp; North</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimokratiko Kinoniko Kinima (GR)</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Workers’ Party (IRE)</td>
<td>Western &amp; North</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evropaiko Komma (CYP)</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaunais Laiks (LAT)</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tevzemel un Brivibai/ LNNK (LAT)</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aktiounskomitee fir Demokratie an Rentengerechtigkeet (LUX)</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demokratiscna stranka upokojencev Slovenije (SLO)</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aktivna Slovenija (SLO)</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suomen Senioripuolue (FIN)</td>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partidul Noua Generatie (ROM)</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Proportional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Turnout rate</th>
<th>GDP per Capita</th>
<th>Level of Free Press(^{145})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parti Socialiste Beige (BE)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimokratiko Kinoniko Kinima (GR)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Traditions (FR)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Workers’ Party (IRE)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evropaiko Komma (CYP)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaunais Laiks (LAT)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tevzemel un Brivibai/ LNNK (LAT)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aktiounskomitee fir Demokratie an Rentengerechtigkeet (LUX)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Komitet Wyborczy Mniejszosc Niemiecka (POL)</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demokratiscna stranka upokojencev Slovenije (SLO)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aktivna Slovenija (SLO)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suomen Senioripuolue (FIN)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partidul Noua Generatie (ROM)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{145}\) The values for this variable are as follows: 1 = almost perfectly free; 2 = ‘very’ free; 3 = ‘average’ free; 4 = ‘low’ free; 5 = free, but leading towards partly free; 6 = partly free.
All the areas into which the political systems included in this research have been classified are included in this table except for one: the EP. None of these parties operate at the EP level. That is, all of the party groups operating at the EP had websites which had at least one or more hyperlinks to external sites. This would confirm the idea already mentioned above: that parties operating at the EP level are more interested in the networking potential of the Internet than the rest, probably due to the special characteristics of the political system they operate in.

To test the validity of this idea, Table 42 and Table 43 further below, look at the differences on number of links from party websites according to the political systems the parties come from. The data shown in both of them confirms that parties operating in the EP have the websites with the highest number of hyperlinks to external sites on average.

The majority of party websites which had no links at all to external sites come from the Eastern region of the EU. Six parties come from this area, compared to four from the Western and North, two from the Mediterranean, and one from the Scandinavian. Almost half of the parties with no links to external websites in their own site come thus from ‘new’ or ‘young’ democracies. This finding is in line with what was pointed out above, that is, that there is a Western / Eastern divide in terms of party website sophistication in Europe in terms of internal and external networking, although not so much with regards to the websites’ interactive content.

Although Eastern countries have on average lower rates of Internet penetration than the rest of the European areas (as Table 8 illustrates), this does not mean that Norris’ thesis, already mentioned on several occasions throughout this study, which states that the rate of technological diffusion of a country is a good indicator of the degree of sophistication of party websites (Norris, 2003), is validated. As Figure 10 illustrates below, Norris’ thesis is only to some extent confirmed when it comes to the networking side of party websites. Most of the parties not including any links to external sites on their own websites belong to political systems with an average rate of Internet penetration. However, and more in line with Norris’ claim, significantly more parties with sites not including any hyperlinks come from political systems with lower rates of Internet penetration than with higher ones.

146 Contrary to Norris’ claim, already mentioned, which stated that this divide was between the Northern and the Southern regions in Europe.
Party websites with no hyperlinks at all come from systems in which the last legislative election had taken place both recently (2006, in five cases) and not so recently (2004, in four cases). All of these parties except for one operate in legislatures with proportional electoral systems, which would confirm that parties in non-proportional systems have not only more visible, as shown on chapter four, but also more highly networked sites. Although given the very low number of cases no real conclusions can be drawn from this data, the results shown on Figure 12, further below, do confirm this idea.

Regarding the rest of characteristics of the political systems of these parties, no significant result stands out. Parties with no hyperlinks at all in their websites come from systems which vary greatly in terms of their rates of participation in elections (turnout), GDP per capita, and level of Free Press. Only in terms of turnout it is worth noticing that none of the parties not including any links in their sites comes from a legislature with a very high level of voter turnout. As will be discussed further on, when analysing the results presented by Table 47, the level of participation, as measured by rate of voter turnout in elections, does affect the networking degree of party websites. As a general rule, the higher the percentage of citizens participating politically (through voting in elections) in a legislature, the higher the number of external links included in party websites from that legislature.

Summarizing, what is worth keeping in mind from this analysis is that:

- all of the parties operating at the EU had websites with at least one hyperlink towards other sites;
- that the area with most party websites not including any hyperlink at all to external sites is the Eastern one;
- that all of the parties not having any links to external sites in their websites except for one operate in proportional electoral systems;
- and that the rest of variables applying to the political system (levels of turnout, GDP and Free Press, as well as the year when the last legislative election took place) do not play a role in determining which party websites included no hyperlinks to external sites.

Table 41, below, summarises the characteristics of the parties themselves, instead of the political systems they operate in, for those cases in which the websites had no external links at all to other sites.
Table 41: Characteristics of the parties which websites had no external links at all to other sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Size according to Votes</th>
<th>Size according to Seats</th>
<th>Ideological family</th>
<th>Affiliation in the EP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parti Socialiste Beige (BE)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Social democrat</td>
<td>Socialist group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimokratiko Kinoniko Kinima (GR)</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Extra-parliamentaria n</td>
<td>Extreme left</td>
<td>EUL-NGL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Traditions (FR)</td>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>Extra-parliamentaria n</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Workers’ Party (IRE)</td>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>Extra-parliamentaria n</td>
<td>Extreme left</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evropaiko Komma (CYP)</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaunais Laiks (LAT)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>EPP-ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tevzemei un Brīvībai/ LNNK (LAT)</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>UEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aktiounskomitee fir Demokratie an Rentengerechtigeet (LUX)</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>UEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Komitet Wyborczy Mniejszosz Niemiecka (POL)</td>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demokratica stranka upokojencev Slovenije (SLO)</td>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aktivna Slovenija (SLO)</td>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>Extra-parliamentaria n</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suomen Senioripuruiue (FIN)</td>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>Extra-parliamentaria n</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partidul Noua Generatie (ROM)</td>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>Extra-parliamentaria n</td>
<td>Christian democrat</td>
<td>EPP-ED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Eurostat, International IDEA, Farrell, IMF and Freedom House

The findings shown in this table are quite similar to the results analysed in chapter four (4.1.2.). This subheading showed that most of the parties having websites with no links at all towards them were small in terms of size (both in votes and in seats) and non-mainstream in terms of their political orientation. Regarding external networking, that is, hyperlinks towards other sites, a familiar picture appears: most of the parties which websites did not include any hyperlink at all towards external sites are very small in terms of size (both measured as rate of votes and percentage of seats in parliament) and non-mainstream in terms of the ideological family they belong to. Specifically, out of the 13 party websites not including any external link, seven are edge parties in terms of votes\(^{147}\) and four are what have been labelled in this study as small\(^{148}\). When identifying parties

\(^{147}\) That is, according to our methodology, those parties that are not within the six most voted parties in the legislature.

\(^{148}\) That is, parties which were on the fifth and the sixth position in terms of votes attained in the last legislative election for that political system.
regarding their share of seats at parliament, we find that six of these websites belong to extra-parliamentarian parties and five to fringe ones. With regards to their ideological orientation, six parties which sites had no links at all to external websites belong to what has been labelled as ‘other’ ideological family. Similarly, six of these parties had no ascription to any of the political groups operating in the EP. Most of these parties were thus far from being within the mainstream in terms of their political orientation.

These results go, again, against the claims of the equalisation thesis and follow instead the propositions of the normalisation argument. Although it could have been expected, following the claims of the equalisation thesis, that smaller parties would be willing to make the most of the networking capacity of the Internet, through the use of hyperlinks, this is not the case. No big party (and only one major one when looking at the size in terms of proportion of seats) had no links in their websites. In other words, all big parties had at least one hyperlink towards external websites in their sites. Further on in this chapter, the data shown in corroborates this finding. Indeed, the number of links included in European party sites actually tends to increase with the size of the party. However, it is worth repeating that some caution needs to be kept when interpreting the data shown in this data: the nature of the links included in each site is not brought into the analysis. This means that, beyond the total number of hyperlinks included in each website, nothing is known about to what type of websites these links are directing the user to. The data, thus, seems to corroborate the claims of the normalisation thesis, but further research is needed to fully confirm this claim.

6. 2. Differences on the External Networking Dimension of Party Websites according to their Political System:

It is expected that European party websites will differ substantially among themselves in terms of their external networking. Previous studies have already confirmed that party websites differ between themselves also at this regard (Ackland and Gibson, 2006) and as it will be explained throughout this section, the data from our study arrives to the same conclusion.

149 Those parties that did not achieve any seats in parliament in the last legislative election for that political system.
150 Parties that have achieved seats in parliament but are not within the top four in terms of share of seats.
The previous section shows that most of the parties which websites had no links at all towards external sites belonged to newer democracies within the EU. It also revealed that none of these parties were operating at the EP level. Table 42 below confirms these patterns.

Table 42: Differences on links included in party websites according to Age of Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliamentary System</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Established Democracies 151</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>153 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newer Democracies 152</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>82 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Parliament</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>24 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parties operating at the EP level have the highest number of hyperlinks towards external sites on average in the EU. The difference, compared to parties operating in other political systems of the EU is striking. The average number of hyperlinks included in websites from parties of the EP practically double those of the established democracies group, and are almost four times higher than those from the newer democracies. However, it is worth noting that the standard deviation is also much higher for these websites. That is, the websites from parties operating at the EP vary considerably more amongst themselves in terms of number of links-out than the rest.

The area in which parties had websites with the lowest number of links to external sites on average is the newer democracies one. Party websites from established democracies practically double them in that respect. Table 43 goes further into this analysis by separating the established democracies group into various geopolitical areas, as it has been done in precedent chapters. It confirms the 'supremacy' of the parties operating at the EP in terms of external networking in their websites and shows that there are not many differences among the different areas that form the established democracies group. Eastern party websites continue to remain the least externally networked ones.

151 Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, and the UK.
152 The Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania
Table 43: Differences on number of links included in party websites, according to Geopolitical Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geopolitical Area</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western and North</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>76 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>49 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>28 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>82 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Parliament</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>24 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Counter-intuitively, the level of technological diffusion in a society does not seem to make much difference on the website sophistication of the parties operating within it. This study has already shown that the degree of Internet penetration is no explanatory factor for the differences found in European party websites regarding their visibility and their interactive content. With regards to their networking side, the relationship is more complex:

Figure 10: Average number of links from party websites according to the Internet penetration rate of their political systems

As Figure 10 illustrates, there is almost a perfect, positive, relationship between the average amount of hyperlinks included in party sites and the rate of Internet penetration of the political systems the parties operate in: the higher this rate, the higher the number of links included in the websites. However, this relationship disappears with the last category: those systems with a very high degree of technological diffusion. Parties from these legislatures have many fewer

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153 Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Austria and the UK
154 Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Portugal
155 Denmark, Sweden, Finland
156 Same as the group of “Newer democracies” above (see footnote 189)
hyperlinks in their websites than parties from systems with a high, average, and even low rate of Internet penetration. It would however make sense that websites in systems with very high rates of technological development would be more networked than the rest: with more citizens making use of the Internet, it would be logical to expect parties to create highly networked sites to respond to the more sophisticated demands of this kind of public. This does seem to be the case for all of the categories, except precisely for those societies with a 70% or over ("very high") rate of Internet penetration.

Because the relationship is so clear up until this last, very high, category, it can be claimed that the level of technological development in a country does play a role in determining the degree of networking (measured in quantity of links to external sites) of its party websites. The higher this level, the more networked the party websites are in that system. The particularity of the "very high" group may be explained on the particularities of the countries which make up this category: Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Sweden. Indeed, as the table below shows, all of these countries have party websites with a comparatively low number of external hyperlinks, except for Sweden. The case of Luxembourg is particularly striking: the average number of external links included in its party websites is as low as 10. There is one important difference between this political system and the other four, which may well be affecting the low level of networking of its party sites: the degree of voter turnout in elections. Luxembourg has a low rate of voter turnout, whereas the rest of the countries with a very high level of technological development have all high turnout rates. As Table 47 will show bellow, there is indeed some relationship between the level of turnout in a legislature and the number of external links included in its party sites. As a general rule, the more citizens participate politically in a legislature, the higher the number of external links from party websites for that legislature. This issue will be discussed further on. For the moment, Table 44 and Figure 11 show the average number of external hyperlinks included in party websites for all the political systems in the EU:
Table 44: Average number of links from party websites for each political system in the EU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Geographical Area</th>
<th>Internet access</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>12 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>6 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>8 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>14 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>12 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>8 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>9 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Western/North</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>13 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP</td>
<td>EP</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>24 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own classification of geopolitical areas and Eurostat
Table 44 confirms the specific case of the EP case in terms of number of links to external sites in party websites: sites from parties operating at the EP level have the highest number of external hyperlinks on average (89). With this finding it can thus be claimed that parties operating at the EP utilise their websites as elements for external networking to a largest extent than parties from any other political system in the EU. This can be explained by the specific characteristics of the EP as a legislature: its size, population, perceived distance between represented and representatives, variety of countries – with its different languages, cultures, etc. – that conform to it, and so on. Political groups operating at the EP level may well be taking these factors into account when making the decision to include more links to external websites than parties from any other European legislature. In other words, the much higher number of links included in EP political groups’ websites (the difference with the rest of systems can best be appreciated looking at Figure 10 below) cannot be a coincidence. Nevertheless, these websites, it is worth remembering, are also the ones that diverge the most between themselves, as the very high standard deviation of 116 shows.

