**You’ve Got (No) Mail: How Parties and Candidates Respond to Email Inquiries in Western Democracies**

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**Abstract**: Although email is one of the most popular components of users’ experience of the internet, its use by political actors in campaigns has rarely been studied. In this article, I explore political actors’ responsiveness to emails coming from citizens through a large-scale, longitudinal study of 194 parties and candidates in Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States between 2007 and 2013. In order to assess political actors’ email responsiveness, two fictitious emails were sent to each of them: one requesting issue information, the other pledging to be willing to volunteer. Results show that most parties and candidates fail to respond to both emails, and that progressive parties tend to respond more than conservative ones.

**1. Email the Great Unknown?**

There is broad scholarly consensus on the idea that “parties have adopted more quickly to new media technologies than to any previous technological advance” (Ward 2008: 1-2).

Across the Western world, political actors have established a diversified, multifaceted presence across a variety of digital platforms, including, among others, websites, blogs, social media, and mobile applications. However, in spite of all these efforts by politicians, most voters in most campaigns do not seem to take notice. Apart from widely touted exceptions, such as Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign and a handful of other highly publicized success stories, digital outlets such as campaign websites and social media profiles fail to attract significant attention among voters. For instance, during the United States 2010 midterm elections the median candidate in competitive House districts (which on average comprise about 700,000 voters) had only about 1,800 Facebook “friends”, 350 Twitter “followers”, and 1,500 monthly visits to his/her website (Nielsen & Vaccari 2013). In the French 2012 presidential elections, the losing incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy had around 630,000 supporters on Facebook, whereas the victorious challenger François Hollande had about 120,000. These numbers pale by comparison with their vote totals of 10.2 and 9.7 million in the first round, respectively, which increased to 18 and 16.9 million in the runoff. Parties' and candidates’ online presence is certainly useful to inform and engage particular segments of the electorate, but the audiences that politicians manage to attract on most platforms are small compared to their vote goals and the publics that they reach via the mass media.

One of the reasons might be that most of the electorate either ignores some digital tools or is not interested in politicians’ presence therein. In this respect, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen introduced a useful distinction between *mundane* online tools, which are routinely used by most people as part of their everyday lives, *emerging* tools, which are used only by minorities at a given point in time, and *specialized* tools, which are only available to insiders or to those who are willing to pay for them. Nielsen notes that, in spite of all the glamour that emerging and specialized technologies often receive in public debates, “when it comes to mobilization, *mundane internet tools* like email and search are more important than *emerging tools* (like social networking sites) or *specialized tools* (like campaign websites)” (Nielsen 2011: 756, emphasis in original). Mundane tools have a broader reach than other, fancier e-campaigning platforms, and voter mobilization needs to reach audiences as large as possible.

It is hard to think of an online tool that is more “mundane” than email. According to Eurostat (2013), in 2012 70% of citizens living in the European Union had used the internet at least once a week in the last three months and 65% had used the internet to send or receive emails. Thus, virtually all Europeans who are online use email. Similarly, a Pew Internet & American Life survey shows that in 2011 92% of American adults with internet access had used email (Purcell 2011). The near-universality of email among citizens makes it a very promising tool through which politicians can engage their constituents.

Research on digital politics, however, has mostly neglected email. Instead, most studies have focused on websites (e.g., Gibson et al. 2003; Lilleker et al. 2011), blogs (Davis 2009), social media (Vergeer, Hermans and Sams 2013), and database technologies (Howard 2006).

One rather isolated exception is Jackson’s (2004) study of email use by British Members of Parliament in 2002, which found that the vast majority of MPs received relatively few emails, most of which from non-constituents, and that MPs claimed that they were coping reasonably well in dealing with them. Apart from this study, most available research on political emails addresses how campaigns use email to mobilize citizens rather than to respond to their inputs, and has been conducted in one country – the United States – rather than relying on the comparative method to test theories and derive findings that can be generalized beyond a single country. For instance, Klotz (2007) noted that U.S. Senate campaigns encourage citizens to send prewritten letters to media editors, which results in what he considers “plagiarized participation” and puts unnecessary pressure on editors to sort genuine from “Astroturf” letters. Klotz sees similar problems with “tell a friend” buttons on websites, which allow citizens to send campaign-crafted messages to their online contacts under the false pretense that they were written independently by the sender. Krueger (2006) found that, as a mobilization tool, email reaches a more inclusive audience than offline channels such as direct mail, telephone calls, and door-to-door canvassing. Because the marginal costs of email communication are practically null, political organizations can afford to send messages to any citizen who is on their list rather than carefully choosing which voters to contact based on their political predispositions. However, Green and Gerber (2004) studied the impact of email mobilization through randomized field experiments and found negligible effects on both voter registration and turnout. Similar findings were obtained in another set of field experiments run by Nickerson (2007) and in a study based on a survey of internet users by Johnson and Krueger (2012). By contrast, Malhotra, Michelson, and Valenzuela (2012) found that emails by official sources have a small but significant positive effect on turnout, while those coming from voter mobilization organizations have no effect.

