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Voter Targeting on the Web: A Comparative Longitudinal Analysis of Voter Targeting Online on Parties’ Websites during the 2008/2009 and 2013 Austrian and German Election Campaigns

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**Abstract**

Web campaigns are more and more embedded in a general political marketing strategy and political parties use their Web appearances to communicate with targeted groups of voters. This paper seeks to more clearly define and measure voter targeting online focusing on the question to what extent do catch-all parties and client parties tailor the content on their websites to specific voter groups? In general, catch-all parties try to appeal to a diverse spectrum of potential voters as one of their top priorities is vote maximization in order to win elections and govern. Whereas client parties have a more consistent idea of what the party stands for and they are aiming at a more specific type of voter. The study analyzes the websites of parties during the 2008 and 2013 Austrian General Elections as well as during the 2009 and 2013 German Parliamentary Elections. Thereby, this comparative longitudinal analysis aims to provide insights into the development process of political targeting strategies.

**KEYWORDS:** targeting, campaigns, parties’ websites, country comparison, longitudinal analysis

**Introduction**

Voters are widely scattered and vary in their needs and interests (Blaemire, 2003, p. 225). The utilization of websites allows targeted communication and greater penetration, and reaching more precisely mapped audiences (Benoit & Benoit, 2005). It offers political parties the possibility to address their voters with information that is actually relevant to their lives (Fenn, 2009, p. 134f). While websites do not necessarily create the opportunity to participate with voters, they provide unlimited space to inform citizens about political issues or the party’s positions, goals and achievements, etc. at low costs. Websites are a campaign instrument that helps political parties to inform, persuade and mobilize voters (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011) in a more comprehensive and targeted way than most offline techniques or when appealing to voters via the traditional mass
With the trend of an ongoing decline in party identification and party membership (Dalton, 2000, p. 25; Niedermayer, 2007, p. 370ff) and a general declining interest in politics, political parties are experiencing problems mobilizing voters. For example, in Austria and Germany, in the mid-1970s voter participation was still at about 90 percent, but has dropped to about 75 percent in the 2013 Austrian National Elections (79 percent in 2008) and to about 73 percent in the 2013 German National Elections (71 percent in 2009). Sedereviciute and Valentini (2011, p. 224) note that “the survival and prosperity of an organization depends on its ability to establish wealth, value or satisfaction for primary stakeholder groups”. Searching for new options to reach voters, politics is increasingly becoming market-oriented (Lee-Marshment, 2010, p. 3). In order to be successful, and thereby win elections, political parties “have to understand their markets — the voters and their basic needs and aspirations and the constituencies they represent or seek to represent” (Kotler & Kotler, 1999, p. 3). Targeting is a strategy to appeal to citizens by facilitating resources and providing information addressing their needs, preferences and interests (Blaemire, 2003, p. 225). In the process of targeting, the electorate is not seen as a homogeneous and uniform group, but is rather segmented in different groups, whose behaviors have to be understood (Kotler & Kotler, 1999, p. 9). With the shift towards market-oriented behavior, voter targeting has become an essential part of the political campaign strategy. Analyzing German election campaigns from the early 1960s until the early 2000s, Schultz et al. (2005, p. 78) conclude that “[e]lection campaigning has turned into target group campaigning.”

The purpose of this research is to explore the dynamics of voter targeting online across time through an analysis of party websites of the 2008/2009 and 2013 Austrian and German election campaigns. This represents an important research topic as recent studies of web campaigning have primarily focused on political party and candidate website content. To enhance our understanding of this increasingly important yet understudied phenomenon, this study investigates the degree to which Austrian and German political parties use their websites to target different voter groups. Online audiences can be seen as a single mass, on the one hand, or as carefully defined voter segments, on the other. Moreover, this longitudinal analysis aims to provide insights into the development process of political targeting strategies and will shed light on the question if parties’ online targeting strategies have been sophisticated: Do catch-all parties and, in particu-
lar, client parties during the 2013 Austrian and German election campaigns offer more customized content on their websites than in the previous 2008/09 election campaigns? A comparative analysis containing data of two countries and across two election campaigns will identify comparative patterns of voter targeting on the Web as well as trends over time.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the debate over targeting as campaign strategy, followed by a close look at catch-all and client parties. Second, I will outline the research design for testing voter targeting on the Web. Third, I present the empirical results of the analysis. The article concludes with a discussion of the principal findings.

