



This is a repository copy of *Roadblocks to interactive digital adoption? Elite perspectives of party practices in the United Kingdom.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/125651/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Dommett, K. orcid.org/0000-0003-0624-6610 (2020) Roadblocks to interactive digital adoption? Elite perspectives of party practices in the United Kingdom. *Party Politics*, 26 (2). pp. 165-175. ISSN 1354-0688

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068818761196>

Dommett, K. (2018). Dommett K. Roadblocks to interactive digital adoption? Elite perspectives of party practices in the United Kingdom. *Party Politics*. 2020;26(2):165-175. Copyright © 2018 The Author(s). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068818761196>. Article available under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Introduction

Digital technology has become a mainstay of party politics in most Western democracies. While just two decades ago party websites were a political novelty, now digital tools have become an indispensable component of party life. In addition to the electoral databases, email lists and membership management systems that parties have long maintained, new functions and capacities are being realized in the digital environment. Social media accounts, the sharing of information, and the mobilization of activists and supporters are increasingly taking place online. These innovations have led to significant speculation and debate within academia about the capacities and potential of digital technology to facilitate more interactive, participatory ‘equalized’ interactions between citizens and parties (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Landemore, 2014; Margolis et al., 2003; Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 2; Strandberg, 2008). In existing studies, most established parties (as opposed to new, insurgent organisations (Bennett, Segerberg and Knüpfer, 2017)) have not been found to exhibit more interactive practices (Gibson and Ward, 2002; Gibson, Römmele and Ward, 2004) as parties have ‘normalized’ their adoption practices, using technology to facilitate existing activities and ideas (Koc-Michalska et al, 2014). And yet, more recently, there have been indications from scholarship on party organisation, particularly from Gibson (2015) and Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016), that the internet is empowering citizens to engage with parties in new ways. These perspectives suggest a need to revisit this debate to examine whether party elites are embracing interactivity and what explains current practices.

In contrast to previous research that has coded party outputs to determine levels of interaction, this article explores party officials’ views of digital adoption. Conducting case study analysis of the UK Labour and Green parties, interviews are used to examine attitudes and practices in two different areas of party activity: electoral campaigning and internal governance. While there is little evidence of elite interest in the interactive potential of digital tools in the former, there is more evidence of interest in the latter area, even though barriers exist that frustrate the enactment of these ideas. Exploring the

significance of parties' objectives and organisational traits this article examines explanations for these outcomes and, in so doing, helps scholars and practitioners alike to understand, identify and tackle barriers to the adoption of interactive digital tools by party elites.

Literature Review

Political parties are no strangers to the use of digital technology. Whilst today such terms evoke images of slick websites, targeted Facebook advertising and political canvassing apps, for many years technology has played a role in the way parties organize, campaign and reach out to voters and supporters. Recently, however, the scope and influence of digital on parties' operations has intensified in an apparently exponential manner. In addition to the creation of (numerous) accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, parties have developed sophisticated websites and blogs, have overhauled their internal software, brought consultants in and purchased new programs such as NationBuilder (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016: 285).

These innovations are significant because of the widely cited capacity for technology to change the *nature* of the interaction between parties and the public. Digital tools can facilitate not simply the top-down communication or broadcast of information from party elites to citizens, but more engaged, interactive connections (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016: 285). Whilst the precise meaning of interaction is contested (Bucy, 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2004), for many, digital technology enables reciprocal connections between users and elites (Hacker and Todino, 1996), providing the former with increased control (Jensen, 1998). This type of interaction is held to be normatively desirable (c.f. Bucy, 2004) and favoured by citizens (Miller, 2016: 28; see also Nesta, 2010).

Attempts to understand and classify interaction have come in many forms (Baxter, Marcella and Varfis, 2011; Foot, Schneider and Dougherty, 2006; Lilleker and Jackson, 2010). Differentiating between studies of digital interaction, Stromer-Galley has described studies of 'interactivity as process' and 'interactivity as product' (2004: 392). The former examines the nature of interaction observed using digital, considering, for example, who is talking, what they are talking about and whether relations between 'senders' and 'receivers' are reciprocal. The latter focuses on the extent to

which opportunities for interaction are provided via technology, considering the quality and prevalence of these tools. This study lies in the second tradition, considering the extent to which parties provide opportunities for the public, party members and/or supporters to engage in two-way exchanges in which they experience greater levels of control (as opposed to receiving instruction or information).