From citizens’ perspective, email is one of the tools through which voters can keep politicians accountable by interacting with them in a limited but practical way. First, the costs of sending an email to a politician or party are lower than those of any other type of elite-citizen contact (such as face-to-face exchanges or handwritten letters), both in practical and psychological terms. These affordances, however, also imply that email presents politicians and their organizations with a greater flow of messages than they are used to managing through other channels, such as phone, mail, and personal contacts. Effectively addressing this challenge, however, can be very important. As shown by a series of focus groups conducted by Stromer-Galley and Foot (2002), candidates’ failure to respond to email inquiries can cause a breach of trust among voters: “The norms of interpersonal conversation are violated if a response is not received. The sender of the message feels slighted if after sending the message no response or feedback is given back to the sender. […] The implication for candidates and their online campaigns is that they risk giving participants a negative impression by not replying to email messages.” (Stromer-Galley and Foot 2002) By answering voter inquiries, politicians can show that they are responsive to their demands and thus strengthen their ties with the citizenry in a way that is increasingly difficult to achieve through the packaged and insider-dominated mass media (Entman 1990; Coleman and Blumler 2009: 42-67). Strengthening accountability, in turn, is a potentially effective antidote to the crisis of representation (Dalton 2004) and the declining trust in political institutions and authorities (Norris 2011) that are affecting Western democracies. Coleman (2005: 200) claims that representatives can reconnect with citizens by substituting closeness for distance, mutuality for detachment, coherence for exclusivity, and empathy for aloofness. Citizens’ trust in their representatives stems from “affective perceptions of attachment, affinity, and respect” (206) which depend more on how politicians relate to them than on policy choices and legislative achievements. As suggested by Coleman and Blumler, such empathy cannot be built unless politicians become more accessible, a goal that the affordances of digital media can help achieve: “citizens regard mediated co-presence as grounds for rejecting forms of thin political communication with which they once had to be satisfied. […] As representatives can be addressed at any time and in any place via mobile phone, text message or e-mail, citizens experience greater communication equality” (2009: 82). Whereas the multiplication of message exchanges made possible by digital media often results in fear of communication overload among politicians, “from citizens’ perspective, the problem is one of non-response rather than overload” (Coleman 2005: 208). As a young voter claimed in an interview, “you can email him [the MP]. But is he going to listen?” (Livingstone 2004: 7). Indeed, “the technical capacity to facilitate citizen-to-representative dialogue makes failures of responsive communication even more conspicuous than they had been in the pre-digital era” (Coleman 2009: 86). In sum, opportunities breed expectations as citizens demand that political actors behave in a more responsive fashion on the web than in mass media environments.

Based on these considerations, one might expect that political organizations such as parties and campaigns should make any effort to respond to the inquiries they receive via digital media, particularly email which is the most mundane among them. Undecided voters inquiring about policy stances might be impressed by a swift and substantive response by a party or candidate, even if staffers are responsible for replying. Prospective volunteers might be turned into engaged activists by a timely email that provides practical information and direction on how they can help. Regardless of the content and scope of the original inquiry, a quick and precise response makes any organization look efficient, competent, and caring for its constituents and publics. Despite all these motivations for being responsive, however, some factors also work in the opposite direction.

First, answering emails individually can place a huge organizational burden on campaigns that need to allocate scarce volunteers’ and staffers’ time to these activities. Moreover, these people must be trained so that their responses are consistent with the overall message and, in case more than one person is tasked with answering emails, their replies must not contradict one another. Although automated replies are often provided by campaigns, they can hardly fulfill the goals of reconnecting elites with citizens and satisfying users’ requests.

Secondly, many things could go wrong when staffers and volunteers send individual messages to strangers. For instance, responses could misrepresent the campaign message, dissatisfy recipients, or reveal sensitive insider information that should not be made public. Given that emails can easily be forwarded, messages that were intended to be private may become public and embarrass the organization. This is what Ward and Vedel (2006: 220) call the “fear factor” that often impedes institutional actors’ approach to innovations.

Thirdly, political organizations may be less at ease with incoming emails than with other digital tools because they cannot control the timing, content, rules, and boundaries of the interaction. As Nielsen (2011) points out, when campaigns respond to email inquiries they cannot “manage” the relationship through control of voter information, as they often do in other domains of digital electioneering (Howard 2006; Vaccari 2010). Just as campaigns prefer broadcasting self-produced advertisements rather than answering questions from journalists, so they prefer emailing supporters (about whom they might know enough to personalize the messages they send them) with news and requests rather than dealing with inquiries coming from people they know little to nothing about.