**Targeting as Campaign Strategy**

Targeting is one of the many different strategies campaigns rely on to mobilize voters to go to the polls. Since the mid-1990’s political parties have increasingly focused on narrowcasting strategies — the targeting of specific niche audiences — using direct mail, email, text messaging, web advertising, etc. to micro-target different messages to different voter groups (Hillygus & Shields, 2008, p. 183; Howard, 2006). In times of declining partisanship and growing critical political and social challenges, people’s desire for personal orientation and identification is constantly increasing (Marcinkowski & Greger, 2000, p. 179). By applying a marketing approach political parties narrowcast their messages to specific groups of people. As Kotler et al. (2005, p. 391) note, “segmentation is (.) a compromise between mass marketing, which assumes everyone can be treated the same, and the assumption that each person needs a dedicated marketing effort.”

Targeting can take different forms. Traditionally, voters “have been categorized on the basis of geography, religion, ethnicity, race, income, education, profession, and party identification (….). More recent classifications are based on combinations of age, ideology, and lifestyle” (Herrmson, 2004, p. 164; see also Baines, 1999, p. 406; Gandy, 2001, p. 145). Voters’ needs and preferences often vary closely with demographic factors, one reason why demographic variables such as age, gender, family size, occupation, education, and race are most often used for segmenting voter groups (Kotler et al., 2005, p. 399, 400). Moreover, with the advancements in data collection, studies investigating U.S. campaigns show that political campaigns increasingly collect and organize large quantities of voter information from many sources, such as social science
surveys, pollsters, and charitable donations, to more narrowly communicate customized news content and policy messages to smaller and more segmented audiences (Howard, 2006; Hillygus & Shields, 2008, p. 154, 172-180). However, as studies on Austrian and German parties’ narrowcasting strategies are scarce, information on the use of data on users’ habits and preferences for tailoring party messages on the Internet, in general, and campaign websites, in particular, is still missing.

Hence, in this study, I follow a classical approach in politics that segments voters into groups of age, gender, profession, education, and ethnicity. Website users are divided in age groups such as young voters and senior citizens and identity groups such as women, men, gays, and minorities. In addition, there are key targeted audiences, which are close to the party and can be mobilized through the Web: the party members and the party supporters. With the rise of decreasing voter turnout and the increase in swing voters (Bischof & Plasser, 2008), Holbrook and McClurg (2005) note that in U.S. presidential campaigns core party supporters are more likely to be targeted with campaign information than other niche audiences. Clearly, although political parties should pay attention to the concerns of all voters, in particular, the vote of those who have a stake in the party can be easily won. Another special interest group in Web targeting is the mass media, because it connects the political party to the broader electorate. These nine target groups can be thought of as political parties’ core constituent groups. Furthermore, the general public, i.e., the broader electorate, has to be considered as an audience, because many Web features simply do not focus on any specific voter group. According to Saxton and colleagues (2007), U.S. community foundations limit the content on their websites to only three stakeholder groups: the community at large (i.e. the general public) as well as donors and grant seeking organizations.

Austrian and German Political Parties: Catch-All versus Client Parties

Although, no categorizations or typologies are sacrosanct (see, e.g., Gunther & Diamond, 2003; Wolinetz, 2002), this study follows a classical categorization by segmenting political parties into so-called catch-all parties (Kirchheimer, 1990) and client parties (Klientelparteien).