Adopting this lens, it appears that elite focused studies have hitherto found scant evidence of opportunities for increased interaction in established parties (Gibson and Ward, 2002; Gibson, Römmele and Ward, 2004). Michael Jensen's study of social media has therefore shown that whilst most political campaigns have embraced aspects of interactive architecture on Twitter, these actions remain marginal and often concentrated among smaller parties (2016: 24). As such parties are not enacting the opportunity to invite persons to communicate and participate in campaigns on their own terms, but are rather focusing on engaging in dialogue, or retransmitting communications produced by supporters. Similarly, Stromer-Galley argues that parties' use of online campaign tools has shown political candidates to be 'using their websites in ways similar to their television or radio advertisements—as one-way messages', not realising the two-way potential of digital tools (2000: 116), findings replicated by Gibson and Ward (2002; see also: Baxter, Marcella and Varfis, 2011: 473; Lee, 2015; Lilleker and Jackson, 2010; Norris, 2001). Elsewhere, Kreiss has shown that whilst digital media lower the costs to supporters and members of getting involved in party activity or expressing political views, these tools have not made 'campaigns more responsive to their mobilized supporters outside of the generally shared ends of getting a candidate elected' (2010: 124). Where exceptions have been found, these have revealed parties' willingness to offer opportunities to engage small communities. In the UK, for example, Lilleker and Jackson uncovered parties' willingness to allow members to generate their own content on devoted party websites: LibDemAct, MyConservatives and Labour's Membersnet (2010: 85). Evidence of a move towards interaction has therefore proved difficult to find, supporting the normalization thesis.

More recent studies of party campaigning and organisation have, however, indicated that new practices may be emerging. Gibson (2015), in particular, has highlighted the emergence of 'citizen

initiated campaigning' to argue that more interactive practices are in evidence. For Chadwick and Stromer-Galley this trend has the potential to redefine party activities, with citizens 'breathing new life into the party form, remaking parties in their own changed participatory image' using digital means (2016: 285). Different kinds of engagement between parties, activists and citizens are therefore emerging, but whilst it appears that digital tools are being embraced by party strategists (Lilleker, Tenscher and Štětka, 2015: 762), it is not yet clear whether elites are seeking to adopt more interactive ideals by engaging citizens in two-way exchanges and providing greater levels of user-led control. Neither is it clear what affects elite receptivity to, and implementation of, such ideas.

In exploring these latter questions, existing theory on party organisation and digital adoption helps guide expectations by signalling important differences *between* parties. Perhaps most influentially, Römmele (2003) has argued that parties' practices vary in accordance with their primary goals. Distinguishing between vote-maximizing parties and parties concerned with intraparty democracy, Römmele argued that the former would 'be concerned with top-down information; broadcasting via new ICTs', whereas the latter would 'stress the participatory aspect of the new communication technology' (12 – 13). This suggests that parties' receptivity to interaction will differ according to their primary objective.

A second set of explanations can also be identified within and beyond scholarship on digital adoption that suggest the relevance of organisational traits. Existing studies have shown evidence of variation in the adoption of digital tools despite the presence of similar organisational goals. In the UK, Lilleker and Jackson (2010) have therefore shown that whilst the Labour Party's website was used as a promotional tool, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats provided information *and* opportunities to connect with one another and the party, revealing differences despite apparently common vote-maximising aims (88). These findings suggest that Römmele's theory is, at least, mediated by additional factors.

From one perspective existing work has suggested that party structure is significant. As Gibson has argued (2015), the internet can be used to enable more democratic modes of organization or facilitate

the ‘micro-management of voters and centralized control by techno-literate elites’ (193). The appeal of these strategies is likely to vary in accordance with the degree to which central elites wish to retain control. Whilst a highly decentralised party may be open to more interactive tools, a centralised party is likely to exhibit what Bennett *et al* describe as a ‘top-down or centre-out’ form of linkage that ‘increasingly detaches citizen engagement from core organizational processes, except through communication-based appeals during elections’ (2017: 3-4). Overlapping with Römmele’s thesis, Stromer-Galley (2000) has therefore found that parties pursuing vote-maximisation strategies through centralised teams are often deeply wary of ceding control as interactive engagements can undermine electoral objectives. This suggests that parties with highly centralised organisational structures are less likely to view interaction favourably or seek to enact this form of tool compared with more decentralised parties.

