

New Media and the Personal Vote in General Elections: A Comparison of Constituency Level Candidates in the United Kingdom and Japan

Authors : Sean Vincent

Abstract : Within the academic community, there is a consensus that political parties in established liberal democracies are facing a myriad of organisational challenges as a result of falling membership, weakening links to grass-roots support and rising voter apathy. During the same period of party decline and growing public disengagement political parties have become increasingly professionalised. The professionalisation of political parties owes much to changes in technology, with television becoming the dominant medium for political communication. In recent years, however, it has become clear that a new medium of communication is becoming utilised by political parties and candidates – New Media. New Media, a term hard to define but related to internet based communication, offers a potential revolution in political communication. It can be utilised by anyone with access to the internet and its most widely used platforms of communication such as Facebook and Twitter, are free to use. The advent of Web 2.0 has dramatically changed what can be done with the Internet. Websites now allow candidates at the constituency level to fundraise, organise and set out personalised policies. Social media allows them to communicate with supporters and potential voters practically cost-free. As such candidate dependency on the national party for resources and image now lies open to debate. Arguing that greater candidate independence may be a natural next step in light of the contemporary challenges faced by parties, this paper examines how New Media is being used by candidates at the constituency level to increase their personal vote. The paper will present findings from research carried out during two elections – the Japanese Lower House election of 2014 and the UK general election of 2015. During these elections a sample of candidates, totalling 150 candidates, from the three biggest parties in each country were selected and their new media output, specifically candidate websites, Twitter and Facebook output subjected to content analysis. The analysis examines how candidates are using new media to both become more functionally, through fundraising and volunteer mobilisation and politically, through the promotion of personal/local policies, independent from the national party. In order to validate the results of content analysis this paper will also present evidence from interviews carried out with 17 candidates that stood in the 2014 Japanese Lower House election or 2015 UK general election. With a combination of statistical analysis and interviews, several conclusions can be made about the use of New Media at constituency level. The findings show not just a clear difference in the way candidates from each country are using New Media but also differences within countries based upon the particular circumstances of each constituency. While it has not yet replaced traditional methods of fundraising and activist mobilisation, New Media is also becoming increasingly important in campaign organisation and the general consensus amongst candidates is that its importance will continue to grow along as politics in both countries becomes more diffuse.

Keywords : political campaigns, elections, new media, political communication

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