The German major parties of the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), CDU (Chris-
tian Democratic Union), and CSU (Christian Social Union), as well as the Austrian major parties
of the SPÖ (Social Democratic Party of Austria) and ÖVP (Austrian’s People Party), are classified as catch-all parties. Catch-all parties have moved from having strong ideological principles in the parties’ early decades towards addressing a diverse spectrum of potential voters by adjusting its policy orientation to the center of the political space (Safran, 2009). Ideological differences between parties have mainly been reduced due to partisan de-alignment. This development reached its peak in the late 1990s with a movement known as the Third Way (Norris, 2001). The former German chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder of the Social Democratic Party, together with the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, New Labour, showed an attempt to dominate the center ground. Today, the majority of the party manifestos of Austrian and German major parties do not reflect a profound ideological conviction or clear policy goal (Kirchheimer, 1990); often the policy commitments vary from election to election (Wolinetz, 2002, p. 152). Moreover, as William Safran (2009, p. 549f) has argued, major parties are “increasingly convergent programmatically; and they are periodically so evenly matched that they have resorted to power-sharing via grand coalitions”. Following a vote maximization strategy, catch-all parties concentrate on issues with little resistance (e.g., education) in order to win the support of heterogeneous voters. They address the views of the median Austrian and German voter who do not adhere to strong ideological principles.

Client parties have a more consistent idea of what the party stands for and they are promoting a more specific ideology. They focus on specific topics and very often they enhance the emergence of new issues, such as globalization, immigration, and national identity. For example, the Green Parties highlight the importance of an environmental approach to economic issues. Hence, they are better to appeal to specific voter groups and have a secure base of support compared to catch-all parties (Gunther & Diamond, 2003, p. 188). The German minor parties of the FDP (Free Democratic Party), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance ’90/The Greens), and Die Linke (The Left), as well as the Austrian minor parties of the FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria), Die Grünen (The Greens—the Green Alternative), and BZÖ (Alliance for the Future of Austria), follow a client party strategy.
Drawing upon the previous discussion on politics increasingly adopting a marketing-approach and integrating the above that the catch-all and client division is clearly present in Austria and in Germany today, the empirical study aims to explore the development of voter targeting on political parties’ websites by focusing on the following research questions: To what degree do Austrian and German catch-all and client parties use their websites to target different voter groups? And do catch-all parties and, in particular, client parties during the 2013 Austrian and German election campaigns offer more customized content on their websites than in the previous election campaigns in 2008/09?

**Methodology and Data**

In order to investigate voter targeting on the Web, I analyzed Austrian (SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, BZÖ, Green Party) and German (CDU, SPD, FDP, Green Party, The Left) political party websites of the last two national elections: the 2009 (September 27, 2009) and 2013 (September 23, 2013) German Federal Elections as well as the 2008 (September 28, 2008) and 2013 (September 29, 2013) Austrian National Elections. Germany and Austria are quite close in terms of Internet development and usage and they have very similar parliamentary, electoral, party, and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which provides a solid basis for a cross-national analysis.

The first step was to archive the websites so they could be analyzed later in the research. For this purpose, the websites of the six German and five Austrian parties were downloaded using Offline Explorer Pro in the middle of the “hot phase” of the campaign, i.e., two weeks prior Election Day. Before and after this key point only a very few changes occurred, which are negligible in the context of the research question.

In order to conduct the multi-level comparison of political party websites, I developed a coding scheme consisting of 87 variables, integrating a number of variables of related studies (in particular, Foot & Schneider, 2006; Gibson & Ward, 2000). Due to the development of the Web between the two analyzed elections in 2008/2009 and 2013 the comprehensive template of campaign website features has slightly been revised and new features (variables) have been complemented. The structural analysis of campaign websites focuses on the key functions of web campaigning: informing (44 features), participating (12 features codifying online political discussion
and measuring voter opinion), mobilizing (14 features measuring the Web’s potential to recruit supporters or to raise money), and connecting/networking (17 features measuring internal and external links on a website). The four functions reflect the behavior of the website producers, in this case, the political parties.