Less common to studies of digital, but prevalent elsewhere in scholarship on party behaviour, is the relevance of party heterogeneity. Whilst widely acknowledged that parties are stratarchical organisations (Carty, 2004) composed of factions and tendencies that inspire contestation, debate and power struggles within parties (Rose, 1964), hitherto limited attention has been paid to the presence and significance of different views of digital within single party organisations. It is therefore unclear whether elites within parties hold a consistent view of digital, and whether this affects behaviour. Here it is theorised that heterogeneity in regards to different views of digital affects outcomes. Where uniformly indifferent or negative views are held, little evidence of interaction is likely to be found. Where views are more divided, progress in implementing interactive tools is likely to be frustrated, especially where there is a balance of power between the actors concerned. Finally, where views are united in favour of interaction, greater progress can be expected.

Finally, resource is also cited as a key factor in explaining the uptake of digital tools. As Lilleker and Vedel have claimed ‘[w]ithout resources, a sophisticated and innovative web presence is far more difficult’ (2013). This suggests that parties with more resource may exhibit evidence of greater interactivity, and yet studies of UK parties suggest that the relationship here is not clear. This is because the BNP, a party with limited financial resource, demonstrate considerable interactivity

(Baxter, Marcella and Varfis, 2011; Lilleker and Jackson, 2010), suggesting that resource may be mediated by other factors. Questions of resource therefore require further study.

These explanations suggest the importance of variations *between* parties, but within this article it is also argued that there are important differences *within* single organisations. A notable feature of the existing literature is the tendency to study parties' campaigning activities (Jensen, 2016; Lilleker and Jackson, 2010), and yet it is widely acknowledged that parties perform a range of functions (Sartori, 2005). Parties can utilise digital for electioneering, policy-making, recruitment and to advance aggregation, participation and conflict management (Ibid.: 21-2). For this reason, this article structures its analysis by looking, first, at electoral campaigning before, second, examining parties' internal democratic governance. This division, whilst admittedly crude, allows a distinction to be drawn between parties' views and application of digital in the context of short-term electoral imperatives, and contrastingly, to internal applications where parties' face incentives to engage members and supporters in longer-term ways. This frame structures the analysis that follows and is used to explore the relative purchase and explanatory power of the different variables cited above.

Case Studies

To examine elite party actors' perceptions and applications of digital two case studies of the Labour and Green Party in the UK are used. These two cases are selected as their different attributes allow the theories outlined above to be tested.

In line with Römmele's hypothesis, these two parties have historically been defined by different organisational objectives. Whilst the Labour Party is a vote-seeking organisation focused on the pursuit of elected office, the Green Party has traditionally been thought of as focused on intra-party democracy, with significant emphasis placed on its internal democratic structure and the significance of members (Harmel and Janda, 1994). Whilst some scholars have highlighted the increasing acceptance of vote maximising practices within the central party office (Dennison, 2016), internal democracy remains an important objective (Wilks-Heeg, Blick and Crone, 2012). Recognising the

continued importance of this tradition, a distinction is drawn between these cases, and yet, contestation here is noted.

Organisationally, the two parties also differ significantly in regards to structure, heterogeneity and resource. Founded in 1900 the Labour Party, in contrast to the Greens, has a sustained record of electoral success at national, local and European levels. Its present structure is highly centralised as, despite being formed as a mass membership party (Duverger, 1954), decreases in the size of party membership (to 552,000 members in 2017¹) and a series of reforms have led to central control (Faucher-King and Le Galès, 2010).² In terms of heterogeneity, the party has a long history of factionalism, derived from ideological tensions (Finlayson, 2013) and competing views of party democracy, divisions that have become prominent under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. In 2016, the party declared an income of £49,840,000.00 (Electoral Commission, 2016a) and hence are able to invest considerably in central party staff (with 289 full time and 54 part time staff in London and regional offices (Ibid: 15)) and campaigning.

In contrast, the Green Party of England and Wales is a far smaller organisation. Formed initially as People in the early 1970s, the party has a devolved power structure and minimal central infrastructure. Whilst, over time there has been investment in central party services and staff, the decentred ethos of the party has prevailed, meaning, for example, that the party lacks a centralised system for recording voter information. Culturally the party has less established factions than Labour, but recent increases in party membership (to 55,500 members) have seen growing tensions between ‘traditional’ supporters motivated by climate change and newer members who favour a broader left wing message. In addition, amongst elites some disquiet is evident over the degree of decentralisation, resulting in some calls for greater centralisation of infrastructure and strategy. In terms of resource, the party declared an income of £2,165,032.00, just 4 per cent of Labour’s. This translates into a far smaller

¹ It is important to acknowledge recent increases in membership within Labour and the Green Party. For more information, see: House of Commons Library (2017) *Membership of UK Political Parties*, London: Stationary Office.