**2. Research Questions and Methodology**

This article aims to study political actors’ email responsiveness in comparative perspective. As emerged from the review of the literature discussed above, most available studies on the role of email in campaigning have focused solely on the United States and none has employed the comparative method. This tendency, which is rather common in the literature on digital politics, has two troublesome implications. On the one hand, it might lead to unwarranted generalizations of U.S.-originated findings to other countries. This is not a desirable outcome because the American political system offers uniquely strong incentives for political actors to employ digital media, thus making the U.S. a deviant rather than modal case in comparative perspective (Anstead and Chadwick 2009). On the other hand, it is only by comparing different countries that we can understand how digital politics is shaped by systemic factors such as technological development, the socio-political environment, and party-level characteristics (Nixon, Ward, and Gibson 2003: 241). In light of the theoretical background and empirical evidence from previous research summarized above, this study aims to answer the following questions across the realm of various Western democracies:

*RQ1: To what extent and how quickly do political actors answer emails from citizens?*

*RQ2: Do parties’ and candidates’ response rates and timing differ between emails inquiring about issue information and emails requesting assistance on how to get engaged with the campaign?*

*RQ3: Which factors related to technological development, the socio-political environment, and party internal characteristics predict political actors’ responsiveness to emails?*

This final question incorporates a series of causal hypotheses derived from theory and evidence from previous research. Technological development in a country may affect the incentives that parties and candidates have to invest in digital media because it determines how large their potential online audiences are as well as citizens’ expectations on the sophistication of parties’ digital efforts. As regards the socio-political environment, the degree to which citizens participate in politics affects the demand function for parties’ online efforts. Party internal characteristics such as resources, organization, and ideology may affect various aspects of their online communication. The normalization theory (Margolis and Resnick 2000) posits that better resourced parties and candidates tend to be more visible and effective online, resulting in uneven competitive patterns that may also be reflected in responsiveness to emails. Karpf (2012) has suggested that incumbency may reduce incentives to adopt communicative innovations, which leads us to expect that challengers could be more responsive to citizen emails. Also, parties and campaigns that engage with their supporters through inclusive organizational practices may be expected to be more responsive than parties that are structured in a more centralized and hierarchical fashion. Finally, ideology may affect political actors’ approach to the web, including their responsiveness to emails (Ward and Gibson 2009).

To address these issues in comparative perspective, my analysis will focus on Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, in a period between 2007 and 2013. This sample offers meaningful variance on many relevant characteristics and can thus be considered representative of a broader realm of established democracies. Among the various types of case selection techniques, the *diverse case* selection strategy aims to achieve “maximum variance along relevant dimensions” within a defined population (Seawright and Gerring 2008: 300). By including cases that differ as widely as possible in some theoretically relevant characteristics while still belonging to the same class, this method allows incorporating various different causal configurations that may affect the dependent variables. The sample of cases studied here can be considered diverse because, although they all pertain to the realm of Western democracies, they differ from one another in many theoretically relevant ways, including their technological development, political institutions, political culture, and political context.

In each of these countries, I focus on national elections – including European Parliament elections for European Union members and U.S. presidential primaries – because they constitute a focal point in representative democracy and provide one crucial mechanism that helps keep parties and representatives accountable. This choice, however, implies that my findings cannot be automatically generalized to “peacetime” periods between elections. I focus on political parties, their leaders, and presidential election candidates as the key actors involved in election campaigns. In order to identify which subjects to study, before each election I compiled a list of political actors that could be considered relevant in the next campaign based on Sartori’s (1976) criteria of coalitional and blackmail potential. Parties (and their presidential candidates and national leaders, to the extent that they had a personal website) were thus included when they could be expected to become part of a governing coalition or when they could conceivably affect electoral competition. Because these were prospective rather than retrospective judgments, unfortunately they sometimes left out parties that turned out to be rather successful or to use technology in an interesting fashion.[[1]](#footnote-1) That being said, retrospective evaluations confirm that all the major political actors were included in the corpus. This procedure led to a total of 304 contacts made with political actors between 2007 and 2013. A breakdown of the number of parties, leaders, and candidates that were contacted in each country for each year is presented in Appendix 1. Because multiple national elections occurred in all countries, some political actors were contacted in more than one occasion.[[2]](#footnote-2) The total number of parties, party leaders, and presidential candidates that were contacted at least once is thus 194. Of these, 113 were parties and 81 were presidential candidates or party leaders. Among all the political actors studied here, 124 were contacted in one occasion, 31 in two occasions, 38 in three occasions, and one (Barack Obama, who ran in both 2008 and 2012 and in both primary and general elections) in four occasions.