The unit of analysis is the single website of a political party. The structural analysis of campaign websites was conducted from a user perspective, i.e., websites were analyzed from the point of view of the voter. According to the coding scheme, first, we measured which features political parties use to appeal to voters. To allow for quantitative comparison, following the practice of previous studies of parties online, each element was assigned a score: 0 for absence of the website element and 1 for presence. Second, we codified whether website features could be considered to be targeted at one of the target groups or were addressed at a general audience. The following target segments were considered: (1) party members; (2) supporters of the political party; (3) media/press; (4) young voters (age group); (5) senior citizens (age group); (6) women (identity group); (7) men (identity group); (8) minorities (identity group); (9) gays (identity group); (10) other specific users/identity groups; and (11) general public, i.e., the broader electorate. For each website feature all targeted user segments were identify and coded as specifically as possible. Coders judged whether one or more specific target groups were aimed at, or the content tailored to “all” visitors. In the case of a feature that was aimed at multiple voter groups, coders checked all those that applied. If no specific target group was identified, we coded 11 = general public for “all” visitors.

In each election cycle the websites were coded by three coders. To test intercoder reliability, one website from each country was coded in each election cycle. Intercoder reliability scores for the variable target groups were calculated using Holsti’s coefficient of reliability (see Appendix Table 3). For the year 2008/2009 intercoder reliability is at or above 75 percent – with the vast majority above 84 percent. In 2013 intercoder reliability is slightly higher and at or above 86 percent.
Results

Table 1 details the results for the analysis examining the occurrence of online targeting on political parties’ websites in election campaigns. The results are broken into party, year, and country to provide further insight into possible trends.

Considering each analyzed target group as a single group, party websites in the National Elections in 2008 and 2009 were aimed at the general audience - except for the German Social Democrats and partly for the Austrian Social Democrats. Table 1 shows that about 40 percent of identifications of target groups within the analyzed features applied to the broader electorate. On the website of the Austrian Green Party (69 percent) and the German Left Party (60 percent) this was the case to an even greater extent. After addressing the general public, parties were clearly prioritizing two groups: party members and party supporters. About 20 to 25 percent (each) (considering the number of mentions of target groups to a single feature) of the Website features were aimed at these two groups. Moreover, for those features that were aimed at more than one target group, results indicate that there was an overlap of three voter groups: the general public, party members, and party supporters. Another important group for political parties in the 2008 and 2009 election campaigns was the mass media – with the exception of the Austrian Green Party. Party websites offered a special media section with content such as press releases and pictures or services such as press accreditation. The mass media connects the party to the broader electorate and thus can be considered as one of the most important target audiences. Overall, German parties put a greater focus on addressing the mass media online than Austrian parties.

Taking a close look at the other specific target groups, results indicate a clear pattern for German party websites in 2009: Other specific target groups such as young voters, senior citizens, women, or gays had not been addressed. (The Left had one feature on their website directed at women and one feature at seniors.) Contrary, the country comparison reveals that Austrian parties distributed limited information and services to the following specific target groups in 2008: young voters, senior citizens, women, minorities, and gays. Young voters had the greatest chance to find targeted communications. This is probably due to the fact that the 2008 National

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Elections were the first elections after Austria had lowered the voting age for all elections to 16 and this group of voters is generally using the Internet for information and communications to a great extent.

The data for the recently held elections in autumn 2013 shows quite different patterns for both countries compared to the previous elections. German and Austrian parties tailored the utilized features on their websites to an even greater extent to the general public - except for the Austrian Green Party (see Table 1). In 2008, 69 percent of the features on the website of the Austrian Greens were aimed at the broader electorate, but this applies to only 49 percent of the features five years later. In 2008 the Greens were the party with the greatest concentration on the general public, whereas in 2013 they focused on it less than all other parties.