² This is not to deny the reforms conducted by Ed Miliband to democratise the party. For more see Goes E (2016) *The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband: Trying But Failing to Renew Social Democracy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

staff, with 46.2 full-time equivalent posts, and less central party capacity (Electoral Commission, 2016b: 20).

In line with existing theory we may therefore expect that Labour and the Green's would exhibit different digital adoption practices because they have different organisational imperatives, levels of centralisation, heterogeneity and resource. What is unclear, however, is whether expected correlations exist between these variables and the outcomes observed in each case. To examine these ideas interviews were used to identify elite officials' rationale for digital adoption, examining the degree to which the above variables featured in respondents' ideas. A content analysis of party documentation and digital tools was also undertaken to verify whether intentions were translated into reality. This approach allows the paper to move beyond 'official story' accounts (Katz and Mair, 1992) which capture parties' formally stated objectives, to examine the thinking behind actions and the challenges encountered in translating ideas into practice. It also departs from the form of replicable coding frameworks deployed in studies to date (c.f. Stromer-Galley, 2000).

In total, 12 interviews semi-structured occurred with senior party staff, consultants, board members and volunteers working directly with the national party (as opposed to elected politicians) between January and April 2017. Participants were asked a series of questions relating to parties' roles, their connections with citizens, their use of digital, and challenges experienced in the adoption of digital, focusing on practices between 2015 and 2017 (prior to the General Election). All interviews were transcribed and coded to identify key themes. Anonymous quotations, attributed to each party, are used in the analysis that follows to offer insight into the thinking of elite political actors (Vaccari, 2010). An overview of interviewees is available in Appendix 1.

Parties' Adoption of Digital

Electoral Campaigning

In the field of election campaigning, parties' adoption of digital tools has been relatively uniform with data management and canvassing software (such as Labour's Contact Creator and the Green's

localised systems such as EARS or Nationbuilder), party websites, social media presence, online fundraising tools and digital apps used by both parties. In regards to interactivity, interviews in both parties revealed that whilst some variation in actual usage occurred, amongst elites interaction was not desired or pursued.

Within Labour, interviewees described their desire to use digital to ‘[put] our platform out there and invit[e] them [the public] to approve it or not’ (Interview 3). This strategy was described as ‘probably more about presenting information’ than inviting two-way forms of connection (Interview 2). Indeed, one interviewee reflected:

‘If I’m honest, I don’t think we are yet at the stage where we believe that digital is going to connect with people in some sort of spectacular or revolutionary way. I think what we’re working towards is to make the party more accessible and use technology to just tell people what we’re about’ (Interview 3).

Engagements with the public were therefore aimed at communication, a trait readily apparent on the party’s website which primarily contained news stories and policy positions as opposed to opportunities for interaction and discussion. Similarly, social media produced by the central party focused on advertising the leader’s activities and policy positions, rather than soliciting more interactive engagements (akin to the findings of Jensen, 2016).³

A similar rationale underpinned interactions between central party HQ and activists. Interviewees described how members and supporters were viewed as advocates of the party’s position or foot soldiers collecting data for central party use and oversight. One digital consultant described the digital strategy as defined by ‘money, message and mobilisation and ... an attempt to build a movement and to motivate our supporters’ (Interview 5). Digital tools were therefore seen as a way of stimulating engagement (either as voting or volunteering) and were not, of themselves, seen to facilitate a different form of interaction. Digital accordingly served as a tool ‘to make it easier for people to do what they

³ It is worth re-iterating that interest here is in centrally derived digital tools, not those produced independently by activists that have proved a key feature of recent electoral campaigns (Gibson, 2015).

do, so that local parties don't have to sort of start battling around with spreadsheets and moving data from one system into another' (Interview 3). Digital hence enabled members to have:

'...more time actually going out and speaking to people and making a difference in the community rather than getting tied up on things that take longer than they should because we're kind of fighting a little bit against old technology that maybe hasn't kept pace as much as it might have done' (Interview 1).

This rationale was exemplified in practices such as webinars designed to up-skill activists' campaigning skills and new tools, such as Promote - which one interviewee described as sitting 'between Facebook advertising and our own data systems, that will make it easier for local party groups to run local advertising including A/B testing of message' (Interview 6). Similarly, it underpinned social media content designed to be shared by supporters. Videos, memes and news stories produced by the central party's digital consultants (Blue State Digital, No date) were designed to disseminate information via sharing, rather than invite direct engagement between the party and activists or the public.