This study will focus on two dependent variables that measure whether political actors responded to a specific type of email: one requesting information on policy issues, the other pledging to volunteer for the recipient. These types of emails correspond to the two main purposes of digital media for election campaigning as identified by Gulati and Williams (2007: 2-3)—informing and engaging voters. Emails were sent to each political actor within the last two weeks before election day. Fictitious email addresses and sender names were used so that political organizations would not be aware that their responsiveness was being monitored, which could have influenced their behavior.[[3]](#footnote-3) The emails were written in each country’s official language, were directed to the address or contact form for general inquiries accessed through the official website, and had substantially identical content. The issue email asked for the party or candidate’s position on taxes, a policy on which each party must take a stand and that is discussed in any election in every country. Thus, voter inquiries on taxes should be treated by all political actors in all contexts with comparable priority levels, as opposed to policy domains, such as the environment, civil rights, or European Union governance, that are more salient for some parties than others. The volunteer email stated that the sender was interested in helping the party or candidate in carrying out some campaign tasks and asked for instructions on how to do so. Responses to these emails were considered valid only if the researcher evaluated them as addressing the questions and being written by a human being, while generic and automated responses were discounted. The timing of the responses since the email had been sent was measured with three modalities: one business day, two to four business days, and one week or more.

The first two research questions can be answered by descriptive statistics on the response rates and timeliness for the two emails that were sent to the political actors included in this study. The third research question addresses the factors causing email responsiveness and requires a multivariate analysis. In order to perform it, the two response variables have been converted into dichotomies discriminating between political actors that did and did not respond to emails. These will constitute the dependent variables in two multivariate logistic regression models predicting responsiveness to the issue question and volunteer pledge emails, respectively. In order to test the various hypotheses encompassed in RQ3, the model includes both system-level and organization-level variables.

The system-level variables are:

* six dummy variables identifying the countries where the political actors operate (France being the reference category) in order to account for the role of any systemic characteristic not included in the model;
* technological development, defined as the diffusion within the population of internet access and broadband connections;[[4]](#footnote-4)
* the electoral system employed in the election, with majoritarian (first past the post plurality and run-off majority) systems contrasted with proportional systems;[[5]](#footnote-5)
* political participation, defined as the percentage of voters who turned out in the election (which also allows to distinguish between general elections, European elections, and primaries, as voter turnout varies significantly across these types of elections).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The organization-level variables are:

* the type of political actors analyzed, which differentiates between parties, presidential candidates, and party leaders (the latter functioning as the reference category);
* incumbency in national government (and in the majority supporting it in parliamentary systems);
* the percentage of votes achieved by each party, employed as a measure of its resources;[[7]](#footnote-7)
* organizational inclusiveness, measured with respect to leader and candidate selection, with normalized values ranging from the least (0) to the most (1) inclusive methods;[[8]](#footnote-8)
* the ideological family to which the (candidate’s or leader’s) party belongs,[[9]](#footnote-9) entered as a set of ideological dummy variables comparing each ideological family with Christian-democrats and conservatives, which is the reference category.

**3. Results**

The first two research questions can be answered by assessing how many parties and candidates responded to the issue question and volunteer pledge emails, and how long it took for them to do so. As Table 1 shows, political actors are rather un-responsive to email inquiries. First, six in ten emails went entirely unanswered, which suggests that, in spite of the ubiquity and mundane nature of email as a communication tool, political organizations either lack or refuse to marshal the resources necessary to deal with it in a way that matches citizens’ expectations. Secondly, among the minority of messages that received a reply, about half had to wait for more than one business day, which is notable given that the requests were relatively simple.

**[Table 1 about here]**

Even if they are somewhat related, the empirical correlation between responses to emails asking issue questions and those pledging to volunteer is not particularly strong: if we differentiate between political actors that responded and those that did not, thus treating the two variables as dichotomous, the φ coefficient measuring association between them is .497 (*p*=.000). Volunteer pledges are slightly more likely to receive a response than emails asking information about policy issues (41% versus 35%) and to be answered within one business day (21% versus 16%). This finding is understandable since resource mobilization is a crucial component of online campaigning, as most visitors of party websites are supporters of those parties (Bimber and Davis 2003; Vaccari 2008). Political actors are more eager to respond to messages that can result in new volunteers, donors, and message multipliers, than to those that may simply clarify an issue for a prospective voter. However, the difference between the response rates to the issue question and volunteer pledge emails is not statistically significant (φ=.064, *p*=.112 when the variables are treated as dichotomous), suggesting that a clear-cut answer to RQ2 cannot be provided by the data. The clearest finding is that the parties and candidates in the seven countries included in this study between 2007 and 2013 responded rarely and rather slowly to emails. Given the widely uneven levels of responsiveness that were found and the fact that relatively few parties and candidates that replied to both emails, it is important to understand which factors are related to such responsiveness. This point is addressed by RQ3, which I answered with logistic regression analyses predicting whether issue and volunteer emails were responded to based on both systemic and organizational variables, as shown in Table 2.