All other Austrian parties (SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, BZÖ) show a great rise of about one fourth in aiming at the broader electorate. In Germany, about half of the parties (CSU, SPD, Greens) show a similar trend, whereas the other half (CDU, FDP, The Left) only slightly increased its focus on the general audience.

Table 1 also shows that after addressing the general public, in both countries, parties still pay most of their attention to party members and party supporters. But in 2013 to a lesser degree than in the previous elections. In 2008 on Austrian party websites 21 to 26 percent of the utilized features were aimed at party members and 15 to 27 percent of the features applied to party supporters. In 2013 targeting of party members has decreased to 11 to 13 percent and targeting of party supporters to 10 to 15 percent. In 2009 German parties addressed 16 to 28 percent of the content of their websites to party members, but only 8 to 13 percent five years later. A similar trend to that of party members is observed for party supporters: on the websites in the 2009 campaign 16 to 29 percent of the features aimed at supporters, but this number dropped to 11 to 15 percent in 2013.

Moreover, unlike in 2008/09, today the mass media is just as important as target group as party members and supporters. All parties show a very similar pattern concerning the degree of mass media targeting. In Austria about 8 percent and in Germany about 12 percent of identifications of target groups within the analyzed features applied to the mass media.
Table 1. Targeted Groups on Austrian and German Party Websites during the 2008/2009 and 2014 National Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>Party Members</th>
<th>Party Supporters</th>
<th>Media/Press</th>
<th>Young Voters</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Minorities</th>
<th>Gays</th>
<th>Other Target Groups</th>
<th>N*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Austrian Party Websites</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SPÖ</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ÖVP</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPÖ</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZÖ</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>German Party Websites</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDU</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSU</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPD</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDP</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Left</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N – Number of identifications of target groups

Note: Each feature can be aimed at more than one target group (multiple answers); percentages therefore correspond to the number of identifications.
Concerning the longitudinal perspective, in terms of targeting specific audiences, I find that German parties have taken advantage of the Web’s potential to customize content. Even though, as shown in Table 1, to a very limited extent. In 2013, German parties clearly prioritized young voters and senior citizens. On the contrary, Austrian political parties who did tailor some of the content on their websites to specific target groups in the 2008 election campaign addressed the different specific audiences to a lesser degree than German political parties. In 2013 the amount of information and services on Austrian party websites customized at specific audiences has almost dropped half compared to the year 2008. However, if, young voters, seniors, and women were again prioritized and were almost equally addressed.

**Catch-all vs. Client Parties**

Second, this study focuses on the theoretically grounded differences between catch-all and client parties and applying them to parties’ targeting strategies online across time.

Contrary to the theoretical discussion, in the 2008/09 election campaigns there are no evident differences between catch-all and client parties. The data in Table 2 reveals only slight variations. The results indicate a clear pattern for the two countries: considering the number of mentions of target groups to a single feature, Austrian and German catch-all parties tailored about one third of the website features to the general public and about two thirds of the website features to different target segments. Client parties in Austria and Germany concentrated their Web campaign on both groups almost equally.

A different pattern is revealed for the 2013 campaigns as the results for Austrian and German catch-all parties are in line with the theoretical assumption that catch-all parties address the broader electorate to a greater extent than specific target segments. Considering the number of mentions of target groups to a single feature, Table 2 indicates that Austrian catch-all parties addressed 60 percent of the website features toward the general audience and 40 percent towards specific target groups. Differences for German catch-all parties are slightly smaller, but definite (56 percent at the general audience vs. 44 percent at specific target groups). However, unlike the theoretical predictions, German and Austrian client parties also aimed primarily at the general public (Austria: 56 percent; Germany: 60 percent).