In understanding Labour's approach to digital adoption it appears, in line with Römmele's theory, that adoption practices are heavily conditioned by party motivation. Labour's focus on vote-maximisation inspired a top-down dissemination strategy, with central party staff using digital to complement existing offline activities rather than facilitating new forms of interaction. Amongst interviewees this perspective was uniformly advanced, demonstrating a high degree of consensus and an accordingly lack of internal contestation about approach. Whilst some interviewees did voice interest in interactive tools – such as Momentum's car pool app and digital phonebank – these were viewed with caution because of a desire not to jeopardise primary electoral aims. One interviewee therefore noted, '[s]o that sounds like a cool tool...but then I was looking at it and it raises loads of questions...the problem from our perspective, the Labour Party perspective, is how do you manage the risk around that?' (Interview 1). This suggests that experimentation with interactive digital tools is inhibited by central

staff concerns about their implications, leading them to concentrate on methods and styles of engagement proven to deliver electoral success without unnecessary risk.

Turning to the Green Party, interviews revealed marked similarities with the ideas and practices of Labour elites, despite theorised differences in party objectives. Akin to Labour, Green elites outlined a desire to use digital to amplify ‘the value of what [representatives are] doing’ by informing both members and voters, allowing the national party to focus on ‘formulating ideas and present[ing] it to the public’ and ‘broadcasting’ in a way not previously possible (Interview 7). This objective was strongly connected to the party’s difficulty in accessing traditional media channels and an according desire to communicate directly with citizens (Casero-Ripolles, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016; Römmele, 2003: 9), but notably focus was placed on presenting information rather than pursuing interaction.

Similar to Labour, for central party staff digital also facilitated more efficient engagements with members. Within the central party members were described as ‘our foot soldiers’ (Interview 7) and were seen as advocates for the party’s message. Elites therefore focused on trying to ‘increase the numbers or proportion of members who are actually willing to be engaged in some general activity that’s going to support our election campaign’ (Interview 7), rather than facilitating more interaction. These digital campaigning practices are exemplified on the national party’s website which promotes information, recruits volunteers and mobilizes members, with scant opportunity for interaction. They were also evident in examples of citizen-initiated digital content. Initiatives such as ‘Reasons to Vote Green’ (an app that allowed individuals to select policies that most inspired them to produce a shareable graphic on social media) and the ‘Green Party Meme Builder’ (which allowed people to upload an image and create memes using the official Green Party logos and fonts) were described in terms of their capacity to ‘leverag[e] social media to spread messages about [the] Green Party and get Green Party votes, or get people who aren’t Green Party voters to take interest’ (Interview 10). Vote-maximising rationale therefore underpinned much of the party’s activity, colouring the ideas and practices not just of elites, but of others within the party hierarchy.

When discussing party practices elite interviewees did, however, acknowledge that alternative practices could be found within the party. Interviewees recounted a tendency for significant sections of the party to:

‘think well, we’ll sort of make a bit of a gesture of running election campaigns, but we’re not really going to put in the work that’s required, and what we’re going to do instead is run a stall all about TTIP [Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership] or have an interesting public meeting about pollution, or something you know, that feels like you’re engaging in green politics’ (Interview 7).

This alternative philosophy was seen to drive a different style of interaction between some local parties, their members and the wider public. Digital campaigning in this vein focused not on dissemination, but rather on ‘consulting with community campaigns...and formulating interesting policy ideas’ (Interview 7) via Facebook groups and online discussion. Although not promoted by the central party office, elites acknowledged that the decentralised party structure and a lack of central control allowed local parties to utilise digital tools in more interactive ways.

In regards to Römmele’s theory this suggests that parties can exhibit competing ideas about their primary goals which, when mediated by organisational factors such as a lack of central control and decentralised structure, result in different practices as well as ideas. As such, within the Green’s it appears that vote-maximising objectives dominate elite ideas and practices, but that party structures can allow more interactive practices to emerge. Notably, in neither case was resource cited as a pertinent concern.

Internal Governance

The second dimension of party activities considered here refers to the way in which parties are governed, and the degree to which the views of the public, party members and/or supporters, as opposed to the ideas of elites, guide party actions. Within both parties digital underpins governance: it

is central to membership management platforms such as Membersnet and Civi CRM, it is used to facilitate discussion on internal member forums, and it enables other communications, with email routinely used to disseminate messages, solicit participation or funds and to organize activity both horizontally and vertically within party hierarchies (Nielsen, 2010). Within these cases digital is used primarily to facilitate the representation of party members as opposed to the public. Indeed, interviewees within Labour stated:

‘I think at the moment, there's not really any real mechanisms for members of the public to get involved aside from if they want to join as members. The closest you've got is interacting with us on Facebook, or other social media channels. But to what extent that's a meaningful relationship I'm not quite sure’ (Interview 2).