**[Table 2 about here]**

The evidence presented in Table 2 suggests that system-level variables are less relevant than organization-level variables in predicting email responsiveness.[[10]](#footnote-10) The fact that there is no correlation between technological development and email responsiveness is not surprising given the mundane nature of email as a communication tool. The electoral system also does not correlate significantly with email responsiveness (although the coefficients are negative in both models) and there is a small but statistically significant negative correlation between voter turnout and responsiveness to both types of emails. This might be a function of the fact that U.S. presidential primary candidates were equally responsive to emails as other political actors included in this study, but the total turnout of their races was substantially lower. Among the country dummy variables, Australian and German (with respect to issue emails) political actors were, all else being equal, more likely than French ones to respond to emails. Since these variables were included solely to control for systemic factors that could not be accounted for in the models, I will not speculate on these findings other than saying that institutional and contextual factors should not be overlooked in the study of parties’ uptake of digital media.

The results indicate that email responsiveness is mostly related to the characteristics of political organizations rather than the context they operate in. The variables that play the strongest role are the difference between parties, presidential candidates and party leaders, ideology, and votes (employed as a proxy for resources). By contrast, incumbency and organizational inclusiveness do not show any significant correlation with the two types of responsiveness predicted by the models, although the signs of the coefficients are identical in the two models and consistent with theoretical expectations (negative for incumbency and positive for inclusiveness).

Presidential candidates and parties are much more likely than party leaders to reply to both types of emails. This difference can be attributed to the fact that presidential campaign committees and party organizations tend to be better structured than those overseeing the online presence of party leaders in parliamentary systems, where elections are generally more centered on parties. Especially presidential candidates are less known than parties and more dependent on the resources that they gather during the campaign, and thus have greater incentives to respond to both issue inquiries and volunteer pledges.

The coefficients for ideological families highlight that both green and socialist and democratic parties are more responsive than Christian-democratic and conservative ones with respect to both types of emails. The probability that both emails receive a reply is more than four times as high for greens, and more than twice as high for socialists and democrats, as it is for conservatives. Thus, among the two main political groupings that compete for government leadership in most Western democracies, center-left forces appear to be more responsive to emails than their center-right rivals. More broadly, progressive parties seem to be more responsive than all other parties, and extreme parties, both left-wing and right-wing, are among the least responsive, as shown by the three negative coefficients out of four that involved them.

Finally, vote percentages show a weak but significant correlation with responses to emails featuring issue questions. Although this finding is consistent with the normalization theory, the correlation is not particularly strong and the coefficient related to the volunteer email, albeit positive, is not significant. Larger political organizations are more likely to reply to email inquiries about their issue stances, but, as can be inferred from the exp(b) coefficients, a 10% difference in the votes achieved by two parties increases the probability that the larger one will respond by only 4% compared to the smaller one, all else being equal. Moreover, the fact that no significant correlation was found for responses to the volunteer pledge email suggests that smaller political actors rationally prioritize addressing messages through which they can recruit fresh volunteers, which may help them narrow the gap with larger competitors.

The findings presented in this article are limited in various ways that should be acknowledged. First, I measured an outcome (responses to emails or lack thereof) and employed statistical techniques to explain variance in it based on various system- and organization-level factors, but this approach can only shed light on general patterns such as the ones discussed in this paragraph. Equally valuable and necessary are studies based on direct observation and first-hand accounts of the functioning of political and campaign organizations, which can uniquely shed light on contextual factors that are difficult to disentangle statistically, let alone measure. In the case of email, for instance, Karpf (2012), Kreiss (2012), and Vaccari (2008) discuss how organizations can scientifically test responses to different messages in order to fine-tune their communication and obtain feedback from their constituents even if the latter are not aware of the process. Thus, email may be a viable channel for two-way dialogue between political actors and respondents in a passive and implicit fashion rather than in the active and explicit way that has been the focus of this study. Such use of email may also be more consistent with campaigns’ pressing need for time, control, and resource optimization, which often encourages them to avoid rather than embracing low-cost communication tools. Consistently, Nielsen (2009) has suggested that internet activism often results in “labors” – overcommunication, miscommunication, and communicative overload – that increase the transaction costs for political organizations and thus impede rather than enhancing their functioning. In suggesting a rather reluctant approach to email responsiveness by most political actors, the findings of this research reaffirm such considerations. Finally, even if this study employed regression analysis to assess multivariate correlations between email responsiveness and various independent variables, the number of cases that could be included is rather limited in spite of the relatively long time-span of this research, a typical case of Lijphart’s (1971) “too few cases, too many variables” conundrum. Although the models yielded results that are both interesting and plausible, they should be treated with caution and hopefully replicated with a larger number of cases in order to achieve more robust findings.

**4. Conclusions**

Email is ubiquitous in citizens’ everyday lives and is routinely used by political organizations for both internal and external communication. As a channel of citizen-elite communication, email can enable politicians to bypass the filter of the mass media and to show responsiveness to voters’ demands. In spite of these premises, the evidence presented here suggests that most political actors across Western democracies in national elections between 2007 and 2013 failed to respond to the majority of email inquiries they received.