At the other side of the spectrum Slovenia is the political system in which party websites had the lowest number of links on average (four) to external sites. It is also the country in which party websites are most similar within themselves in terms of external networking: a standard deviation of a very low value (five) proves this. Indeed, the same as it happened with the number of links into party websites, there is a strong relationship between the average amount of links from party websites and the standard deviation figure. This correlation can best be appreciated by looking at the figure below:
Figure 11 shows specifically that:

- There is a very strong relationship between the average number of links out from party websites and the figure for standard deviation. As it happens with the number of links into party websites (as shown on Figure 2), the amount of hyperlinks included in party websites onto external ones increases at pace with the standard deviation. Party websites from political systems with the highest quantity of external links on average are also the ones that diverge the most between themselves on this matter. Or in other words, legislatures with party sites with very low figures of external links have also the most similar party sites on this particular topic.
• The particularity of the EP case can be appreciated with just a quick glance at the figure: websites from political groups operating at the EP level are, as its situation on the top right corner shows, the ones with the highest figures both for number of external links included in them and for standard deviation. Furthermore, there is a considerable distance between this political system and the next one (the UK) in number of links.

• Indeed, the UK has very highly networked party sites, with an average of 79 links included in its party websites, a result that goes against what had been claimed in a study by (Gibson et al., 2003a), in which the authors maintained that external networking was a low priority for British parties in general. Moreover, parties from the UK also have very visible websites (the most visible ones in the EU, or in other words, the sites receiving the highest amount of links into them, as illustrated on Figure 2 in chapter four) but, somehow surprisingly, are within the bottom of the EU with regards to interactivity: they are the fourth less interactive websites in the EU (as Figure 8 shows).

• The case of France stands out. Websites from this country have a very high figure of external hyperlinks on average (74) while at the same time being quite similar between themselves on this matter (a comparatively low standard variation of 26). It is the only political system in the EU where this happens, as the figure graphically shows.

• Germany, on the other hand, is positioned within the bottom part of the graph. Taking into account that German party websites were amongst the most visible and interactive ones, this is an unexpected result that goes against the claim made above about how German party websites appeared to be the most sophisticated ones in the EU. In terms of external networking, they are definitely not.

• Chapter five showed that Mediterranean party websites were, surprisingly, amongst the most interactive ones in the EU. This result was unanticipated as it goes against previous comparative studies about party websites (specifically that of Norris, 2003). In terms of networking, it is worth noticing that Mediterranean party websites are also within the top of the EU, with the exception of Spain (which, interestingly, had very interactive party sites).

• In the lowest part of the graph we find mostly Eastern political systems. Taking into account previous findings, it can thus be stated that party
websites from the Eastern political systems are on average the least externally networked ones of the EU. In terms of party websites' both internal and external networking, then, signalling a geographical divide between the East and the West seems thus more appropriate than the one proposed by Norris between the North and the South of Europe. Within the party websites with the lowest quantity of external hyperlinks there is also Luxembourg, a case which was discussed above.

One of the hypotheses of this thesis (as has been explained above) was that the date of the last legislative election in each political system would pay a role in determining the content of party websites. If these are used by political parties as instruments for campaign, then it would make sense to expect them to vary accordingly to whether an election was soon due or not. However, the previous chapters have shown that the relationship between the date of the last legislative election and the characteristics of party websites is not a clear one. In terms of party sites' visibility, there did not seem to be any clear differences between party websites from systems with different dates of elections. Regarding websites' interactivity, the relationship was somehow more complex. The same can be said in terms of the websites' external networking:

Table 45: Differences on number of links included in party sites, according to Date of last legislative election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of last legislative election</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>17(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>15(0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>74(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>53(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>78(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>16(0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 45 shows that, apriori, the results of this study do support the claim that party websites would be more highly networked in those systems when an election was due soon. As it can be seen, those websites from legislatures in which the last election had taken place on 2002 (and when, thus, a new one was expected very soon) had on average the highest number of links to external sites. However, the party websites with the second highest average in terms of links-out are those from systems when the last legislative election had taken place in 2005, systems which were at 'in-between' elections times thus. Furthermore, the lowest mean is found in those legislatures that had the last election on 2007. If party websites are expected to be more highly networked the nearer an election is due,
then it should also be the case that those websites from systems where an election had taken place the very same year when the survey was done should be quite highly networked; unless parties had specifically changed their websites very fast, the sites should still be under their 'campaign mode'. This, however, is not the case. The conclusion to be drawn from these results is, therefore, that the relationship between the networking of party websites and whether an election was due soon or not is a complex and unclear one. The same was true for the relationship between the date of last election and party websites' interactivity and visibility.

One of the major findings of this study has been the striking relationship found between the visibility of European party websites and the type of electoral system those parties operate in. As it has been shown, websites from parties acting in legislatures with non-proportional electoral systems were considerably more visible than party websites from other systems. In terms of the websites' interactivity the association was not so strong. What is more, parties from non-proportional electoral systems have the less interactive websites. Regarding external networking, Table 46 shows that party websites from first past the post and two round systems have more than double more links towards external websites.

Table 46: Differences on number of links included in party sites, according to Type of electoral system (A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of electoral system</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List Proportional Representation</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>173 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Past the Post</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>13 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Member Proportional</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>16 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Transferable Vote</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Round System</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>9 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel System</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: International IDEA

Figure 12 graphically illustrates the striking differences found on party websites' external networking between sites from non-proportional electoral systems and the rest. It is clear by looking at the table than, the same as it was for party websites' visibility (as shown on Figure 3), those websites from parties acting in non-proportional systems are networked to a much higher degree than the rest. It is worth noting however that, unlike what happened with websites' visibility, party
sites from mixed electoral systems have the lowest ranking in terms of external networking.

**Figure 12: Differences on number of links included in party sites, according to Type of electoral system**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of electoral system</th>
<th>Average number of links-out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportional</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Proportional</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: International IDEA and Farrell

Intuitively, the degree and ways of participation of citizens in any given society should affect the relationship between the parties and the people they are intended to represent. Specifically, party websites are expected to change depending on whether they are directed to a very politically active audience or a more passive one. One of the few empirical studies that looked at the impact of electoral turnout on party websites, that of Trechsel et. al (2003), proved, however, that the degree of participation in elections of a society did not have a significant effect upon party website development. What is more, it has been shown in chapter five that party websites from legislatures with a more active citizenship were not, as it would have been expected, more interactive than the rest. Regarding their visibility, it is true, however, that those parties operating in political systems where the people was most active (as measured, always, in terms of participation in elections) had more visible websites than the rest. In terms of external linkage, the data presented in Table 47, below, shows that, as a general rule, the more citizens participate politically in a legislature, the higher the number of external links from party websites for that legislature.
Table 47: Differences on number of hyperlinks to external sites included in party websites, according to the level of voter Turnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate of voter Turnout</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very low (50 – 59%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>17 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (60 – 69%)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>41 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (70 – 79%)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>73 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (80 – 89%)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>86 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high (90 – 100%)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>14 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: International IDEA

Taking out the category of legislatures with a medium rate of turnout in elections, the rest of cases follow a linear relationship: the higher the rate of voter turnout, the higher the number of external links included in party websites. This is particularly true for those parties operating in systems with a very high degree of turnout: parties from these legislatures have on average almost four times more external links in their websites than those acting in countries with a very low rate of voter participation in elections. Furthermore, in this category all party websites, without exception, had at least four hyperlinks towards external sites. Nevertheless, and although the importance of these findings should not be undermined, it needs to be pointed out that the number of legislatures included in both extremes of the turnout variable (very low and very high rates) is relatively low. Most systems are situated towards the middle categories (low, medium, and high rates) and here the differences between party websites according to their average number of external hyperlinks are not so strong.

Previous studies on political uses of the Web have differed, as it has been shown, on the influence of the level of economic wealth of a country in the sophistication of the websites of its political actors. Whereas Norris has claimed that there is indeed a relationship between the degree of economic development of a country and the political use of the Web by its actors (Norris, 2003); other studies have concluded that there is not such relationship, at least not in the European context (Trechsel et al., 2003). The findings from this study confirm to a degree Norris' thesis: party websites from the most economically developed systems were more visible and, with certain exceptions, more interactive. With regard to the differences found on the external networking of party websites from political systems when these were classified according to their GDP per capita, Table 48 shows that there is a clear divide between party sites from systems with a very low, low, and medium level of GDP per capita and those from countries with a high or very high one.
Table 48: Differences on amount of links included in party sites, according to GDP per capita

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GDP Per Capita</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very low (less than 10,000)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>13  (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (10,001-15,000)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>43  (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (15,001-30,000)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>39  (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (30,001-45,000)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>79  (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high (over 45,001)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>57  (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IMF

Party websites from countries with a high and a very high rate of GDP per capita more than double on average number of external links those from systems with a very low, low, and medium GDP per capita.

The final factor analysed in this section is that of the level of Free Press of a country, and how it affects, or not, the degree of external networking of party websites. As has been shown in the previous chapters, this has not been found to be playing any role on the visibility, nor on the interactivity, of European party websites. The same can be said with regards to party websites' external networking:

Table 49: Differences on number of links included in party sites, according to level of Free Press

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Free Press</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost perfectly free</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>10  (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very free</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>65  (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium free</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>65  (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low free</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>61  (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free, but almost partly free</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>20  (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partly free</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>15  (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Freedom House

There is no relationship at all between the level of Free Press of a country and the average number of external links included in European party websites. This confirms what previous findings of this study already suggested: that the degree of Free Press is not a good indicator of the sophistication of party websites.

This may be because there are not many differences within the context of the EU regarding the level of Free Press. As was explained on chapter three, the scores of each European country were generated by the researcher into artificially self-created categories, to be able to differentiate between countries. A better indicator of the state of the civil society is therefore probably needed for future research.
As a concluding summary, the main findings that have been shown in this section are:

- Parties operating at the EP level stand out significantly with regards to the external networking in their websites. Their sites have considerably more hyperlinks towards other websites than those from any other political system in the EU.

- Geographically, the geopolitical area in which parties have websites with the least amount of hyperlinks is that of the newer democracies or Eastern Europe. Taking into account the findings from previous chapters, it can thus be claimed that parties from Eastern Europe have the least networked websites in the EU. Instead of a North/South divide, thus, there is a Western/Eastern divide in terms of the networking of political parties' websites in Europe, although not so much regarding their interactive content.

- The same as happened with party websites' visibility, measured by the amount of links into the websites, the higher the average number of links-out in party websites from a political system, the higher the figure for the standard deviation is. This means that in those legislatures where party websites are most externally networked in average terms, when compared to other systems, these websites are also the most divergent between themselves. The only exception to this is the case of France, where party websites have a comparatively high number of links to external sites on average but a low standard deviation (meaning that the websites are quite similar between themselves on this matter, and so that most of them are highly externally networked.)

- The date of the last legislative election and the rate of Internet penetration in political systems have not proven to be good predictors of the degree of external networking of party websites. As it has been described above, if there is any relationship between these variables and the number of links-out in a party website to be found, then this is of a highly complex nature. On the other hand, it can be stated without the shadow of a doubt that the level of Free Press of a country does not affect the nature of the party websites from that legislature. This is true for the external networking, but also for the interactivity and the visibility of European party websites.

- There is a clear relationship, the same as in the case of party websites' visibility, between the external networking of party websites and the type of
electoral system those parties operate in. Parties from non-proportional electoral systems have websites with many more links towards external sites than the rest.

- Finally, two other variables showed some influence in the degree of external networking found on European party websites: the rate of voter turnout in elections and the degree of economic wealth of a political system. In general, systems with a higher political turnout have party websites with a higher number of links-out. With regard to economic development, a divide has been found between party websites from countries with a very low, low and medium GDP per capita and those from systems with a high or very high GDP per capita in terms of external networking.

6. 3. Differences on the Networking Content of Party Websites according to Party Characteristics

Much has been discussed in the discipline of Internet studies about the different usage of new ICT by smaller and bigger parties\(^\text{157}\). The majority of recent empirical studies have been more in line with the arguments from the normalisation or 'politics as usual' thesis than with the equalisation one. The findings shown so far in this study confirm this trend. Chapter four showed that smaller parties had websites considerably less visible than those from the bigger ones. In turn, chapter five confirmed that bigger parties had generally more interactive websites, although it presented arguments to claim that the normalisation thesis may work best for parties situated on the extreme of the size spectrum than those in the middle (medium or not so small parties).

When looking at the differences between party sites in terms of their external networking according to the size of parties both in terms of share of votes and of percentage of seats in parliament, this study has found that, as the data shows in below, the average number of links to external sites in party websites increases as the size of the party does. Or in other words, that there is a relationship between party size and the external networking of party websites: the bigger the party, the higher the average number of hyperlinks included in the site.

\(^\text{157}\) As reviewed on chapter two.
Table 50: Differences on number of links included in party sites, according to Size of parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Party</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>According to Seats:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>57 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>55 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>91 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-parliamentarian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>52 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>According to Votes:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>57 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>57 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>52 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>89 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALL PARTIES</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>255 (17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own categorisation of parties according to rates of votes and seats achieved in last legislative election for each political system

These results are true both for when parties are separated according to their share of seats in parliaments or of votes. Major or big parties have at least one third more links in their websites than all the rest of parties. Extra-parliamentarian parties have on average 22 links to external sites in their websites, compared to the 65 of major parties, the 45 of minor and also the 38 of fringe ones. These findings are in line with those from a study by Conway and Dorner of party websites in New Zealand. The authors found that parliamentary parties were more connected than non-parliamentary ones (Conway and Dorner, 2004). Ackland and Gibson had suggested, however, that fringe parties (specifically those with a left ideology) had the most extensive networks and that they were considerably more well connected than their mainstream counterparts (Ackland and Gibson, 2006). In line with the normalisation thesis, though, this study has found out that bigger parties have more visible, more interactive, and more networked websites than smaller ones. It is worth mentioning that, unlike the case with regards to the interactive content of party websites (see chapter five), there is a linear relationship between size of parties and external networking. The bigger the party is, the more links-out its website has on average. The propositions from the normalisation thesis work, thus, for all parties, including those at the extremes and not only the ones positioned in the middle.