Recognising this focus, interactive digital tools were viewed positively by both parties, but in each case there was evidence of a disjuncture between attitudes and practices.

Within Labour, contrary to expectations, interviews revealed consistent interest in using digital to facilitate interaction. However, in practice, significant differences between desires and actions emerged. Highlighting the creation of a Digital Transformation Team, many interviewees reflected on the party’s desire ‘to develop a far richer and deeper two-way relationship with members’ (Watson, 2015). This involved an ambition to ‘give the tens of thousand of new members who’ve joined since the election a real say over how the party is run’ (Ibid.). The Team’s activities to date have involved the creation of a MyLabour app which interviewees described as having the potential to create ‘huge opportunities for a totally different more participative way’ of organising members via communities of interest (as opposed to geography) (Interview 4).

Yet, whilst the enthusiasm for interaction and new forms of digital organisation was clear, in practice these tools have failed to materialise. The MyLabour app, for example, only currently enables members to receive news and information and access a digital membership card, perpetuating information dissemination rather than interaction. Elsewhere high profile attempts to solicit opinion

such as the party's decision to ask the public what questions Jeremy Corbyn should ask at Prime Ministers Questions, and to gather members' views on military action in Syria in 2015 via email, have not enabled two-way debate or decision making, but rather new avenues for expression.

The possible explanations for this disjuncture are manifold. At one level, questions of central control appear to be playing a role. For some interviewees there was open trepidation about the implications of implementing such tools because of concerns about:

‘asking for like opinions all the time on stuff, because you could get opinions which actually you feel don't represent the people who you want to be representing, who you were founded to represent’ (Interview 4).

There appeared unwillingness amongst some to cede control to an unpredictable constituency because of possible unforeseen implications (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016). Yet, for other interviewees more Machiavellian forces were at play. Indeed, one interviewee argued that there were some people in the Labour Party who enjoy the fact that there are ‘digitally native people who are unable to engage with civic institutions like the Labour Party’ (Interview 11). This suggests not caution over implications, but the existence of a more fundamental schism over the degree to which the party should be engaging with members.

Evidence of heterogeneous views also emerged regarding the degree to which interactivity should be pursued. To give one example, interviewees offered different views of the party's position in relation to Pol.is – a tool adopted in Europe and elsewhere to facilitate internal party debate. Whilst some interviewees proclaimed an intention to use Pol.is at the party's 2017 conference to develop, via the membership, a policy on universal basic income - with a view to getting ‘the membership to write the next general election manifesto’ (Interview 11) – other figures described how ‘we might be trying Pol.is at a very small scale as a follow on from real world events in the next couple of months’ (Interview 6). This suggests the presence of different levels of commitment towards interactive innovations, which, in this case, were notably held by actors with similar levels of power. This

resulted in ‘genuine disagreements [over] whether the next manifesto should be written by party members’ (Interview 6) that frustrated progress.

Questions of resource also appeared to play a role in accounting for Labour’s behaviour. One interviewee argued that:

‘there is the nervousness that basically, if you ask people what they think about anything, then it’s not unreasonable of them to expect a reply. And there’s got to be a human that does that...Digital enables a million people to get in touch whereas before it would only have been a thousand. There’s how much do you open any of those floodgates, because if we can’t deal with it, it’s pretty fake inviting those comments and then not responding’ (Interview 6).

Whilst Labour possesses greater resource than the Greens it therefore appears that material concerns around the party’s capacity for organisational responsiveness inhibit the enactment of interactive tools.

Labour’s position towards digital interaction is therefore complex. The party appear far more receptive to these ideas for internal governance as opposed to campaigning, suggesting that different objectives are paramount in each realm. However, organisational traits, including a desire for central control, internal contestation and resource appear to have played a role in frustrating the enactment of this idea.

Turning to the Greens, a similar disjuncture between desires and practices is evident, but in this case one obstacle, resource, appears to have frustrated desires. Interviews revealed a consistent desire to:

‘do things quite differently, about trying to engage more people in politics, it’s not just we’re going to ask you a few questions, to better know how to sway you at the next election, it’s you’re going to be part of our power and stuff’ (Interview 7).