Overall, in 2013, differences between catch-all and client parties have been reduced. The comparison between catch-all and client parties reveals a similar targeting pattern with a focus on the general public across countries.
Table 2. Comparison of Web Targeting of Austrian and German Catch-All and Client Parties (in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifications Addressing</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>Specific Target Groups</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>Specific Target Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2008/2009</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifications of Target Groups by Austrian Catch-All Parties</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifications of Target Groups by Austrian Client Parties</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifications of Target Groups by German Catch-All Parties</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifications of Target Groups by German Client Parties</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Each feature can be aimed at more than one target group (multiple answers); percentages therefore correspond to the number of identifications. Identifications of target groups:
Austrian Catch-All Parties 2008: n=127; Austrian Client Parties 2008: n=142
Austrian Catch-All Parties 2013: n=133; Austrian Client Parties 2013: n=187
German Catch-All Parties 2009: n=223; German Client Parties 2009: n=176
German Catch-All Parties 2013: n=227; German Client Parties 2013: n=193

Discussion: Trends in Voter Targeting Online

The results of the cross-national longitudinal analysis reveal that political parties tailor most of the content and services on their websites at the general public. Moreover, over time, I find that the odds addressing the broader electorate increase to a great extent. At first, this finding seems to be contradictory to the general debate (outlined above) about politics increasingly becoming market-oriented and customizing communications toward each individual voter or group of voters. Because, following this approach, the electorate is not seen as a homogeneous and uniform group and thus, messages are tailored to specific groups of people. However, such a targeting strategy of focusing on the broader electorate may be due to the constant decline in voter turnout and an increase in the volatility of party preference (Saalfeld, 2007, p. 86f). Political parties have to deal with increasing pressure to appeal to swing voters. For example, in the 2013 German National Elections the number of swing voters was at 35 percent – the highest percentage ever recorded (Weßels, 2014). And in Austria, the number of swing voters has increased from 3 percent in 1975 to 28 percent in 2013 (Ulram, 2013). Insofar, parties’ online targeting strategies have been more sophisticated in 2013 than in the previous election campaigns. This particularly applies to the targeting strategy of catch-all parties. In the campaigns in 2008/09 catch-all parties tailored 36 percent of the features on their websites at the broader electorate, while in the 2013 campaign 54 to 60 percent of the utilized features
addressed the general public. Catch-all parties now seem to address the fact that they generally appeal to core voters who do not adhere to strong ideological principles.

Moreover, in 2013, new founded parties such as the Alternative for Germany (founded in February, 2013) in Germany or the Team Stronach (founded in September, 2012) and the NEOS – The New Austria (founded in October, 2012) in Austria were running for parliament. This development increases the competition over the remaining voters for established parties. Hence, also the online targeting strategies of client parties can be seen as more sophisticated as they adjust to the rise of swing voters and the competition over an overall smaller group of voters. In 2013, German and Austrian client parties also aimed primarily at the general public.

In line with these findings is the slight increase in offering specific content to the mass media. The traditional mass media connects the political parties with the general public and it is still the most influential campaign communication channel. Hence, offering the mass media a single section with information and services seems to be very fruitful to address the general audience via different communication channels.

However, in the 2013 election campaigns the two key specific target groups, party members and party supporters, had been addressed to a far lesser extent than in 2008/09. With the decline in party membership and interest in political parties it is elusive why all parties follow this trend. Particularly, considering that websites “play a valuable role in strengthening bonds, building trust and communication strategically with core constituents” (Saxton et al., 2007). A trend future research has to observe in more detail.

The findings on the specific voter groups for the 2008/09 as well as the 2013 election campaigns in Austria and Germany reveal that the targeting of specific (niche) audiences is a neglected strategy (by the parties) for mobilizing voters. Young voters can find the most information on the majority of the websites. This is probably due to the fact that younger people are disproportionately likely to access the Internet.

To conclude, trends in voter targeting online across countries can be summarized as followed: a) information and services on political parties’ websites increasingly focus on addressing the general public, and b) differences between catch-all and client parties have been reduced between campaigns.