The previous chapters have shown that parties from the left side of the political spectrum have more visible and also more interactive websites than those

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158 All major, minor and fringe ones are parliamentary parties in this study's classification of parties according to size (see chapter three for a more detailed explanation on this).
from the right. An ideological divide has thus been found in terms of party websites’ sophistication\textsuperscript{159}. In terms of external networking, however, Ackland and Gibson concluded from an analysis of 27 Australian party websites in 2003 that there were no differences between left and right parties in how they connected with the outside world through the use of hyperlinks (Ackland and Gibson, 2004). In a later study, these same authors arrived to very different conclusions: parties on the far right had the smallest networks of all parties analysed, and it was the fringe left parties the most well connected ones (Ackland and Gibson, 2006). The data from this study confirms to a very large extent these later findings. As Table 51 shows below, parties from the extreme left have on average almost four times more links-out in their websites than those from the extreme right. Are there grounds to talk, thus, of an ideological divide also in terms of external networking? There are: parties situated at the left of the spectrum (including parties from the extreme left, social democrat, and green families) have on average 58 links to external sites in their websites. The figure for parties from the right (those from the Christian-democrat, conservative, and nationalist or extreme right families) is 36, considerably lower. Again, this data corroborates Ackland and Gibson’s claims in that left parties have larger networks on the Web than those from the right (2006).

Table 51: Differences on number of links including in party sites, according to Ideological family of party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideology Family</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St Dev.</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Left</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democrat</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian – Democrat</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist (extreme right)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: party’s ideological self-position as stated on their website and Wikipedia

When parties are classified according to the EP group they are ascribed to, the story is no different: parties belonging to the Socialist, Greens/EFA and EUL/NGL groups have almost the double the number of hyperlinks to external sites in their websites on average (65.33) than those from the EPP-ED, UEN, Independency / Democracy and ITS groups (34.25).

\textsuperscript{159} Contrary to authors such as Trechsel (2003) or Farmer and Fender (2005) who claimed that ideological orientation was not a good indicator for the sophistication of party websites.
These findings differ from those from a study of US political blogs, in which it is described how conservative blogs link to each other more frequently and in a denser pattern than liberal ones (Adamic and Glance, 2005). Similar to our results, Hill and Hughes have suggested already in 1998, in what is one of the first comparative empirical studies of political actors’ websites, that liberal websites (in the US context, this meaning parties from the left side of the political spectrum) have more links towards other websites than the conservative ones (Hill and Hughes, 1998). The authors explained this difference by claiming that liberal political actors were more interested in the community-building aspect of the Web than the more conservative ones. This may be a good argument to explain, also, why in Europe parties from the left have more visible, interactive, and networked websites than those from the right, as the data shown in these chapters has proved.

The main findings from this section are in line with those from the previous chapters: bigger parties have more externally networked websites than smaller ones, just as they had more visible and interactive websites; and parties from the left are more connected than those from the right, just as they were more visible just as more interactive.

6. 4. The Relationship between Visibility, Interactive Content, and External Networking on Party Websites

As it was pointed out above, in the introduction to this chapter, the degree of external networking of a website is an intentional act. Parties with highly networked sites have strategically decided to make their websites more
sophisticated and, more generally, to make a more intense use of the new media than the rest. It would be logical, thus, that these websites would also turn to be the most interactive and also, although to a lesser degree, more visible.

This section provides an overview of the relationship between these three dimensions, taking the degree of interactive content as the independent variable and analysing the corresponding variances in visibility and external networking.

Table 53: Relationship between Interactive content, Visibility, and External Networking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Interactivity (according to score in the Scale of participatory interactivity)</th>
<th>Visibility (average number of links-in)</th>
<th>External Networking (average number of links-out)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>111.50</td>
<td>14.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>70.71</td>
<td>38.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>117.14</td>
<td>47.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>72.67</td>
<td>11.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>187.53</td>
<td>44.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>126.77</td>
<td>45.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show that, although, there is not a clear relationship between the degree of interactivity of party websites and their levels of visibility, nor external networking, as expected very interactive party sites tend also to be quite visible and highly externally networked. However, the most externally networked websites are those that scored low in the scale of interactivity, suggesting the idea that the strategies from political parties and the influence from contextual factors regarding the interactive content, visibility, and external networking of their websites may well be different. This is explored in the next chapter of this thesis.
Chapter 7: Summary of Findings and Further Discussion

7.1. The Influence of Contextual Factors and Party Characteristics on European Party Websites

If there is one single finding to be pointed out as the clearest result from this research on European party websites it is that these vary considerably among themselves. Answering the first research question of this thesis, it can be stated that there is no standardization of parties' online behaviour going on in Europe with regards to the visibility, interactive content, and external networking of their websites. Already previous scholars had claimed this (Morris, 2003; Trechsel et al., 2003) and, in any case, it would make sense to expect such a high number of websites to greatly differ one with the other. It is nevertheless a very important finding – and in the case of the interactive content, an unexpected one – which is worth emphasizing. It confirms, for instance, that there are variables that influence and constrain the design of parties' websites. If the Web was a separate, independent space from the 'offline world', and if political institutions created websites without being affected by any of the characteristics of this 'offline world', then most websites would be quite similar. After some time (the time required by the Internet to establish itself as a technology and a medium in European societies) there would have been a model of party websites (more or less participative, more or less informative) which most sites would be emulating. This is just simply not the case. There are sound differences between types of parties (big and small, conservative or liberal) and the websites they create. Furthermore, this study has shown that there are also strong divergences between party websites from various political systems according to a series of different factors. It is thus plausible to claim that the behaviour of parties online is, at the very least, influenced according to the characteristics of the parties themselves, but also to those of the legislatures.

As some of the earlier, Internet scholars would have made us believe: cyberspace as an independent republic where the laws of the offline world do not apply. The distinction between the online and the offline worlds, although sometimes used in this study because of its utility on practical and illustrative terms, is an artificial and dangerous one that can easily lead towards technological determinism and should thus be avoided.
they act in. Of course, as this study also shows, not all factors have an impact on this behaviour, and certainly not to the same degree.

A considerable amount of data has been collected as part of this research, and so the findings that have been analysed on the previous chapters (four, five, and six) are abundant. Leaving aside specific cases, which have been discussed, Table 54 below offers a succinct summary of the main results of this comparative study. As it has been discussed, a major aim of this work has been to look at the ‘offline factors’ which may influence – and if so, to what degree – the behaviour of parties online. By grouping these factors or variables into a column and showing in the rows the differences found between party websites according to each of the factors, this table provides the reader with a clear overview of how each of the variables analysed affects the visibility, interactive content, and external networking of European party websites and offers therefore a clear insight into the second main research question of this study

Table 54: Summary of results: differences on party websites according to contextual factors from the political systems and parties' characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextual Factors</th>
<th>Visibility</th>
<th>Interactivity</th>
<th>Networking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of democracy</td>
<td>Party websites from established democracies are much more visible.</td>
<td>Party websites from newer democracies are slightly more interactive than those from established ones.</td>
<td>Parties operating at the EP level have many more hyperlinks in their websites than the rest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geopolitical area</td>
<td>Party websites from the Western and North area are much more visible than Eastern ones.</td>
<td>Mediterranean party websites are the most interactive ones in the EU.</td>
<td>Eastern party websites are the least externally networked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of Internet access</td>
<td>Party websites from systems with highest Internet rate are slightly more visible.</td>
<td>Not much of a relation found.</td>
<td>Linear relation (higher Internet rate → party sites more networked) up until last category.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of last election</td>
<td>No relation found.</td>
<td>No relation found.</td>
<td>Unclear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of electoral system</td>
<td>Very strong differences: party websites from non-proportional systems are 3 times more visible than those</td>
<td>Some relation: party sites from proportional and mixed systems are more interactive than those from non-</td>
<td>Strong differences: party websites from non-proportional systems include double the amount of hyperlinks than</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

161 Which is, as developed in the Introduction as well as in chapter three of this thesis: 'Which factors account for the variations between European party websites?' Specifically:
  o Do country-specific contextual variables affect the visibility, interactive content, and external networking of party websites? And if so, in what manner?
  o Do party attributes such as size and ideology affect the visibility, interactive content, and external networking of party websites? And if so, in what manner?
### Rate of voter turnout

- From proportional ones:
  - The higher the level of turnout, the more visible party websites are.

- Proportional ones:
  - Not much of a relation.

- All others:
  - Linear relation (higher turnout rate \( \rightarrow \) more externally networked sites) except at one category.

### Economic wealth (GDP)

- The higher the GDP, the most visible party websites are.

- Linear relation (higher GDP \( \rightarrow \) more interactive party sites) up until last category.

- Strong divide: party websites from systems with high or very high GDP are much more externally networked.

### Level of Free Press

- No relation found at all.

- No relation found at all.

- No relation found at all.

### Party characteristics

#### Size of party

- The bigger the party is, the most visible the websites are.

- Bigger parties have significantly more interactive websites.

- Bigger parties have significantly more externally networked websites.

#### Ideological family

- Parties from the left have more visible websites than those from the right.

- Parties from the left have more interactive websites. Specifically: Green parties.

- Parties from the left have more externally networked sites than those from the right.

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Only one of the ten variables analysed has been proven not to affect at any rate the degree of sophistication of party websites (measured in terms of visibility, interactive content, and external networking): that of the level of Free Press in the political system. Differences between party websites – and in some cases consistent relations – have been found when the sites have been classified according to any of the nine remaining variables. The degree of these divergences varies depending on the factor chosen to categorise the websites. Party websites, thus, vary a lot between themselves, but *some party websites vary more between themselves than others*. For instance, in the case of party sites' visibility, chapter four showed that the type of electoral system of the parliament where the parties operated is one of the strongest indicators. That is: party websites vary considerably in terms of their online visibility depending on the type of electoral system of the country.

This section looks at each of the variables analysed and assesses to what extent each of them has an impact on European party websites, according to the data collected for this research. It also compares the findings from this study with those from previous ones, to see if there has been any change over time. Due to the substantial amount of results to be discussed, and for the sake of clarity, the
impact of each of the variables is discussed following the same order in which the results have been presented on chapters four, five, and six. The discussion starts, thus, looking at the contextual factors specific to the political systems and it finishes with the analysis of those characteristics affecting the parties themselves: size and ideological orientation.

For the purpose of this research, the political systems of the EU have been classified into three groups depending on the age of their democracy: established, newer, and the EP. No differences have been found among these three groups with regards to whether parties had established or not an online presence. The vast majority of parties in all of the three had a website at the time when the survey for this research was done. However, and confirming the need for systematic comparative research on this subject, sound differences have been found amongst the three with respect to their party websites’ visibility, interactive content, and networking. Regarding the former, party websites from established democracies have been found to be more than three times more visible than those from the newer ones, a result which points towards an Eastern/Western divide in terms of party websites’ development. The comparatively higher visibility of party websites from the established democracies group is confirmed when an alternative indicator for visibility (Alexa’s Traffic Rank) was used.

With respect to their interactive content, party websites from the new democracies outdid those from the EP and the established democracies in the majority of the features looked at. Although the differences were not very high, this is an important finding which confirms the claim that a higher rate of Internet access in a society does not necessarily mean that the websites from their political actors will be more interactive. This point is further discussed below. For now it is worth keeping in mind the argument already mentioned above proposed by Ward, Gibson and Nixon in that ‘in newly democratised countries ... the Internet may be able to make more of an impact, since party systems and the parties themselves are less well entrenched and more susceptible to technological change.’ (Ward et al., 2003b: 26). Following this idea, it makes sense that party websites from the newer democracies in the EU are slightly more interactive than their counterparts.

Finally, the investigation on the external networking of European party websites led to another significant result: websites from political groups operating at the EP level are much more externally networked than the rest. In other words, they contain on average a much higher rate of hyperlinks towards external websites than party websites from the other two groups analysed (new and
established democracies). This finding is explicable given the special circumstances of the political groups acting in the EP: large territory, variety of peoples that they represent, relations with political actors from the member states, and so on. All of these factors can serve to explain the attraction of EP political groups towards the networking capabilities of the new media. The claim that the behaviour of parties online is greatly influenced by external, ‘offline’ circumstances is further corroborated. The least externally networked websites belong to those parties from the newer democracies group.

The political systems that conform the three categories described above (EP, new, and established democracies) have been further subdivided in order to go deeper in the comparative analysis for this research. Specifically, the countries that formed what was called the ‘established democracies group’ have been classified according to their geopolitical area: Western and North, Mediterranean, and Scandinavian. The legislatures that made up for the category of ‘new democracies’ above are in this part of the analysis known as the Eastern group. Adding this layer of analysis allowed us to realise that those websites from parties acting in the countries belonging to the Western and North area were considerably more visible – i.e. had a much higher average number of links directed towards them – than party websites from any other European area. The largest differences in this respect have been found between websites from parties from this, Western and North, area and the Eastern one. This contradicts Norris’ thesis about a North/South divide being at play in Europe among party websites (Norris, 2003) and points instead towards the existence of a Western/Eastern divide within the EU at least in terms of websites’ visibility. In this sense, Trechsel et. al. had pointed out that there were strong differences in terms of party and parliamentary websites’ sophistication between existing member states of the EU at the time of their research and the candidate ones. While these authors suggested that the political actors from those candidate states were catching up fast, in terms of websites’ visibility our research shows that this has not (yet) been the case.

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162 For specific information about which countries belong to each of the categories, please refer to the methodological chapter.
163 Their study was completed on 2003, and thus focused on the then 15 member states of the EU. The then 10 candidate or accession countries are: Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia (who entered in 2004), and Bulgaria and Romania (which in turn became member states of the EU in 2007). (Information from http://europa.eu/abc/history/2000_today/index_en.htm, last accessed on February 2009). Except for Malta and Cyprus, the rest of these have been included in the categories of ‘newer democracies’ and ‘Eastern geopolitical area’ in this research.
Regarding the interactive content of European party websites, two unexpected findings have been brought into light through the analysis of the data. Firstly, and contradicting the hypothesis for the existence of an Eastern/Western divide, party websites from the Eastern area were the ones that scored the most in the scale of participatory interactivity. Secondly, party websites from the Mediterranean group included spaces for online debate at a higher rate than those from any other area. These were non-expected findings mainly considering that the two areas are within the lowest ones of the EU in terms of their rate of Internet access in their societies. We will come back to this point below in this section.