‘I also think that if we do it properly, it can actually be a genuine conversation with people and so we can do regular surveys, we can use it ... so people can feel like they can actually contribute to the way the party is operating’ (Interview 8).

This suggests a clear ambition for more interactive engagement, and reflects failures in the party’s current representative structures. Discussing the purpose of the party and its representative goals, interviewees remarked on the importance of internal democracy, particularly emphasising that ‘members are sovereign in the Green Party’ and that policy is determined in accordance with democratic procedures (Interview 7). However, within the organisation, the desire for interactive connections is often not fulfilled. One interviewee noted that:

‘[t]here's been some attempts through our members' website to broaden engagement, but the tools are really primitive and it just doesn't work’ (Interview 7).

Elsewhere the party’s members’ area was described as:

‘a total mess. No one really understands the purpose or the function and it's just grown into this massive beast that no one can control. It's also quite a dark place, in a way, if you go on the forum, it's you know, the language is horrible, it's very much echoing the Twitter kind of, the same problems Twitter has’ (Interview 8).

Others argued that ‘the system just doesn't provide a nice place to be able, even a productive place to have these sorts of discussions...[b]oth to feed into what the party's policy ultimately is, because they can decide it, and also just to shape what we're talking about’ (Interview 7). Interactions with members were therefore commonly defined by e-mail, with respondents noting ‘we send them [members] email updates, we're connected with them on social media’ and the party uses text messages, but for the most part these connections are designed to disseminate information ‘about how

they can get involved...about what their elected members and people that they've elected internally are doing', not more interactive representative connections (Interview 9).

These findings suggest a divide between the Green Party's objectives and their actual behaviour, but unlike Labour, where a range of barriers were cited, here material constraints are of primary concern. Indeed, interviewees lamented a lack of tangible resource, noting that the party already has an expensive 'shopping list of things we'd like to be able to have, that most parties would think are just basic, you know' (Interview 7), desires that curtailed their capacity to trial more interactive tools. As such innovation was dependent on identifying volunteers 'with time to put into it, as well as any money to put into projects' (Interview 7), a strategy that whilst amenable to short term initiatives, is frustrated when seeking to address long-term, complex organisational reforms. For the Greens, therefore, a desire to enable greater interactivity was frustrated by resource.

Discussion

Digital technology is integral to the many functions that parties perform, but hitherto there have been few indications that party elites are interested in using this tool to facilitate more interactive engagements with citizens. Echoing signs that citizens themselves have begun to innovate on this front, these cases provide evidence of elite interest in interactivity, but also reveal important differences between and within parties that conform and depart from expected theory on why this has occurred.

First, these cases suggest that parties' motivation is a significant influence on the uptake of interactive digital tools, however, predicted differences between the parties were not found. Whilst, as expected, Labour showed little interest in interaction for electoral campaigning, Green Party elites did not favour interactivity in this realm, but outlined how others *within* the party pursued such ideas. These findings suggest that Green Party elites have adopted vote-maximising imperatives (Dennison, 2016), but they also indicate that party objectives are not singular and that, facilitated by a decentralised structure, more interactive practices can emerge. In developing this point, it seems that organisational structure is not separate to questions of motivation, but rather helps to explain variations in this realm.

Rommelle's theory can therefore be usefully appended by recognising the interactions between motivation and party structure, with these cases suggesting that parties with decentred structures and a history of local autonomy are more likely to contain elites tolerant of local interactive innovations than those with centralised structures.

In addition, these cases revealed unexpected differences between parties' campaigning and governing functions, with Labour and the Greens showing receptivity to interaction. However, these ideas were not translated into practice. In explaining such outcomes these cases reveal the significance of other variables, suggesting how, in Labour's case concerns over ceding control, internal contestation and resource inhibited progress, whereas in the Green's a lack of resource was paramount. Adapting Römmele's theory it is therefore important to recognise that parties do not always possess uniform objectives but can hold and pursue different ideas both throughout a party hierarchy and across functional terrain. From these cases it appears that elites that have central control, are united and well resourced are more likely to realise their objectives (whether interactive or not) than those which sit within decentralised structures, exhibit contestation and possess limited resource, and yet, in these latter cases (as with the Greens) local innovation is expected to be more readily found.