This dismal performance can be explained by political organizations’ need to carefully prioritize their scarce resources. Answering large numbers of personal messages that require individual consideration requires time and manpower which any campaign is hard pressed to employ as parsimoniously and effectively as possible. Such imperative should be paramount in the final phases of election campaigns – which is when the data presented here were collected – because the pressure and constraints on the available resources are highest then. In choosing whether or not to direct hardly abundant assets to answering citizens’ emails, campaigns may employ two sets of tactical considerations.

First, parties and campaigns may value known over unknown constituents, using email preferably to follow up on personal conversations in which they have already established trust and rapport with supporters. For instance, in his ethnographic research on U.S. Democratic Congressional campaigns Nielsen notes that, once a volunteer had been recruited, interactions were more likely to occur over email than over the phone or in person. As he notes, “The advantages are clear for both staffers and volunteers: an email can spell out details about locations and time more clearly than a rushed phone call from a busy campaign office, they can be copied and pasted and sent quickly to many, and they do not require that the receiver take an incoming call here and now or is physically present.” (Nielsen 2011: 763) Political organizations may thus be more responsive to emails from citizens with whom they have already established a personal connection than to emails from strangers. Since the emails sent for this research came from people that the addressed organizations did not know, they may have treated them with less attention.

Secondly, party and campaign staffers may place a premium on those interactions that can be decisive for the completion of required tasks and the meeting of upcoming deadlines over those that can also be accomplished by other means. In trying to cope with scarce resources, chief amongst them time, they may reason that, if a voter is motivated enough to write to them, she may also be perseverant enough to find the relevant issue information on the – equally accessible, or mundane in Nielsen’s (2011) definition – institutional website, and to participate in the campaign by clicking on the “get involved” buttons and creating an account on the digital organizing hubs that are by now customary on these platforms. From a hard-pressed campaign’s perspective, answering emails such as the ones that were sent for this research may thus not be decisive to inform and engage its online audiences. As a result, political actors may attribute lower priority to answering these emails and may instead focus on those inquiries that involve tasks that cannot be completed otherwise.

Besides showing that parties’ and candidates’ email responsiveness is rather low overall, this research has also shed light on some causal determinants of such phenomenon. First, political actors are slightly more likely to respond, and to do so quickly, if the email contains a volunteer pledge as opposed to an issue question. This might be a rational calculation – particularly for less resourceful parties – because a voter who takes the time to write an email to a party or candidate asking an issue question should already be in or close to their tent given the time and effort she dedicated to finding and contacting them online (Norris 2003), and online campaigns have been known to prioritize volunteer recruitment and supporter mobilization for these reasons (Bimber and Davis 2003). However, the fact that response rates to volunteer pledges were only marginally higher – and not to an extent that was statistically significant – than those to issue questions suggests that political actors place limited value on email as a recruitment tool as well, or at least not enough value to justify the investment needed to promptly respond to all messages.

As regards organizational factors, parties and presidential candidates respond more efficiently to incoming emails most likely because they tend to have larger staffs and more robust routines than party leader campaigns in parliamentary systems. The fact that larger parties answer issue questions more than smaller ones suggests that offline inequalities may translate into political actors’ online responsiveness. However, the relative weakness of this correlation, and the fact that it was not significant for volunteer pledges, also suggest that email may play a leveling role in political competition. Minor parties seem to be just as eager as major ones to harness its affordances for volunteer mobilization.

As regards ideology, the greater responsiveness shown by progressive parties may be related to their organizational structures and elite preferences, as well as contextual factors that vary from country to country. Green parties are rooted in grass-roots organizational paradigms that value informal relationships among members and identifiers over formal ties and structures (Löfgren and Smith 2003: 49). Accordingly, they tend to be at ease with the decentralizing affordances offered by the internet, of which engagement with supporters over email constitutes an important component, not least due to its mundane nature. By the same token, European socialist parties have been historically associated with the mass-party model, focused on recruiting a vast membership and enabling participation among them. Parties that have inherited this legacy may thus be expected to rely on the internet mostly to disseminate information from the center to the periphery and to mobilize supporters when needed (Löfgren and Smith 2003: 45–46), functions which correspond to the types of emails these parties were more likely to answer. These considerations do not apply to the U.S. case, where party organizations have been much looser and campaign-focused on both sides of the spectrum. However, contextual factors, such as the Democrats’ status as the opposition party at the crucial time in which online campaigning was shaped and developed into its present form (Karpf 2012) have been suggested as explanations for the American left’s upper hand on the internet over the last decade.