As has been discussed above, party groups operating at the EP level are the most externally networked within the EU. On the opposite side of the spectrum, party websites from the Eastern countries were the least externally networked. Breaking down the analysis into the five geopolitical areas merely confirmed these two results. Coming back to the discussion on the existence – or not – of an Eastern/Western divide in terms of party websites’ sophistication in the EU, the conclusion from this study is that such divide clearly exists with regard to networking. Eastern party websites are much less networked than those from the Western European countries both in terms of links coming into them (visibility) and of links towards other sites (external networking). However, not such divide has been found in terms of the websites’ interactive content. The explanation to this fact may rely in that the level of technological development (much lower in the Eastern European countries) has some positive impact on the networking dimension of party websites (the more technologically developed a society is, the more networked, particularly externally networked, its party websites are in general) but not their interactive content, as it is discussed below.

The rate of Internet access in a society has not been found to play a major role on the sophistication of the websites from the parties acting in that society. To be sure, none of the parties without a website in 2007 come from a region with a high or very high degree of Internet access. Furthermore, the most visible websites in the EU are those from parties acting in countries with a high or very high rate of Internet penetration. Having said this, however, the relationship between the level of Internet access and the visibility of party websites is a very weak one.

164 This finding gives support to the idea pointed out by Nixon et al. in that the rate of Internet development may help explain initial uptake of new ICTs, but not necessarily determine how the technology is used (Nixon et al., 2003: 241).
In terms of party websites' interactivity, this is not affected at all by the level of technological diffusion in the society the parties operate in. According to the data, and as it has been shown, the conclusion is irrefutable: the degree of technological development does not affect the interactive content of party websites. Furthermore, in the online forum or the interviews done as part of this research, no differences can be found on the attitude towards new technologies between party officials from countries with different levels of Internet penetration. This is an important finding: the interactive possibilities of the Internet are, more than any other characteristic of this new medium, what makes it possible at least in theory for parties to create new spaces for citizens' participation. Intuitively one would assume that political actors would use the new technologies to a higher extent in those countries where the Internet is more widely used by the population. What is more, in one of the few large comparative studies of the use of the new media by political parties, Norris had arrived to the conclusion that the best predictor of how this use was going to be was was the level of technological diffusion of the society where the parties operate in (Norris, 2003). A higher proportion of population online meant that parties would have more sophisticated websites than those from other countries with a lower rate of Internet penetration.

Other scholars, however, have claimed that - more accordingly to what has been found in this study - the degree of ICT development in a society does not affect the behaviour of the political actors. In the other major comparative study of European party websites, that of Trechsel et. al., the authors used a variety of variables (proportion of Internet users, intensity of Internet users, extent of e-literacy, index of digital divide, and proportional use of e-commerce) that measured the level of ICT development of each European country that they analysed. None of these was found to be a good predictor of the websites' sophistication of political parties (nor those of parliaments). The authors stated that 'this constitutes a "non-finding" of potentially great importance'(Trechsel et al., 2003: 38). For them, it proves that 'there is nothing inexorable or unavoidable about E-Democracy. ... E-Democracy, it would seem, will have to be chosen. It will not evolve as a side-product of other trends in technological innovation' (Trechsel et al., 2003: 38). Similarly, after an analysis of Romanian party websites which showed the low participatory potential of these sites, the authors of the study disregarded the low levels of Internet development in Romania as a valid explanation for their findings. Instead, they argued that, 'given that other nations with more widespread Internet use present similar results. (...) Such findings indicate that political will is probably
the most important force in putting these new technologies to work for the people' (Mocan et al., 2003: 173).

This brings us to an idea that had already been pointed out by Lusoli, Ward and Gibson: that the use that political actors are going to give to ICT has mainly to do with their previous, offline strategies and organisational philosophies rather than on the technology itself (Lusoli et al., 2002a). The findings from this study confirm these claims. With Trechsel et al., we are inclined to suggest that they constitute indeed a discovery of major relevance.

Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that according to our data, the rate of Internet penetration does play a role with regards to the external networking of party websites. This does not contradict the arguments that were exposed above. It is logical that in societies with a higher use of new media, websites are more networked. The very nature of networks implies that they grow at an exponential rate the higher the number of elements existing in the network. Presumably, in societies where there is a high use of new media, the number of websites is also higher than in those with a lower use. Websites, through the use of hyperlinks, create web spheres. The more websites there are the more complex these spheres are, or have the potential to be. To be sure, the inclusion of hyperlinks in a party website is an intentional act: it relies on a strategy. Parties include links in their websites for a variety of reasons, mostly to direct the citizen towards likeminded organisations. Our findings suggest that parties from countries where citizens use the Internet to a larger extent include more links than the others165. The most plausible interpretation of this fact is that these parties are more aware of – or more willing to use – the networking capacity of the Internet at least partly due to the fact that a bigger proportion of their citizens (than in other societies) are high users of the new technologies. They will be, for instance, more likely to click on those links than those who do not use the Internet very much. On the other hand, this argument can also be applied to the inclusion of interactive elements in party websites: it would be logical to expect that in countries with a higher rate of Internet penetration, and thus with a higher proportion of active Internet users, these features will be more used. What can be concluded from this, thus, is that parties are more interested in citizens clicking in the links that they have on their websites, but to a less extent in using the interactive elements that they could include. It may well be for this reason that the trend already mentioned, of parties moving their interactive features elsewhere, away from their official websites, appears to be

165 It is worth keeping in mind, however, that the relationship between number of links included on party websites and the degree of technological development in a society is not a perfect one, as Figure 10 showed.
establishing itself as the general practice. For this hypothesis to be tested, however, an in-depth study of the uses and attitudes of citizens towards these interactive features would be necessary (in the line of that done by Stromer-Galley and Foot, 2002), and this is something which goes beyond the scope of this research.

The relation between the date of the last legislative election in the political system parties operate and party websites' sophistication is unclear. Considering the data exposed, at a first glance there appears to be no relationship between the two. Party websites in Europe are not more or less sophisticated depending on whether an election is due soon or not in their legislature. Even looking at the first, basic step: that of setting up a website, the date of last election is not a good predictor of parties' behaviour. European parties from systems where an election is due soon are not more likely to have setup a website than the rest. The same applies to party websites' visibility: contrary to what was predicted, European parties in which an election was due soon do not have more visible websites than the rest.

When looking at the interactive content of party websites, a similar conclusion is drawn: those websites from systems where the last election had taken place in 2002 or 2003 (and thus where logically elections were due soon) were not the most interactive ones, as it would have been expected. Further corroborating this finding, when party officials were asked about how their websites changed - or not - in times of electoral campaign none of them stated that these sites became more interactive. Instead, most of them agreed that the website did change, but towards emphasising the information offering function of it rather than its participatory side. For instance, one official said that 'there is a greater emphasis on information specific to that election (e.g. candidate information, how to vote, manifesto, etc.)'\(^{166}\). The reason: 'all other information would become pretty much irrelevant for that period and would take a back seat!'\(^{167}\) It should not be understood, however, that parties are not interested in the interactive potential of a campaign. As it has been pointed out throughout this study, the trend is to keep their own websites as information-based as possible, and direct the citizen towards other spaces where more interactive features are presented. Similarly, a growing number of political candidates set up profiles on social network sites such as Facebook or MySpace on campaign- times\(^{168}\). In this way, parties avoid the risks

\(^{166}\) E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr B), 27 Feb. 2008.
\(^{167}\) E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr A), 29 Feb. 2008.
\(^{168}\) As an example, note the British Conservative party’s online video campaign launched exclusively on Facebook in February 2008. This issue raises some questions regarding the
associated with free and open citizens’ participation and try to reach individuals (usually, the younger) who may not be interested in political issues. Research has shown, however, that politicians do not tend to use fully the interactive features available on these networks (Utz, 2009). Furthermore, this issue raises important questions about the responsibility of parties regarding the content of these alternative spaces.

Finally, it is with regards to the websites’ external networking where the date of last election plays a biggest role, the same as it happened with the contextual variable discussed above (rate of Internet penetration). Party websites from systems where the last election had taken place on 2002 had on average the highest number of hyperlinks towards external sites in the EU. Although, as shown on Table 45, this relation is far from being a perfect one, it does add further evidence to the argument outlined above: that institutional variables may be playing a role on the content of party websites only with regards to their networking side.

The variable of ‘date of last election’ is worth looking more into in future research. One of the main areas of studies that has emerged on the field of Internet research is that of e-campaigning, or how political actors utilise the new media for campaign purposes. To understand effectively how parties make use of the Web for electoral purposes, analysing party websites over time and comparing them on different periods of the electoral cycle is a necessary first step. The conclusions from this research are thus not definite or exhaustive. Instead, they point towards further study on this topic.

The type of electoral system plays a major role on the sophistication of party websites, concretely in relation to their networking side, both internal (links-in) and external (links-out). Whereas there was no consistent pattern in terms of the electoral system they come from among those parties that did not have a website on 2007, chapter four showed also the very strong differences found within party websites from different electoral systems with regard to their visibility. Parties from non-proportional systems are more than three times more visible than those from proportional ones, and almost double party websites from mixed electoral systems

Further individualization of politics in Europe (towards an US-style of campaigning) which has already been suggested by other scholars (for instance: Farrell and Webb, 1998; Gibson et al., 2003a), as more and more commonly it is the individual candidates within parties the ones setting up profiles in those networks or alternative, more interactive, websites to that of the official one of the party (such as David Cameron’s personal blog, www.webcameron.org.uk, to continue with the same example).
in average number of links into their sites. When Alexa's Traffic Rank is used as an
indicator of visibility, these findings are further confirmed.

The interactive content of party websites, on the other hand, is higher on
those parties coming from proportional systems. These results point, again,
towards institutional variables having an effect on the networking of party websites
rather than on the content. Furthermore, when attention is turned towards the
external networking of these sites, Figure 12 shows that those sites from parties
operating in legislatures with a non-proportional electoral system include twice as
much links towards external sites as the rest.

All parties acting in political systems with a high or very high rate of voter
turnout had setup websites on 2007, with the exception of two Italian cases.
Moreover, the higher the rate of citizen participation in a political system, the higher
the visibility of party websites is. Although the relation between turnout and party
websites' visibility is not a very strong one, the data (as shown on Figure 4), is
clear: the average number of links into party websites increases with the rate of
turnout of the political system the party comes from.

The degree of voter turnout does not have any effect, however, on the
interactive content of party websites. In terms of party websites' external
networking, a relationship has been found, although not as clearly defined as in the
case of visibility. To be sure, the average number of links included in party websites
does increase with the degree of voter participation of the country of origin of the
party, except on one case (political systems with a medium rate of voter turnout).

The level of economic development of a political system has not been
found to have an effect on the design and sophistication of political parties'
websites in a variety of studies (Farmer and Fender, 2005: ; Löfgren, 2003: ;
Trechsel et al., 2003). Chapter four showed that parties from the wealthier
European countries were not more likely to have setup a website than those from
the poorer ones. It has also illustrated (see Table 15), however, that parties from
countries with a higher GDP per capita had more visible websites than the rest. In
other words, the higher the GDP of a country is, the higher the amount of links on
average coming into their party websites. The relation, although not strong on
statistical terms (probably due to the small number of cases included in our
sample), is clear.

The relation between economic wealth and interactive content of party
websites is, in turn, rather more complex and unclear. The interactivity of party
websites increases with the level of GDP of the political system the parties operate in, but not in all the categories analysed. In fact, party websites from the wealthiest European countries had the lowest average score on the Scale of participatory interactivity. This fact leaves the question open as to the effect of economic development on the interactive content of party websites and does not allow for making bold generalisations on this regard.

Finally, party websites from wealthier European countries have, on average, considerable more links towards external sites than those from the poorest states. In particular, party sites from countries with a high and a very high rate of GDP per capita more than double the number of links of those from systems with a medium, low, and a very low GDP.

A final contextual variable has been analysed: that of the level of Free Press. Arguably, this is a good indicator of the state of media in a society, which in turn is a sign of the health of the civil society in a given political system. It would be thus interesting to analyse to which degree party websites from systems with different degrees of level of Free Press differ between themselves. However this research has shown, in a very clear manner, that there is no relation at all between the level of Free Press of a country and the sophistication of its party websites. It is therefore recommended for future research on this topic the use of a different indicator, at least in the context of the European Union, where societies do not diverge much between themselves in terms of their level of Free Press as according to the classification done by Freedom House, which is the one that has been used in this study.

These findings indicate in a very unambiguous manner that, as it had been predicted, contextual factors such as Internet penetration rate, date of last election, type of electoral system, voter turnout, and level of economic wealth do affect party websites in terms of their networking, both internal and external. However, they do not appear to have much of an effect on the interactive content of party websites, which is the feature that has, potentially, more implications with regard to citizens' participation through the Web.

The offline context, then, does clearly matter, at least with regard on how party websites are networked through the Web. In other words: ICT do not act in a vacuum. These results are too consistent for any researcher to be able to claim that the differences found are just due to mere chance.
The findings from this study have also shown that there are a number of offline factors influencing parties' behaviour online other than these contextual or country-specific ones. In particular, and as predicted, characteristics of the parties themselves such as size and ideology have been found to have an even more important effect on their websites\textsuperscript{169}.

With regard to parties' size, in 2007 European major parties were more likely to be online than smaller parties, and had more visible, interactive, and externally networked websites. All of the parties which did not have a working website on 2007 were what has been classified in this study as 'edge' parties (meaning that they are not within the six most voted in the legislature they act in). Or, in terms of their parliamentary representation, they were either fringe\textsuperscript{170} or extra-parliamentarian ones. Furthermore, major parties had on average almost four times the amount of links coming into their websites than extra-parliamentarian ones. Bigger parties have considerably more visible sites than smaller ones. Again, using Alexa's Traffic Rank as an indicator for websites' visibility further confirmed these results.

It was predicted that major parties would have more visible websites, since it is logical to expect factors such as monetary resources, influence, and visibility in the offline media sphere to play a bigger role with regard to websites' visibility. The same may not necessarily apply with regards to the interactive content of the websites. Based on this argument, the claims from the equalisation theory were expected to be valid with regards to party websites' interactive content. However, bigger parties score higher in the Scale of participatory interactivity than any other type of party. They also have the highest proportion of elements for online debate such as blogs or fora. This is true regardless of whether parties have been classified into the various size categories according to their electoral or to their parliamentary size.