Over time, differences between party websites have been reduced. Thus, from a theoretical perspective, parties’ online targeting strategies have not been more sophisticated. Instead, political parties’ web targeting strategies follow the general development on the voter market. However, the rise of swing voters shows that voters need orientation and political parties should not exacerbate the decreasing voter participation. Voter responsiveness — providing
information that responds to voters’ expectations and interests — should increasingly be of a strategic concern (Saxton et al., 2007, p. 144). By customizing information, the party can meet the demands of specific voter groups — in particular, of their core constituents; thereby helping them in their decisions whom to vote for in the elections. Sedereviciute and Valentini (2011, p. 222) have argued that an organization (e.g. political party) “gains legitimacy when the content is perceived to be relevant to known stakeholders”. Websites are an ideal campaign instrument to give a clear and comprehensive picture of what the party stands for and is offering to the voters. Hence, political parties should develop a map of party’s relevant groups of voters and their basic needs and interest and accordingly offer more targeted communications. Identifying and segmenting online stakeholders is fundamental for managing strategically organization’s decisions (e.g., Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011). Moreover, websites should be promoted by integrating them to a greater extent in the general campaign. For example, the website link should be placed (more prominent) on campaign posters and newspaper advertisement or on Facebook postings and Twitter tweets.

The limitations of this research suggest some intriguing directions for future research. One area for improvement is to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Further cross-national analysis could identify to which extent the observed trends occur in other electoral contexts. Longitudinal studies could investigate to what degree the presented findings are more than just trends. Interviews with party Web strategists and campaigners could give some insight into the inner workings of the campaign and to what extent parties customize the information on their websites. For example, this could also shed light on the trend of reducing information and services for party members and party supporters. Future research also needs to collect data on Internet user behavior in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture on Web targeting strategies and the overall success of political web campaigns. To explore what specific target segments do online user statistics (hits) need to be analyzed as well as direct responses of users about what content they are looking for and what political activities they engage in online have to be collected. Exploring these aspects would give us greater insight in the context of voter targeting on websites and greater understanding of the broader implications.

Over the past fifteen years, party websites have become more sophisticated and an integral part of the overall campaign of Austrian and German political parties. The occurrence of online targeting on political parties’ websites is still an understudied phenomenon. This study contributes to the debate over targeting as campaign strategy. However, with regard to the changes in voter targeting on parties’ websites between the last two elections, further research
is necessary to fully understand political parties’ (web) targeting strategies and its relevance in the overall (web) campaign.

Acknowledgement
This research was carried out under the auspices of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), a National Research Network (NFN) sponsored by the Austrian Research Fund (FWF) (S10903-G11) as well as the internal F&E Research Fund of the FH Wien University of Applied Sciences of WKW, Vienna, Austria. The authors thank the members of the research teams, Andreas Hacker, Manuela Leitner, Juliane Nagiller, Martina Löcker, and Katharina Weitzer for their help with data collection.
### Appendix

#### Table 3. Inter-Coder Reliability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website of the SPÖ (Austria) (September 16, 2008)</th>
<th>Presence/Absence of Features (Average)</th>
<th>Target Group(s) (Average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Informing</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Participating</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Mobilizing</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Connecting</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website of the Green Party (Germany) (September 15, 2009)</th>
<th>Presence/Absence of Features (Average)</th>
<th>Target Group(s) (Average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Informing</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Participating</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Mobilizing</td>
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<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Connecting</td>
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<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website of the SPÖ (Austria) (September 29, 2013)</th>
<th>Presence/Absence of Features (Average)</th>
<th>Target Group(s) (Average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Informing</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Participating</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Mobilizing</td>
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<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Connecting</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website of the Green Party (Germany) (September 23, 2013)</th>
<th>Presence/Absence of Features (Average)</th>
<th>Target Group(s) (Average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Informing</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Participating</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Mobilizing</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of Connecting</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