The findings presented in this study suggest various directions for future research. First, it is an open question whether the patterns and correlations that were found during election campaigns are reproduced in “peacetime” periods outside of elections. In these contexts, citizens’ demand for information and participation should be feebler and political actors’ response capacity should thus be placed under lower pressure, but their interest in showing responsiveness should also be weaker due to the lack of immediate electoral incentives. Secondly, the methodology of this study could be usefully extended to study email responsiveness by other types of political actors, such as social movements, interest groups, parliamentary representatives, and local elected officials. Thirdly, social media open many interesting opportunities for political actors to respond to individual voters’ demands, as most citizens with internet connections have personal accounts on at least one of these platforms. Interactions between politicians and citizens on social media occur in semi-public rather than private environments, so their audiences – and, thus, political implications – are potentially broader than those of private email exchanges. Finally, the causal patterns suggested here should be tested, and possibly expanded, by qualitative studies that focus on the contextual conditions and real-world functioning of political organizations in dealing with emails and other types of interactions with citizens.

This study has shown that, in spite of the mundane nature of a technological artifact such as email, there is meaningful variation in its uses among different types of political actors. As information technology allows parties and candidates to engage with citizens in an increasingly complex and multilayered set of environments, it is important to empirically scrutinize the uses of different tools and applications among various types of subjects and organizations. Although digital politics appears to be in a permanent state of flux, more enduring strategic considerations and internal constraints shape the ways in which political actors address these opportunities—or, in the case of the many emails sent for this research that went unanswered and, perhaps, unnoticed, fail to do so.

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**Table 1 – Levels of responsiveness to issue and volunteer emails**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Issue question %** | **Volunteer pledge %** |
| No answer | 65.1 | 58.9 |
| One week or more | 3.9 | 3.3 |
| Two to four business days | 15.5 | 17.1 |
| One business day | 15.5 | 20.7 |
|  |  |  |
| *N* | 304 | 304 |

**Table 2 – Estimated coefficients for responsiveness to emails with issue questions and volunteer pledges by technological development, socio-political environment, and party characteristics**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Issue question** | | | **Volunteer pledge** | | |
|  | **Coeff.** | **s.e.** | **Exp(b)** | **Coeff.** | **s.e.** | **Exp(b)** |
| *Country (France=ref.)* | | | |  |  |  |
| Australia | 2.304\* | .760 | 10.013 | 2.000\* | .655 | 7.387 |
| Germany | 2.098\* | .825 | 8.153 | .859 | .771 | 2.360 |
| Italy | 1.480 | 1.002 | 4.391 | 1.720 | .911 | 5.587 |
| Spain | 1.419 | .892 | 4.133 | 1.239 | .846 | 3.453 |
| United Kingdom | .477 | .734 | 1.611 | -.702 | .750 | .496 |
| United States | -1.712 | .917 | .180 | -.948 | .738 | .388 |
| Technological development (%) | .018 | .040 | 1.018 | .019 | .036 | 1.019 |
| Majoritarian electoral system | -.618 | .770 | .539 | -.262 | .725 | .770 |
| Voter turnout (%) | -.030\* | .013 | .970 | -.024\* | .012 | .977 |
| *Type of political actor (party leader=ref.)* | | | |  |  |  |
| Party | 1.394\*\* | .504 | 4.029 | 1.851\*\*\* | .488 | 6.365 |
| Presidential candidate | 3.060\*\*\* | .857 | 21.333 | 2.612\*\*\* | .745 | 13.625 |
| Incumbent in national government | -.560 | .416 | .571 | -.352 | .379 | .704 |
| Votes (%) | .025\* | .012 | 1.025 | .017 | .012 | 1.017 |
| Organizational inclusiveness (0-1) | .921 | .725 | 2.512 | .585 | .669 | 1.796 |
| *Ideological family (Christian Democrat/conservative=ref.)* | | | |  |  |  |
| Communist/radical left | -.964 | .642 | .381 | -.681 | .532 | .506 |
| Green | 1.474\* | .615 | 4.368 | 1.542\*\* | .597 | 4.676 |
| Socialist/democratic | 1.012\* | .472 | 2.750 | .919\* | .459 | 2.506 |
| Left-Libertarian | .183 | .623 | 1.200 | -.259 | .579 | .772 |
| Regionalist | .548 | .647 | 1.730 | -.748 | .659 | .473 |
| Liberal | -.217 | .785 | .805 | .662 | .691 | 1.939 |
| Radical right | .203 | .551 | 1.225 | -.664 | .531 | .515 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Constant | -2.700 | 2.322 | .067 | -2.666 | 2.142 | .069 |
| *N* | 296 | | | 296 | | |
| Nagelkerke R2 | .284 |  |  | .232 |  |  |