Finally, major parties include more hyperlinks towards external websites than smaller ones. The differences in this respect are not as striking as those found for party websites' internal networking, but they remain clear and consistent. Again, the results point in the same direction regardless of whether parties were categorised according to their share of votes or of seats achieved in parliament.

\textsuperscript{169} Sudulich has arrived at this same conclusion (that parties' own attributes matter more when explaining differences on the interactive content of party websites than country-specific contextual factors) in a recent study of party websites from the UK, Ireland, Italy, and Spain (Sudulich, 2009).

\textsuperscript{170} Not within the four parties with the highest number of seats in parliament.
These findings support, thus, the claims from the normalisation rather than the equalisation thesis. Contrary to what had been expected, the relations of power between stronger and weaker political actors that exist in the offline world seem to be reproducing themselves also on the Web. Nonetheless, a note of caution needs to be kept in mind. In the specific case of party websites’ visibility, it was indeed expected that major parties would be more visible online, just as they are in the traditional offline media. The proportion, however, needs to be evaluated. That is, future research needs to examine to what degree smaller parties get a higher degree of visibility on the Web when compared to their presence in the traditional media. Contrary to what the most utopian of the Internet researchers may have wanted to believe, it is clear that parties, regardless of their size or resources, have not become all equally visible online. This confirms, once again, that the idea that the Web is a different or independent space from the offline political and media spheres needs to be abandoned once and for all. Not only do contextual or country-specific factors influence the behaviour of political actors online, as it has been proven above, but also specific characteristics of these actors (and mainly, their resources) have an effect on their use of the Web. This research is thus a necessary first step insofar as it demonstrates that parties’ online behaviour does depend on contextual and offline factors. It remains to be analysed, however, whether the Internet is indeed introducing some equalising tendencies by lowering the distance between parties in the online and the offline spheres. That is, empirical studies are needed to quantify how visible parties are from different sizes in the offline media and then compare it to their visibility online. Only if this comparison shows that the same distance is being reproduced in the online realm could it be legitimately claimed that there are no equalising tendencies in the new media.

A final hypothesis has been empirically tested in this study: that parties’ ideological orientation will have an effect on their online behaviour, and particularly that parties from the left side of the political spectrum will have a more sophisticated use of the Web than those from the right side. The results confirm both of these predictions: a divide has been found in terms of ideology in European parties’ use of the Web. In particular, parties from the left have more visible, more interactive, and more externally networked websites than those from the right.

All of the parties that did not have a website in 2007 are what can be named ‘non-mainstream’ in terms of their ideology. This is a finding that offers further evidence towards the normalisation thesis rather than the equalisation one.
It had been claimed, by the authors defending the latter, that non-mainstream parties would find in the Web the space that they are unable to find on the traditional offline media. The findings suggest, however, that all of the European mainstream parties have gone online, whereas the very small minority that has not belong to the margins of the ideological spectrum. When analysing differences in terms of left/right, parties from the left have been found to have considerably more links coming into their websites on average than those from the right.

In terms of their use of the interactive features available on the Web, parties from the left tend to use these to a larger extent than those from the right. Although the differences are not striking, they are nevertheless, consistent, as Figure 9 graphically shows. Green parties in particular have the most interactive websites, a finding which had also been expected given the specific history of this party and the characteristics of its typical support base.

Also in terms of their external networking websites belonging to parties from the left side of the political spectrum outdo those belonging to parties from the right. The combined average of number of hyperlinks to external sites included in websites from the left almost doubles the same figure for those from the right.

A number of hypotheses had been outlined above (chapter three) with regard to European parties’ websites. Departing from the main claim, that offline factors would influence parties’ online behaviour and that there is not what some had called a ‘cyberspace’ independent from and unaffected by the characteristics of the offline world, it was expected that:

1. European party websites would vary substantially between themselves in terms of their visibility and networking. However, it is not clear whether there would be a homogenization of party websites regarding their interactive content.

2. Contextual, country-specific factors would account for the expected differences on the sophistication of European party websites.

3. Parties from different sizes would utilise the Web in a dissimilar manner. Specifically, in line with the propositions of the equalisation thesis, it was expected that smaller parties would be making a more intensive use of the Web than the bigger ones, and so their websites would have a more interactive and networking content. In terms of party websites' visibility, however, it was predicted that major parties would dominate, the same as they do in the offline media sphere.
4. And that there would be differences also with regard to the use of the Web by parties from diverse ideological families. In line with what had been found by Hill and Hughes (1998) over a decade ago, it was predicted that parties from the left would have more sophisticated sites than those from the right. Also, Green parties were predicted to be making a more intense use of the Web than their counterparts.

The results from this research have confirmed these hypotheses to a very large extent. European party websites do vary greatly between themselves in terms of internal and external networking, but also with regards to their interactive content. Furthermore, country-specific factors, and mainly the type of electoral system but also others, do make a difference on how European parties utilize the Web. Or in other words: consistent differences have been found among party websites from political systems with different characteristics with regard to their internal and external networking. The same cannot be said, however, with regard to the interactivity of party websites. While party websites diverge greatly also in terms of their interactive content, the influence of the contextual, country-specific factors looked at on this matter remains unclear.

In terms of parties' size, there are clear differences in the websites between those from the bigger and the smaller parties. Major parties have indeed more visible websites. Unlike what had been claimed, however, major party websites outdo those from the smaller ones also in terms of their interactive and external networking content.

Finally, with regard to the use of the Web by parties from various ideological orientations, not only the results have confirmed that party websites from the left are different than those from the right, but also, in line with the prediction, that those from the left are more visible, interactive, and externally networked. The expectations regarding Green parties have also been confirmed.

\[^{171}\] And contrary to more recent studies such as those from Trechsel et al. (2003) which claimed that there were no differences on the use of the Web by parties regarding their ideological orientation.
7.2. What Affects Party Websites’ Interactive Content

The findings from this research have confirmed that external, contextual factors have an effect on party websites, particularly with regards to their networking. Internal (inbound links or links-in) and external (outbound links or links-out) networking of party websites varies substantially depending on certain characteristics of the political systems they act on. The same cannot be said, however, with relation to their interactive content. To be sure, a relationship has been found between parties’ attributes (size and ideological family they belong to) and the interactive content of their websites. But, with the exception of the degree of economic development\(^{172}\), there is not much of a relation between the level of interactivity in European party websites and the number of contextual, country-specific, variables that have been analysed. This research has proved that, contrary to the claims of the most technologically determinists, the spread of the new media does not automatically produce a kind of participatory cyberspace where all actors make the most of the interactive potential of the Internet. If this argument was to be followed, then societies where the Internet is most widely used will have the most interactive party websites. Our data has shown that this is not the case\(^{173}\).

ICT do not act in a vacuum. This is clear in the case of internal and external networking, but the same applies to the interactive content of websites. In this case, the national context where parties operate does not matter as much as the specific characteristics of the parties themselves. On this matter, significant differences have been found on the content of interactive websites depending on the size and ideology of the parties. These variances are too strong to be accidental. The inclusion of features in a website is an intentional act, it responds to a strategy. If the interactivity available on party websites differs consistently among parties from various sizes and ideological families, then it follows that the content of party websites depends on the strategies of the political actors – in this case parties – and not on the technology itself, as Lusoli, Ward and Gibson have already suggested (Lusoli et al., 2002a).

According to the data shown in this study, and contrary to the most equalising theories, bigger parties have strategically incorporated interactivity into their websites to a larger degree than the smaller ones. This does not mean that

\(^{172}\) In line with Norris’ thesis (2003), European party websites from wealthier countries are in general, though not always, more interactive, as Table 32 has shown.

\(^{173}\) Nor with regard to the visibility, nor the external networking of the sites.
they have more to gain than the smaller parties from using the interactive potential of the Net, but the fact remains that they do use the Web in a more interactive manner than their minor counterparts. This is shown not only by the results from our web survey, but also through the declarations from party officials in the online forum which was setup as part of this research. It was officials from the smaller parties the ones who talked more about the negative aspects of incorporating participatory elements in their websites, while the most enthusiastic statements about interactivity belonged to officials from major parties. For instance, while an official from an extra-parliamentary party said that 'the value of interactive features in our site is overstated'\textsuperscript{174}, another from a major party declared that feedback mechanisms are essential for any political party website\textsuperscript{175}.

Parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum have more interactive websites in general than those from the right. As above, this does not imply that parties on the left have necessarily more to gain from the inclusion of participatory elements in their websites than those from the right. In this case, and specifically regarding environmental parties, these differences may be explained due to the diverse target audiences the parties have in mind when designing their websites. Officials from the online forum repeatedly stated the importance – and difficulty – of targeting their websites to a variety of audiences. While they disagreed to some extent in which kind of audience – if any – should be privileged (i.e. whom the website should be aimed at)\textsuperscript{176}, the importance that they all gave to the notion of target audience was clear. It is thus logical to expect this to be a great factor influencing parties' online behaviour. Other scholars had already suggested this: Nixon, Ward and Gibson concluded from their comparative study on party websites that 'specific online target audiences produce important inducements in encouraging parties to direct resources into Internet-based technologies' (Nixon et al., 2003:241).

Why do the particularities of political cultures not affect the interactive content of party websites to the same extent that parties' own attributes do? It may well be that the problems associated with elements for online participation are

\textsuperscript{174} British party official (Mr C), 'Interactivity and Participation', online forum \textit{Use of the Internet by European parties}, 14 Feb. 2008.

\textsuperscript{175} E-mail correspondence with Romanian party official (Ms G), 03 Mar. 2008.

\textsuperscript{176} For instance, one official stated that 'the point of a party site is surely to engage people who are not already members' (British party official (Mr C), 'Features of Party Websites', online forum \textit{Use of the Internet by European parties}, 31 Jan. 2008), while another believed instead that how the website ought to be designed was dependant on satisfying a variety of audiences: supporters, members, floating voters, journalists... (British party official (Mr B), 'Features of Party Websites', online forum \textit{Use of the Internet by European parties}, 23 Jan. 2008).
equally perceived by party officials in the same way regardless of the political system their parties operate in. As it was shown on chapter five, party officials from smaller parties – regardless of the political system they came from – were more aware of the associated risks regarding the inclusion of spaces for online debate in their sites than officials from the bigger parties. It would be the case, thus, that the interactive content of party websites depends more on parties’ own strategies than on the contextual factors of the political systems parties operate in. This explains why the size of party has a stronger impact on the interactive content of party websites than, for instance, the degree of technological development of the country the party acts in.

7.3. Parties’ Use of the Web with regards to their Legitimacy

Western contemporary parties face, according to many scholars, a crisis of legitimacy\textsuperscript{177}. Parties’ popular legitimacy derives from their linkage role between the government and the people. When citizens start perceiving that this linkage is broken, feelings of what has been called ‘anti-party sentiment’ might emerge. If, with Dalton, we believe that public support for parties is one of the fundamentals of the legitimacy of a party-based democracy (Dalton, 1988; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000c), then it becomes clear that what is at stake is of capital importance for our political systems. To be sure, it is not maintained here that parties are in decline: they remain one of the most – if not the most – important and influencing political institutions in European democracies. What is more, surveys show that citizens also believe that parties are indispensable for the functioning of these democracies (Dalton, 2000; Linz, 2002; Mair, 2005). This does not invalidate the fact, however, that contemporary parties are undergoing a generalised loss of popular legitimacy. As stated, the main reason for this is the eroding function of parties as representational agents connecting citizens with the government. For parties to fulfil this function, it is essential that their communication with citizens improves. Otherwise, if the public continues to perceive parties as distant agents who are not interested in what they have to say, it will be impossible for the latter to perform their roles of linkage and representation. Furthermore, for citizens to be able to trust and to be overall satisfied with the performance of parties, parties need to prove that they are accountable, that they listen to their demands and that they respond to these. Both of these – communication and accountability – are features

\textsuperscript{177} This issue was discussed in depth on chapter two of this thesis.
that can be increased with the inclusion of interactive elements on party websites, as party officials themselves are aware of. They have the potential to become spaces where citizens can participate politically and establish a communicative relationship with the party. In turn, parties can use them as mechanisms of accountability.

Of course, the inclusion of spaces for online debate in party websites is not the panacea and will not automatically solve contemporary parties' problems regarding their relationship with citizens in terms of communication, accountability, and so on. Nor will they magically transform apathetic individuals into engaged and politically active citizens. Even if one was to believe that, in theory, these features could allow for a free flow of communication between parties and the people they are meant to represent, many problems arise in practice, as discussed on the final section of chapter five. To be able to make good use of these elements, resources are needed to be dedicated by the parties. The development of new media may in this respect be actually contributing to enlarge the already vast distance between major and minor parties, with the consequences for inter-party competition and democratic pluralism that this implies. Without taking this into account, communication in online debates is far from perfect. Moreover, not many people seem to be participating in them, and so the distance between active and non-active citizens may also be growing. Most of the premises from the enthusiastic Internet scholars of the first wave\textsuperscript{178} seem, thus, to be wrong: the distances both between major and minor parties and between non-active and active citizens, would appear not only not to be diminishing, but in fact to be growing with the spread of new media.

Why should then parties include such elements in their websites? At this point it is worth repeating what a party official from a major British party said in this respect: 'I guess there is always a risk with such things (spaces for online debate), but the potential of positive engagement far outweighs the negatives\textsuperscript{179}. This sentence summarises the argument very concisely: there is so much to be gained from spaces for online participation that all the obstacles and risks discussed on chapter five are worth dealing with. What is at stake overtakes, in this case, the problems. Citizens may not be making much use of these elements at this stage, but we ought to keep in mind that these are new technologies; they take time for the general public to get used to. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the political actors to make sure that these elements are not only available, but also that their

\textsuperscript{178} See chapter one.

\textsuperscript{179} E-mail correspondence with British party official (Mr A), 29 Feb. 2008.
use is worth the citizens’ efforts (in time, skills, and so on). In other words, it is parties who need to improve these features. It has been suggested that it may not be worth including interactive features in the websites from political institutions seeing that the citizens may not be that interested in using them anyway. This argument is misleading as it takes away the institutions’ responsibility in not only offering a good website, but also in keeping it up, and somehow positions this task on the citizens’ side. But surely not many people are going to be willing to make use of these features if it is perceived that they are not taken into consideration by the political actors themselves. Offering a space for online debate in a website is a first step, but it does not stop here. No participatory value is added into any site if the online forum is rarely used, is not up to date or, worse, there are no responses there from the party itself. Instead of concentrating on the negative sides (and there are many, as it has been outlined on chapter five) of online spaces for participation, the call by Internet scholars should be for political actors to make a better use of these elements. What potentially can be gained from them is worth the effort.

Again, it is not argued here that the creation of real participatory spaces online will by themselves solve contemporary parties’ legitimacy problems. It is maintained though, that they can contribute to overcome some of them. Most of these problems derive from parties’ eroded relationship with citizens to act as intermediaries between them and the state. Any instruments that may be used to ameliorate this relationship should be welcomed and used to its best capability. Unfortunately, it would seem that up to now most political actors have dismissed the innovative potentials of the new technologies in terms of increasing and enhancing participation, and have instead used them to replicate old patterns of relationship with the public. ‘Though the technology itself may be innovative, the use to which it is put is not’ (Norton, 2007: 356). The new media can be used by parties to reassure their dominant position within the political systems, but no democratic value is being added if communication remains one-directional and top down, from the party to the citizen (Norton, 2007).

Research needs thus to be dedicated to analyse how to make the most of these tools. Once it has been established to what extent parties use – or not–interactive elements and which factors may be influencing this use, as this study has done, the next step is not to discuss whether parties should include these elements or not in their websites, but instead to analyse how they can incorporate them in their best manner. This is not to deny the attention that the demand side – that of the citizens – requires. Investigation is also needed to single out the
obstacles that undermine citizens' use of these spaces for online debate. Why are citizens not participating and what can be made to encourage them into doing so? At the same time, however, the supply side – that of the political institutions themselves – needs to be dealt with. Once more: for the public to make use or not of interactive elements, these need not only to be included, but also to be well used by the political actors themselves. Otherwise nothing changes: ICT would not add any value to contemporary political behaviour.
Conclusion

This thesis has evaluated the use of the Web by European parties in 2007. It constitutes an innovative comparative study of a very large scale: over 200 party websites have been analysed as part of the research. Furthermore, this websites' survey has been complemented with an extra method of research, an online forum with party officials from various European parties, which has been rarely utilised in this kind of investigations. It is worth emphasising also the date from this research: as it has been pointed out above (chapter three), any study of the Web cannot aim to offer but a snapshot picture of the Web in a particular time. What is more, since 2007, the time when the websites' survey was done, much has been developed in the uses of new media by political actors, and especially with regards to the Web 2.0 style of making politics. A trend that has been spotted within political parties already in 2007 – as discussed throughout this study – consolidates itself as the norm in Western politics: more and more commonly, parties use their official website as a device used to provide information in a top-down manner but, crucially, also (in the words of one of the officials participants in the online forum) 'as a first staging post' from which interested users are directed to other online spaces – such as blogs included on external sites, profiles in social network communities, alternative websites, and so on – much more interactive and user-oriented. Institutions therefore seem to be more interested in offering information while the participatory potential of the Web becomes driven more and more by citizens through the use of these Web 2.0 instruments.

Particularly since November 2008 (with what has come to be known as the 'Obama effect') the political implications in the ‘offline context’ of the use that these actors give to the Web has become even clearer, and thus the relevance of this and similar studies for the discipline of Political Sciences. The need for further, updated, research on this area becomes evident.

The contribution of this study to the field of Internet research and political science in general can be summarised as follows.

1. With regard to the first research question of this study, European party websites vary greatly among themselves in all levels analysed: visibility, interactivity, and external networking. They differ also with regards to the

180 British party official (Mr B), ‘Functions of Party Websites’, online forum Use of the Internet by European parties, 14 Feb. 2008.
political system the parties act on as well as between parties from different sizes and political ideologies. There are therefore no grounds to talk of a standardization of parties’ online behaviour, at least not with regards to any of the three dimensions analysed.

2. With regard to the second research question analysed – which factors account for the variations between European party websites – it has been found that:

   a. Contextual factors from the political system the party operates in have an effect in party websites, particularly with regards to their visibility and external networking. Specifically, the type of electoral system parties operate in has proven to be one of the most important factors with regards to the differences found on party websites’ networking, both internal and external.

   b. However, the contextual variables analysed do not account so much for the differences found in terms of party websites’ interactivity. To be sure, party websites from different geopolitical areas differ greatly among themselves, also in terms of their interactive content, but none of the specific variables analysed has proven to have a major effect on this. Strong differences were found, the same as with regards to party websites’ visibility and external networking, between parties from various sizes and ideologies. This implies that with regard to the interactive content of party websites, external factors do not count as much as the party’s own online strategy.

   c. Characteristics from the parties themselves have a major role on party websites. Bigger parties have more visible, more interactive, and more externally networked websites than smaller ones. Parties from the left have more sophisticated websites, particularly those from the Green family, than those from the right.

   It has also been argued in this study that the inclusion of interactive elements on party websites – and thus the creation of spaces for online debate – could help overcome some of the popular legitimacy problems that European parties are currently facing. Specifically, they can help parties improve their relationship with citizens through the development of spaces for online participation

\[181\] On the other hand, as it has been pointed out and not in line with what had been predicted, significant differences were found regarding the interactive content of party websites from different political systems. This fact points towards the need of incorporating other contextual variables in the analysis in future research.
in their websites. As party officials themselves have pointed out (see chapter five) these spaces can be used as areas of communication between citizens and party, as well as arenas through which the party can become more accountable to the public. This way, the relationship between party and public being enhanced, parties may be capable of act as linkage between the public and the government.

However, this can only be done if these elements are used in an innovative way and to their most participatory potential. That is, if parties go beyond their use as instruments for the dissemination of top-down information. Otherwise, they might actually accentuate existing problems. The solution for parties, as it has been pointed out, may well be moving these elements towards alternative online spaces and keeping their own official websites as devices that serve mainly to deliver information. This way, associated risks and problems with online debates would be tempered. This raises nevertheless important questions, such as who is ultimately responsible for these alternative spaces, or about how this practice may exacerbate existing differences between the more web-savvy citizens and the less technologically literate.

This thesis has offered an analysis of the uses of the Web by European parties to an extent that has never been done before in the literature. It is not, and cannot be, however, an exhaustive account on the subject. Instead, the study of this topic has brought out questions that need to be evaluated in further research. Specifically, the most important ones of these are:

- Contextual variables used to analyse differences on party websites can be almost added. For instance, an alternative indicator of the state of the media in European societies to one used in this thesis (degree of Free Press) is desirable.
- Future research needs also to pay attention to differences between party websites within the same political system.
- Additionally, research looking into changes over time in party websites (and specifically with regards to the dates of next elections) would be highly interesting.
- Regarding the networking side of party websites, the specific nature of which organisations the sites are linking to (and from) is required for a better understanding on how parties make the most of this networking capacity of the Web.
Attention needs to be paid also to how citizens use party websites and what they expect from them. That is, the 'demand side' needs to be evaluated.

Finally, on a practical level, specific guidelines and recommendations on how parties can make the most of the interactive features available on the new media are desirable.
Appendix I: Parties (and Political Groups) Selected for the Web Survey

Austria:
- Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (Social Democratic Party of Austria)
- Österreichische Volkspartei (Austrian People's Party)
- Die Grünen - Die Grüne Alternative (The Greens - The Green Alternative)
- Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria)
- Liste Westenthaler - BZO (Alliance for the Future of Austria)
- Liste Dr. Martin - MATIN (List Martin)
- Kommunistische Partei Österreichs (Communist Party of Austria)

Belgium:
- Vlaamse Liberalen en Democrat (Flemish Liberal and Democrats)
- Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party)
- Mouvement Réformateur (Movement for Reform)
- Socialistische Partij, Anders & Spirit (Socialist Party Alternative & Spirit)
- Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams (Christian-Democrats & Flemish)
- Vlaams Belang (Flemish Bloc)
- Centre Démocrate Humaniste (Humanist Democratic Centre)
- Écologistes (Ecologists)
- Nieuw - Vlaamse Alliantie (New Flemish Alliance)
- Front National (National Front)
- Anders Gaan Leven (To Live Differently)
- Chrétiens Démocrates Francophones (Christian-Democrats Francophones)

Bulgaria:
- Koalicija za Balgarija (Coalition for Bulgaria)
- Nacionalno Dviženie Simeon Vtori (National Movement Simeon II)
- Dviženie za Prava i Svobodi (Movement for Rights and Freedoms)
- Nacionalno Obedinenie Ataka (National Union Attack)
- Obedineni Demokraticni Sili (United Democratic Forces)
- Demokrati za Silna Balgarija (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria)
- Balgarski Naroden Sajuz (Bulgarian People's Union)
- "Ebpopoma"
- Hoboto Bpeme

Cyprus:
- Anorthotikon Komma Ergazemenou Laou (Progressive Party of Working People)
- Dimokratikos Synagermos (Democratic Rally)
- Dimokratiko Komma (Democratic Party)
- Kinima Sosialdimokraton Eniaia (Movement for Social Democracy - EDEK)
- Dimokratiki Enosi Kentrou (European Party)
- Evropaiko Komma (Ecological and Environmental Movement)
- Kinima Oikologoi Perivallontistoi (United Democrats)
- Enomeni Dimokrates

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• Hunters' Political Movement

Czech Republic:
• Obcanska Demokraticka Strana (Civic Democratic Party)
• Ceská Strana Sociální Demokratická (Czech Social Democratic Party)
• Komunistická Strana Cech a Moravy (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia)
• Krestansko-Demokratická Unie (Christian Democratic Union)
• Strana Zelených (Green Party)
• Evropští Demokraté (European Democrats)
• Nez Demokrata (Vladimír Zelezny) (Independents Democrats)

Denmark:
• Venstre, Danmarks Liberale Parti (Left, Liberal Party of Denmark)
• Socialdemokratiet i Danmark (Social Democrats in Denmark)
• Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People’s Party)
• Konservative Folkeparti (Conservative People’s Party)
• Radikale Venstre (Danish Social Liberal Party)
• Socialistisk Folkeparti (Socialist People’s Party)
• Enhedslisten de Rød-Grønne (Unity List Red/Green)
• Kristendemokraterne (Christian Democrats)
• Centrum-Demokraterne (Center Democrats)

Estonia:
• Eesti Reformierakond (Estonian Reform Party)
• Eesti Keskerakond (Estonian Centre Party)
• Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit (Union of Pro Patria Res Publica)
• Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond (Social Democratic Party)
• Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised (Estonian Green Party)
• Eestimaa Rahvaliit (Estonian People’s Union)
• Eesti Kristlik Rahvapartei (Estonian Christian Democrats)
• Konstitutsioonierakond (Constitutional Party)

Finland:
• Suomen Keskusta (Finnish Centre Party)
• Kansallinen Kokoomus (National Coalition Party)
• Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue (Finnish Social Democratic Party)
• Vasemmistoliitto (Left Wing Alliance)
• Vihrea Liitto (Green League)
• Ruotsalainen Kansanpuolue / Svenska Folkpartiet in Finland (Swedish People’s Party in Finland)
• Kristillisdemokraatit (Christian Democrats)
• Perussuomalaiset (True Finns Party)
• Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue (Yhdenäisyys) (Communist Party of Finland (Unity))
• Suomen Senioripuolue (Finnish Senior Citizens’ Party)

France:
• Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle (Union for the Presidential Majority)
• Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party)
• Union pour la Démocratie Française (Union for French Democracy)
• Parti Communiste Français (French Communist Party)
• Parti Radical de Gauche (Left Radical Party)
• LesVerts (The Greens)
• Démocratie Libérale (Liberal Democracy)
• Rassemblement pour la France (Rally for France)
• Mouvement pour la France (Movement for France)
• Front National (National Front)
• Chasse, Pêche, Nature, Traditions (Hunting, Fishing, Nature, Traditions)

Germany:
• Christlich-Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union)
• Christlich Soziale Union in Bayern (Christian Social Union of Bavaria)
• Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
• Freie Demokratische Partei - Die Liberalen (Free Democratic Party – The Liberals)
• Die Linkspartei (The Left Party)
• Bündnis '90/Die Grünen (Alliance ‘90 The Greens)
• Nationaldemokratische Partei (National Democratic Party of Germany)
• Die Republikaner (The Republicans)

Greece:
• Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy)
• Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima (Panhellenic Socialist Movement)
• Kommunistiko Komma Elladas (Comunist Party of Greece)
• Synaspismos tis Rizospastikis Aristeras (Coalition of the Radical Left)
• Laikos Orthodoxos Synagermos (Popular Orthodox Rally)
• Dimokratiko Kinoniko Kinima (Democratic Social Movement)

Hungary:
• Magyar Szocialista Párt (Hungarian Socialist Party)
• Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége (Alliance of Free Democrats)
• Fidesz - Magyar Polgári Szövetség (Hungarian Civic Union)
• Keresztyendemokrata Néppárt (Christian Democratic People’s Party)
• Magyar Demokrata Fórum (Hungarian Democratic Forum)
• Somogyért (Association for Somogy)
• Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja (Hungarian Justice and Life)
• Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom (Movement for a Better Hungary)

Ireland:
• Fianna Fáil (Soldiers of Ireland)
• Fine Gael (Family of the Irish)
• Labour Party (Labour Party)
• Progressive Democrats (Progressive Democrats)
• Green Party (Green Party)
• Sinn Féin (We Ourselves)
• Socialist Party (Socialist Party)
• Comhar Criostai (The Christian Solidarity Party)
• The Workers’ Party (The Workers’ Party)