Note: \*\*\*p≤.001 \*\*p≤.01 \*p≤.05

**Appendix 1 – Number of Parties and Candidates/Leaders Contacted in Each Year, 2007- 2013**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Year** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | **Total** | | | |
|  | **‘07** | | **‘08** | | **‘09** | | **‘10** | | **‘11** | | **‘12** | | **‘13** | | **Contacts** | | **Actors** | |
| **Country** | **P** | **C/L** | **P** | **C/L** | **P** | **C/L** | **P** | **C/L** | **P** | **C/L** | **P** | **C/L** | **P** | **C/L** | **P** | **C/L** | **P** | **C/L** |
| Australia | 13 | 6 |  |  |  |  | 16 | 4 |  |  |  |  | 9 | 4 | 38 | 14 | 20 | 11 |
| France | 9 | 13 |  |  | 13 | 1 |  |  |  |  | 15 | 9 |  |  | 37 | 23 | 22 | 20 |
| Germany |  |  |  |  | 14 | 7 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 10 | 0 | 24 | 7 | 10 | 7 |
| Italy |  |  | 16 | 0 | 16 | 0 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 22 | 8 | 54 | 8 | 35 | 8 |
| Spain |  |  | 9 | 3 | 10 | 0 |  |  | 11 | 2 |  |  |  |  | 30 | 5 | 11 | 4 |
| UK |  |  |  |  | 8 | 0 | 10 | 3 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 18 | 3 | 10 | 3 |
| USA |  |  | 3 | 19 |  |  |  |  |  |  | 5 | 16 |  |  | 8 | 35 | 5 | 28 |
| Total | 22 | 19 | 28 | 22 | 61 | 8 | 26 | 7 | 11 | 2 | 20 | 25 | 41 | 12 | 209 | 95 | 113 | 81 |

Note: each email contact included both an issue question and a volunteer pledge; for Germany in 2009, the analyses were conducted both during the European (7 parties) and federal elections (7 parties and 7 party leaders); for the U.S. in 2008 and 2012, the analyses were conducted during both the presidential primaries and general elections (in 2008 15 candidates were contacted during the primaries and 4 candidates and 3 parties during the general election; in 2012 11 candidates were contacted during the primaries and 5 candidates and 5 parties during the general election).

1. For instance, the Pirate Party, which Schweitzer (2011) found to have a very robust online presence, was not included in the analysis of the 2009 German elections, but it was included in subsequent analyses of the Australian, German, and Italian 2013 elections. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The fact that responses from some political actors were analyzed more than once does not severely violate the assumption, implicit in the regression models that will be shown below, that cases must be fully independent. Although the same organization might respond (or fail to do so) similarly to different email inquiries in a short timeframe, it is plausible that its behavior might vary in a longer timeframe, for instance between a general and a European election, between two general elections, and between a primary and a general election. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From an ethical standpoint, concealing the research purpose of email exchanges such as those studied here can be justified because this activity did not violate any individual rights of the subjects. First, the focus was not on the individuals who responded to emails or failed to do so, but on the organizations they worked for. Secondly, no personal information, let alone sensitive data, was solicited or collected through the emails sent and received for this research. Thirdly, the content of the responses was not recorded beyond assessing whether they addressed the question and had been written by a human being. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Technological development is measured as the average of the number of internet users per 100 inhabitants and the number of broadband users per 100 inhabitants. Both measures come from the International Telecommunications Union (http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict). The index varies between 0 and 100. Cronbach's α measuring internal consistency of these indicators equals .773. Since at the time of this writing the latest available data were from 2012, I used 2012 figures for the countries that I studied in 2013 (Australia, Germany, and Italy). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This variable is sensitive to the fact that in France and the United Kingdom general elections are held with majoritarian systems, but European Parliament elections employ proportional systems. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As is well known, voting is the most common form of political participation in Western democracies. Voter turnout data were obtained from official websites of government institutions in each country. For U.S. elections, turnout was calculated at the national level based on the data available on http://elections.gmu.edu. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In parliamentary democracies where I analyzed party leaders, I imputed to the leaders the votes achieved by their parties. This strategy is justified by the fact that this measure was employed as a proxy for resources, and leaders of major parties tend to be better resourced than those of minor ones. Although it would have been preferable to employ actual measures of financial resources (as was done in Vaccari 2013), these were not yet available for some elections at the time of this writing. Many other studies of digital politics have employed votes as proxies for resources to overcome this limitation (see Strandberg 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. All parties and candidates were classified based on the criteria that they (or, in the case of candidates and leaders, their parties) employ to select their leaders and parliamentary candidates based on the categories suggested by Janda (1980). For leader selection methods, Janda proposes eight categories, ranging in terms of inclusiveness from selection by vote of party identifiers or supporters to selection by the leader’s predecessor. For candidate selection methods, the categories are nine, from vote of local party supporters in an open primary to selection by a national committee or party council (see Vaccari 2013). The variable included in the model averages the values for leader and candidate selection (Cronbach's α =.571). Models run with two separate variables for leader and candidate selection methods yielded substantially identical results as the ones presented here. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Parties and candidates were classified based on the taxonomy of party ideologies suggested by Vassallo and Wilcox (2006), to which I added the category of regionalist parties. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nagelkerke R2 coefficients for models including only the system-level independent variables are .110 for the issue email and .057 for the volunteer pledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)