Italy:
• L'Ulivo (Olive Tree)
• Forza Italia (Forza Italia)
• Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance)
• Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation Party)
• Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e dei Democratici di Centro (Union of Christian and Centre Democrats)
• Lega Nord (Northern League)
• La Rosa nel Pugno (Rose in the Fist)
• Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (Party of Italian Communists)
• Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values)
• Federazione dei Verdi (Federation of the Greens)
• Popolari UDEUR (Popular UDEUR)
• Unione dei Democratici Cristiani – Nuovo PSI (Christian Democracy-New PSI)
• Südtiroler Volkspartei (South Tyrolean People's Party)
• Autonomie Liberté Démocratie (Autonomy Liberty Democracy)
• Partito dei Pensionati (Pensioners’ Party)
• Alternativa Sociale con A. Mussolini (Social Alternative with A. Mussolini)

Latvia:
• Tautas Partija (People’s Party)
• Zalo un Zemnieku Savieniba (Union of Greens and Farmers)
• Jaunais Laiks (New Era)
• Saskanas Centrs (Harmony Centre - PS)
• Latvijas Pirma Partija & Latvijas Cels (Coalition of Latvia’s First Party and Latvian Way)
• Tevzemei un Brivibai/LNNK (For Fatherland and Freedom)
• Par Cilveka Tiesibam Vienota Latvija (For Human Rights in United Latvia)
• Latvijas Socialdemokratiska Stradnieku Party)
• Dzimtene (Motherland)

Lithuania:
• Darbo Partija (Labour Party)
• Lietuvos Socialdemokratu Partija (Social Democratic Party of Lithuania)
• Naujoji Sajunga (Socialliberalai) (New Union Social Liberals)
• Tevynes Sajunga/Lietuvos Konservatoriai (Homeland Union-Lithuanian Conservatives)
• "Už Tvarka ir Teisinguma" ("For the Order and Justice")
• Liberalu ir Centro Sajunga (Liberal and Centre Union)
• Valstieciu ir Naujosios Demokratijos Partijos Sąjunga (Farmers and New Democratic Party Union)
• Lietuvos Lenku Rinkimu Akcija (Election Action of Lithuania’s Poles)
• Krikščionių Konservatorių Socialinė Sąjunga (Christian Conservative Social Union)
• Lietuvos Krikščionys Demokratai (Lithuanian Christian Democrats)

Luxembourg:
• Chréischttich Sozial Vollekspartei (Christian Social People's Party)
• Lëtzebuergesch Sozialistesch Arbechterpartei (Luxembourg Socialist Workers’ Party)
• Demokratesch Partei (Democratic Party)
• Dëi Grëng (The Greens)
• Aktiouonkomitee fir Demokratie an Rentengerechtigkeet (Action Committee for Democracy and Pensions Justice)
• Dëi Lénk-La Gauche (The Left)
Kommunistesch Partei Lëtzebuerg (Communist Party of Luxembourg)

Malta:
- Partit Nazzjonalista (Nationalist Party)
- Partit Laburista (Labour Party)
- Alternattiva Demokratika (Democratic Alternative)

Netherlands:
- Christen Democratisch Appèl (Christian Democratic Appeal)
- Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party)
- Socialistische Partij (Socialist Party)
- Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy)
- Partij voor de Vrijheid (Group Wilders/Party for Freedom)
- Groen Links (Green Left)
- ChristenUnie (Christian Union)
- Democraten 66 (Democrats 66)
- Partij voor de Dieren (Party of the Animals)
- Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (Political Reformed Party)
- Een NL (One NL)
- Lijst Pim Fortuyn (List Pim Fortuyn)

Poland:
- Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc (Law and Justice)
- Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform)
- Samoobrona (Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland)
- Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (Democratic Left Alliance)
- Liga Polskich Rodzin (League of Polish Families)
- Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish Peasant Party)
- Komitet Wyborczy Mniejszosc Niemiecka (German Minority Electoral Committee)
- Socjaldemokracja Polska (Social Democracy of Poland)
- Partia Demokratyczna (Democratic Party)

Portugal:
- Partido Socialista (Socialist Party)
- Partido Social Democata (Social Democratic Party)
- Partido Comunista Português (Portuguese Communist Party)
- Partido Ecologista "Os Verdes" (Ecologist Party ‘The Greens’)
- Partido Popular (People’s Party)
- Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc)
- Partido Comunista dos Trabalhadores (Communist Party of Portuguese Workers)
- Partido da Nova Democracia (Party of the New Democracy)

Romania:
- Partidul Social Democrat (Social Democratic Party)
- Partidul Umanist din România (Humanist Party of Romania)
- Partidul National Liberal (National Liberal Party)
- Partidul Democrat (Democratic Party)
- Partidul România Mare (Greater Romania Party)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Parties</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Uniunea Democratica Maghiara din România (Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Partidul Noua Generatie (New Generation Party)</td>
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<td>Partidul National Taranesc Creștin Democrat (Christian-Democratic National Peasants' Party)</td>
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<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Smer - Sociálna Demokracia (Direction - Social Democracy)</td>
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<td>Slovenská Demokratická a Krestanská Únia - Demokratická Strana (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union Democratic Party)</td>
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<td>Slovenská Národná Strana (Slovak National Party)</td>
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<td>Strana Madarskej Koalicie - Magyar Koalíció Pártja (Party of the Hungarian Coalition)</td>
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<td>Łudová Strana - Hnutie za Demokratické Slovensko (People's Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Krestanskodemokratické Hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Komunistická Strana Slovenska (Communist Party of Slovakia)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Slobodné Fórum (Free Forum)</td>
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<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Slovenska demokratska stranka (Slovakian Democratic Party)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Liberalna demokracija Slovenije (Liberal Democracy of Slovenia)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Združena Lista socialnih demokratov (United List of Social Democrats)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nova Slovenija - Krščanska ljudska stranka (New Slovenia - Christian People's Party)</td>
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<td>Slovenska ljudska stranka (Slovenian People's Party)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Slovenska nacionalna stranka (Slovenian National Party)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Demokratična stranka upokojencev Slovenije (Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aktivna Slovenija (Active Slovenia)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Slovenija je naša (Slovenia is Ours)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Partido Popular (People's Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Izquierda Unida (United Left)</td>
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<td>Convergencia i Unió (Convergence and Unity)</td>
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<td>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia)</td>
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<td>Partido Nacionalista Vasco (Basque Nationalist Party)</td>
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<td>Coalición Canaria (Canarian Coalition)</td>
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<td>Bloque Nacionalista Gallego (Galician Nationalist Bloc)</td>
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<td>Chunta Aragonesista (Aragonese Council)</td>
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<td>Eusko Alkartasuna (Basque Solidarity)</td>
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<td>Nafarroa Bai (Navarra Yes)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Partido Andalucista (Andalucista Party)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bloc Nacionalista Valencia-Esquerra Verda (Valencian Nationalistic Bloc – Green Left)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Arbetarepartiet Socialdemokraterna (Social Democratic Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderata samlingspartiet (Moderate Party)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Centerpartiet (Center Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Folkpartiet Liberalaterna (Liberal Party)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Kristdemokraterna (Christian Democrat Party)
• Vänsterpartiet (Left Party)
• Miljöpartiet de Gröna (Green Party)
• Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats)
• Feministiskt initiativ (Feminist Initiative)

**United Kingdom:**

• Labour Party
• Conservative Party
• Liberal Democrat Party
• Democratic Unionist Party
• Scottish National Party
• Sinn Féin
• Plaid Cymru
• Social Democratic and Labour
• Ulster Unionist
• Respect
• Health Concern
• UKIP
• Green Party

**European Parliament:**

• Group of the European People’s Party and the European Democrats
• Group of the Party of European Socialists
• Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
• Group of the Greens and the European Free Alliance
• Group of the European United Left and Nordic Green Left
• Union for Europe of the Nations Group
• Group for Independence and Democracy
• Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty Group
• European National Front
• Europe - Democracy - Esperanto

• European People’s Party
• European Democrats
• Party of European Socialists
• European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party
• European Democratic Party
• European Green Party
• European Free Alliance
• Party of the European Left
• Nordic Green Left Alliance
• European Anticapitalist Left
• Alliance for Europe of the Nations
• Alliance of Independent Democrats in Europe
• European Christian Political Movement
• Euronat
• EUDemocrats
• European National Front

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Appendix II: Party Websites Analysed in the Web Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs</td>
<td><a href="http://www.spoe.at">www.spoe.at</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Österreichische Volkspartei</td>
<td><a href="http://www.oevp.at">www.oevp.at</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Grünen - Die Grüne Alternative</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gruene.at">www.gruene.at</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</td>
<td><a href="http://www.fpoe.at">www.fpoe.at</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liste Westenthaler - BZO</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bzoe.at">www.bzoe.at</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liste Dr. Martin - MATIN</td>
<td><a href="http://www.weisse.at">www.weisse.at</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kommunistische Partei Österreichs</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kpoe.at">www.kpoe.at</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vlaamse Liberalen en Democrat</td>
<td><a href="http://www.vld.be">www.vld.be</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parti Socialiste</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ps.be">www.ps.be</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mouvement Réformateur</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mr.be">www.mr.be</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialistische Partij, Anders &amp; Spirit</td>
<td><a href="http://www.sp.be">www.sp.be</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christen-Democratisch &amp; Vlaams</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cdenv.be">www.cdenv.be</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vlaams Belang</td>
<td><a href="http://www.vlaamsbelang.org">www.vlaamsbelang.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Centre Démocrate Humaniste</td>
<td><a href="http://www.lecdh.be">www.lecdh.be</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Écologistes</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ecolo.be">www.ecolo.be</a></td>
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<td>Nieuw - Vlaamse Alliantie</td>
<td><a href="http://www.n-va.be">www.n-va.be</a></td>
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<td>Front National</td>
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<td>Anders Gaan Leven</td>
<td><a href="http://www.groen.be">www.groen.be</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chrétiens Démocrates Francophones</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cdf-info.be">www.cdf-info.be</a></td>
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<td>Koalicija za Balgaria</td>
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<td>Nez Demokrate (Vladimir Zelezny)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nezdem.cz">www.nezdem.cz</a></td>
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<td>Venstre, Danmarks Liberale Parti</td>
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<td>Kristendemokraterne</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kd.dk">www.kd.dk</a></td>
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162 All of these were accessed between March and July 2007.
- Centrum-Demokraterne www.centrumdemokraterne.dk
- Eesti Reformierakond www.reform.ee
- Eesti Keskerakond www.keskerakond.ee
- Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit www.isamaajarespublicaliit.ee
- Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond www.sotsdem.ee
- Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised www.roheline.erakond.ee
- Eestimaa Rahvalit www.erl.ee
- Eesti Kristlik Rahvapartei www.ekd.ee
- Konstitutsioonierakond www.kpartei.ee
- Suomen Keskusta www.keskusta.fi
- Kansallinen Kokoomus www.kokoomus.fi
- Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue www.sdp.fi
- Vasemmistoliitto www.vihreallito.fi
- Vihreä Liitto www.vihrealiitto.fi
- Ruotsalainen Kansanpuolue / Svenska Folkpartiet in Finland www.sfp.fi
- Kristillisdemokraatit www.kristillisdemokraatit.fi
- Perussuomalaiset www.perussuomalaiset.fi
- Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue (Yhtenäisyys) www.skp.fi
- Suomen Senioripuolue www.senioripuolue.fi
- Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle www.u-m-p.org
- Parti Socialiste www.parti-socialiste.fr
- Union pour la Démocratie Française www.udf.org
- Parti Communiste Français www.pcf.fr
- Parti Radical de Gauche www.planeteradicales.org
- Mouvement pour la France www.mpf-villiers.com
- Front National www.frontnational.com
- Christlich-Demokratische Union www.cdu.de
- Christlich Soziale Union in Bayern www.csu.de
- Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands www.spd.de
- Freie Demokratische Partei – Die Liberalen www.fdp.de
- Die Linkepartei www.die-linke.de
- Bündnis '90/Die Grünen www.gruene.de
- Nationaldemokratische Partei www.npd.de
- Die Republikaner www.rep.de
- Nea Dimokratia www.nd.gr
- Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima www.pasok.gr
- Kommunistiko Komma Elladas www.kke.gr
- Synaspismos tis Rizostikis Aristeras www.syriza.gr
- Laikos Orthodoxos Synagermos www.karatzaferis.gr
- Dimokratiko Kinoniko Kinima www.dikki.org
- Magyar Szocialista Párt www.mszp.hu
- Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége www.szdsz.hu
- Fidesz - Magyar Polgári Szövetség www.fidesz.hu
- Keresztny démokrata Néppárt www.kdnp.hu
- Magyar Demokrata Fórum www.mdf.hu
- Somogyért www.somogyert.hu
- Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja www.miep.hu
- Jobbik Magyarországcért Mozgalom www.jobbik.hu
- Fianna Fáil www.fiannafail.ie
- Fine Gael www.finegael.com
- Labour Party www.labour.ie
- Progressive Democrats www.progressivedemocrats.ie
• Green Party www.greenparty.ie
• Sinn Féin www.sinnfein.ie
• Socialist Party www.socialistparty.net
• The Workers' Party www.workers-party.org
• L'Ulivo www.ulivo.it
• Forza Italia www.forza-italia.it
• Alleanza Nazionale www.alleanzanasionale.it
• Partito della Rifondazione Comunista www.rifondazione.it
• Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e dei Democratici di Centro www.udc-italia.it
• Lega Nord www.leganord.org
• La Rosa nel Pugno www.rosanelpugno.it
• Partito dei Comunisti Italiani www.comunisti-italiani.it
• Italia dei Valorì www.italiadeivalori.it
• Federazione dei Verdi www.verdi.it
• Popolari UDEUR www.popolariudeur.it
• Südtiroler Volkspartei www.svpartei.org
• Partito dei Pensionati www.partitopenensionati.it
• Alternativa Sociale con A. Mussolini www.azionesociale.net
• Tautas Partija www.tautaspartija.lv
• Zalo un Zemnieku Savieniba www.lzs.lv
• Jaunais Laiks www.jaunaislaiks.lv
• Saskanas Centrs www.saskanascentrs.lv
• Latvijas Pirmo Partiju & Latvijas Cels www.lppc.lv
• Tevzemei un Brivibai/LNNK www.tb.lv
• Par Čilveka Tiesibam Vienota Latvija www.ptclv.lv
• Latvijas Socialdemokrātiska Stradnieku www.lsdsp.lv
• Dzintene www.knab.lv
• Darbo Partija www.darbopartija.lt
• Lietuvos Socialdemokratų Partija www.lsdp.lt
• Naujoji Sąjunga (Socialoliberalai) www.nsaunija.it
• Tevynės Sąjunga/Lietuvos Konservatoriai www.tsajunga.lt
• "Už Tvarą ir Teisingumą" www.ldp.lt
• Liberalu ir Centro Sąjunga www.lics.lt
• Valstiecių ir Naujosios Demokratijos Partijos Sąjungos www.vls.lt
• Krikščionių Konservatorių Socialinė Sąjunga www.nks.lt
• Lietuvos Krikščionys Demokratai www.kdtp.lt
• Chříšťanský Český Club www.csv.lu
• Lëtzebuerger Sozialistesch Arbechterpartei www.isap.lu
• Demokratische Partei www.dp.lu
• Dēi Grēng www.greng.lu
• Aktiounsksomitee fir Demokratie an Rentengerechtigkeet www.adrlu
• Dēi Lēnk-La Gauche www.dei-lenklu
• Kommunistes Partei Lëtzebuerger www.kp-l.org
• Partit Nazzjonaliata www.pn.org.mt
• Partit Laburista www.ml.org.mt
• Alternattiva Demokratika www.alternattiva.org.mt
• Christen Democratisch Appèl www.cda.nl
• Partij van de Arbeid www.pvda.nl
• Socialistische Partij www.sp.nl
• Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie www.vvd.nl
• Partij voor de Vrijheid www.pvv.nl
• Groen Links www.groenlinks.nl
• ChristenUnie www.christenunie.nl
• Democraten 66 www.d66.nl

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- Partij voor de Dieren
- Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij
- Eén NL
- Lijst Pim Fortuyn
- Prawo i Sprawiedliwość
- Platforma Obywatelska
- Samoobrona
- Sojusz LewicyDemokratycznej
- Liga Polskich Rodzin
- Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe
- Komitet Wyborczy Mniejszości Niemieckiej
- Socjaldemokracja Polska
- PartiaDemokratyczna
- PartidoSocialista
- PartidoSocialDemocrata
- PartidoComunistaPortuguês
- PartidoEcológista"Os Verdes"
- PartidoPopular
- Bloco de Esquerda
- PartidoComunista dos TrabalhadoresPortugueses
- Partido da NovaDemocracia
- PartidulSocial Democrat
- PartidulUmânist din România
- PartidulNational Liberal
- PartidulDemocrat
- PartidulRomânia Mare
- UniuneaDemocratica Maghiara din România
- Partidul NouaGeneratie
- PartidulNational Taranesc Crestin Democrat
- Smer - Socială Democratia
- SlovenskáDemokratická a KrestanskáÚnia-DS
- SlovenskáNárodna Strana
- StranaMadarskej Koalície – MagyarKoalícióPártja
- Strana - Hnutie za Demokratické Slovensko
- Krestanskodemokratické Hnutie
- Komunistická Strana Slovenska
- Slobodné Fórum
- Slovenská demokratická stranka
- Liberalnademokracija Slovenije
- ZdruženaLista socialnih demokratov
- NovaSlovenija - Krščanska ljudska stranka
- Slovenska ljudska stranka
- Slovenska nacionalna stranka
- Demokratična stranka upokojencev Slovenije
- AktivnaSlovenija
- Slovenija je naša
- PartidoSocialista Obrero Español
- PartidoPopular
- Izquierda Unida
- Convergenciai Unió
- Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya
- PartidoNacionalista Vasco
- CoaliciónCanaria
- BloqueNacionalista Gallego
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<td>European Free Alliance</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.adieurope.org">www.adieurope.org</a></td>
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<td>European Christian Political Movement</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ecpm.info">www.ecpm.info</a></td>
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Appendix III: Coding Scheme of the Web Survey

A total of 42 variables were researched and consequently codified into a SPSS database as part of the Web survey. These are:

1. Acronym of the party, where existent
2. Name of party in original language
3. English name of party
4. Parliament where the party operates. Each party (case) was given a number, according to which political system they acted in, codified as follows:
   - Belgium (1)
   - Czech Republic (2)
   - Denmark (3)
   - Germany (4)
   - Estonia (5)
   - Greece (6)
   - Spain (7)
   - France (8)
   - Ireland (9)
   - Italy (10)
   - Cyprus (11)
   - Latvia (12)
   - Lithuania (13)
   - Luxembourg (14)
   - Hungary (15)
   - Malta (16)
   - Netherlands (17)
   - Austria (18)
   - Poland (19)
   - Portugal (20)
   - Slovenia (21)
   - Slovakia (22)
   - Finland (23)
   - Sweden (24)
   - UK (25)
   - Bulgaria (26)
   - Romania (27)
   - European Parliament (28)
5. Country where the party operates (in full name)
6. Geopolitical Area: the political systems the parties operate in have been divided into:
   - Western and North (1)
   - Mediterranean (2)
   - Scandinavian (3)
   - Eastern (4)
   - European Parliament (5)
7. Age of Democracy: the political systems the parties operate in have been classified into:
   - Established democracies (1)
   - Newer democracies (2)
   - European Parliament (3)

8. Internet Penetration Rate of the country the party operates in: percentage of Internet access by household in 2007. Source: Eurostat.

9. Internet Penetration Rate Aggregated: own classification according to the Internet penetration rate, into:
   - Very low: less than 40% (1)
   - Low: between 40% and 49% (2)
   - Average: between 50% and 59% (3)
   - High: between 60% and 69% (4)
   - Very high: equal or more than 70% (5)

10. Year of last legislative election of the political system where the party operates, from 2002 to 2007.

11. Type of electoral system of the country where the party operates (for all cases except for parties operating at the EP). Source: IDEA.
   - List Proportional Representation (1)
   - First Past the Post (2)
   - Mixed Member Proportional System (3)
   - Single Transferable Vote (4)
   - Two Round System (5)
   - Parallel System (6)

12. Type of electoral system II (for all cases except for parties operating at the EP). Source: Farrell.
   - Proportional (1)
   - Non-Proportional (2)
   - Mixed (3)

13. Turnout rate of the political system the party operates in (for all cases except for parties operating at the EP): percentage of votes in all elections since 1945 / active population. Source: IDEA.

14. Turnout Aggregated: own classification according to the rate of turnout, into:
   - Very low: between 50% and 59% (1)
   - Low: between 60% and 69% (2)
   - Medium: between 70% and 79% (3)
   - High: between 80% and 89% (4)
   - Very high: over 90% (5)

15. Economic wealth: gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of the country the party operates in, for 2007 and in US dollars (for all cases except for parties operating at the EP). Source: IMF.

16. GDP per Capita Aggregated: own classification according to the GDP per capita, into:
   - Very low: less than 10,000 (1)
   - Low: between 10,001 and 15,000 (2)
   - Medium: between 15,001 and 30,000 (3)
17. Free Press: score of the political system parties are from in the Freedom of Press survey (for all cases except for parties operating at the EP).

18. Free Press Aggregated: own classification according to the score in the Freedom of Press survey, into:
   - Almost perfectly free: scores from 1 to 9 (1)
   - Very free: scores from 10 to 14 (2)
   - Average free: scores from 15 to 19 (3)
   - Low free: scores from 20 to 24 (4)
   - Free, but leading towards Partly Free: scores from 25 to 29 (5)
   - Partly free: scores over 39 (6)

19. Percentage of Votes: rate of votes attained by the party in the last legislative election of its political system. Source: various.

20. Size of party according to Votes: own classification in which parties are categorised depending of the rate of votes attained in the last legislative election of its political system, into the following:
   - Big: those within the two parties who achieved most votes (1)
   - Medium: third and fourth places according to the votes achieved (2)
   - Small: fifth and sixth places according to the votes achieved (3)
   - Edge: those parties who were not within the six most voted parties (4)

21. Rate of Seats: percentage of seats achieved by each party in parliament in the last legislative election for each political system. Source: various.

22. Size of party according to Seats: own classification in which parties are categorised depending of the rate of seats achieved in the last legislative election of its political system, into the following:
   - Major: the two parties with the highest proportion of seats (1)
   - Minor: the third and fourth parties in terms of rate of seats achieved (2)
   - Fringe: parties with seats in parliament, but not within the top four (3)
   - Extra-parliamentarians: parties that did not achieve any seats in parliament (4)

23. Ideological family of party, according to party's own statements or other sources like Wikipedia. Cases (parties) were given a number between 1 and 9 according to the following codification:
   - extreme left (1),
   - social democrat (2),
   - green (3),
   - centre (4),
   - liberal (5),
   - Christian-democrat (6),
   - conservative (7),
   - nationalists/extreme right (8),
   - others: regionalists, minorities, religious, one-item parties.. (9)

24. Party's political affiliation in the European Parliament: parties were given a number between 1 and 9 depending to which political group they were ascribed to in the EP, according to the following codification:
   - European People's Party – European Democrats (1)
25. Website: does the party have a website?
   o Yes (1)
   o No (2)

26. URL: URL address of the party website.

27. Type of domain: of the party website:
   o Country: .uk, for instance; but also .org.uk (1)
   o .org (2)
   o .com (3)
   o Other (4)

28. E-form: does the website include an electronic form?
   o Yes (1)
   o No (2)

29. E-mail: does the website include an e-mail address for contact?
   o Yes (1)
   o No (2)

30. E-newsletter: does the website include the possibility of subscribing to an electronic newsletter?
   o Yes (1)
   o No (2)

31. E-survey: does the website include an electronic survey or poll (closed answers)?
   o Yes (1)
   o No (2)

32. E-guestbook: does the website include an electronic guestbook where guests can leave open comments or does it allow open comments to material presented in the site (such as news)?
   o Yes (1)
   o No (2)

33. Links to external blogs/fora: does the website include links to official blogs or fora (from the party or MPs) in external websites?
   o Yes (1)
   o No (2)

34. Exclusive blogs/fora: does the website include spaces for online debate but for which registering (username and password required) is needed not only to post but also to access (and read) them?
   o Yes (1)
   o No (2)
35. Open blogs/fora: does the website include spaces for online debate which may require registration (username and password) to post but not to access or read them?
   - Yes (1)
   - No (2)

36. Scale of Participatory Interactivity: classification of the cases (websites) according to their degree of interactive content, into:
   - None (0): Those for which no kind of interactivity was possible at all between the user and the producer of the site.
   - Very low (1): Those that include an electronic form or an email address for contact but nothing else.
   - Low (2): Those that provide the possibility of subscribing to a regular electronic newsletter or e-bulletin.
   - Medium (3): Those that include some form of electronic surveys or e-polls (where the user can choose between a selection of closed answers).
   - High (4): Those that offer either direct links to official blogs or forums (from the party or MPs) in external websites, or the possibility for the user to express his or her opinions in an electronic guestbook (where comments can be posted, but they cannot be replied to by other users or by the producers of the site), or to comment to news or other sections of the site (but, again, without any possibility for reply).
   - Very high (5): Those that allowed for real online debate between the users and also between users and producers, through the use of a blog or a forum where anyone could post and/or reply to other posts, regardless of whether registration was needed to read and/or to post in these.

37. Intranet: does the website include an intranet for which registration (username and password) is required to access?
   - Yes (1)
   - No (2)

38. Links-In: total number of inbound links from external websites. Source: Alexa

39. Links-In aggregated: own classification of party websites according to the number of inbound links that they have, into:
   - None inbound links (0)
   - Between 1 and 10 inbound links (1)
   - Between 11 and 25 inbound links (2)
   - Between 26 and 50 inbound links (3)
   - Between 51 and 75 inbound links (4)
   - Between 76 and 100 inbound links (5)
   - Between 101 and 150 inbound links (6)
   - Between 151 and 200 inbound links (7)
   - Between 201 and 300 inbound links (8)
   - Between 301 and 400 inbound links (9)
   - Between 401 and 500 inbound links (10)
   - Between 501 and 750 inbound links (11)
   - Between 751 and 1000 inbound links (12)
40. Traffic Rank, according to Alexa.

41. Links-Out: total number of links towards external websites included in the site. Manually counted.

42. Links Out aggregated: own classification of party websites according to the number of outbound links that they have, into:
   a. None outbound links (0)
   b. Between 1 and 10 outbound links (1)
   c. Between 11 and 25 outbound links (2)
   d. Between 26 and 50 outbound links (3)
   e. Between 51 and 75 outbound links (4)
   f. Between 76 and 100 outbound links (5)
   g. Between 101 and 150 outbound links (6)
   h. Between 151 and 200 outbound links (7)
   i. Between 201 and 300 outbound links (8)
   j. Between 301 and 400 outbound links (9)
   k. Over 401 outbound links (10)
Appendix IV: Details of the Online Forum and E-mail Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Mock name</th>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Degree of interactivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives (Con)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats (L-D)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Independence Party (UKIP)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>EU Critical</td>
<td>Extra-parliamentarian</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party of European Socialists (PES)</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>Social-Democrat</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Democrats (ED)</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>EU Critical</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Party of South Tyrol (SVP)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Regionalist</td>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian’s Social Democrats (PSD)</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>Social-Democrat</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonian Greens (EER)</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Estonian</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden’s Folkpartiet (FP)</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to preserve anonymity, the exact job description within the party of each of the participants is not included. These roles range from website editors, managers or officers of the Communication area of the party (specifically digital communication or electronic communication areas), IT consultants, and so on. All of them were to some degree responsible of the edition and contents of the party website.

Interviews:

Four e-mail based interviews took place in February 2008, following the closure of the online forum. All e-mails were sent out by the researcher on the 26th Feb. 2008. The complete list of participants who replied to the questions include in this e-mail is as follows:

1. Mr B. E-mail received on 27th Feb. 2008.
2. Mr C. E-mail received on 29th Feb. 2008
3. Mr A. E-mail received on 29th Feb. 2008
4. Ms G. E-mail received on 3rd Mar. 2008.
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