These studies have therefore suggested that motivation is the dominant concern, arguing that whilst structure, heterogeneity and resource can frustrate the realisation of objectives, they are not alone able to explain attitudes or behaviour around the uptake of digital tools. This supports previous studies (Marcinkowski and Metag, 2014) and suggests the value of developing hybrid and contextually conscious explanations of party behaviour that recognise how motivations vary and are mediated by organisational traits. Such analysis would allow an exploration of, for example, the point at which differences in the degree of centralised power allow local innovations to emerge (and be tolerated). Or how variations in the degree of consensus over party objectives work to frustrate or promote the pursuit of favoured ideas. These cases offer some indication of expected behaviour here, but further longitudinal, comparative analysis is required to map how variations in parties' organisational traits inform elite perceptions and enactment of digital tools, tracing developments over time to map how shifts in organisation affect observed trends.

In pursuing such analysis this article has also demonstrated the need to recognise important differences across party functions and between parties' desires and actions. Unlike existing studies of interactivity that have tended to focus on party campaigning (Jensen, 2016; Lilleker and Jackson, 2010), this article examined parties' campaigning activities and internal governance to demonstrate the presence of very different attitudes within single parties. It showed evidence of greater interest in digital interaction when looking at longer-term governing interactions with members and supporters, as opposed to short-term campaign-focused engagements. Further study is required to explore the replication of this trend, particularly looking at the significance of ideology. As both these cases are located on the Left of the ideological spectrum it may be expected that they would display a greater interest in intra-party democracy than Right-wing organisations (Bennett et al, 2017). As such it is important to investigate the extent to which such functional differences are evident in other party contexts to appreciate the significance of this work.

In addition, this study has also shown the value of distinguishing between attitudes and practice. Whilst many previous studies have coded parties' outputs and activities to make claims about their receptivity to digital interaction, this study has shown that important factors can inhibit or inform parties' adoption of interactive digital tools. By recognising the significance of attitudinal and/or material barriers this article has revealed new insights of pertinence for those seeking to promote interactive digital tools (a point discussed further below).

Conclusion

This article has explored digital adoption practices in the Labour and Green Party to examine elite perceptions and applications of interactive digital tools. In contrast to existing studies that have diagnosed evidence of normalization in adoption practices, this study has shown evidence of an interest amongst elites in interactivity. It has also revealed important variations across party functions and between stated desires and practices, findings that inform the conclusion that elite interest is often inconsistent and is frequently unrealised. The degree to which this signals a new development is unclear as longitudinal analysis is not available to compare attitudes over time, what is evident is that

simple categorisations of parties' behaviour as either advancing 'normalization' or 'equalization' alone fail to capture the diversity of ways in which parties view and engage with digital tools.

In addition, this article has argued that existing theories require adaptation. Building on Römmele's argument that parties' primary objective conditions the uptake of interactive tools, this analysis has shown that parties can possess multiple objectives and that variations in party organisation, heterogeneity and resource can mediate the enactment of different ideas. Furthermore, it has shown important variations across parties' functions and between attitudes and outputs that result in differences within single parties. Recognising the diversity of factors informing party behaviour this article calls for longitudinal, comparative analysis that maps attitudes and practices in parties within the UK and beyond to discern trends emerging from the confluence of different organisational traits, elite perceptions and practices.

For those interested in promoting interactive digital tools, this study also shows where conditions are most favourable for the promotion of these tools. Whilst in the context of electoral campaigning elites appear uninterested in these ideas, this study has shown that advocates are more likely to receive a favourable audience when looking at internal party governance, especially when offering solutions to perceived barriers to reform. Whether focusing on developing consensus over the value of interactive engagement or developing strategies for those with less material resource, it appears that identifying and responding to barriers is key. Recognising the capricious nature of the party environment, there may accordingly be virtue in developing tools capable of facilitating different forms of interaction, marrying parties' desire for information dissemination in one functional realm with an interest in interaction for member engagement in another. Through such means those promoting interactive digital tools may see a greater uptake of their ideas.

Bibliography

Baxter G, Marcella R and Varfis E (2011) The use of the internet by political parties and candidates in Scotland during the 2010 UK general election campaign. *Aslib Proceedings* 63(5): 464–483.

Bennett L, Segerberg A and Knüpfer C (2017) The democratic interface: technology, political organization, and diverging patterns of electoral representation. *Information, Communication and Society*: 1-26.

Blue State Digital (No date) How do you transform the way a party organizes offline, online?. Available at: <https://www.bluestatedigital.com/our-work/labour-party/> (accessed 23rd June 2017).

Bucy E (2004) Interactivity in Society: Locating an Elusive Concept. *The Information Society* 20(5): 373-383.

Carty K (2004) Parties as Franchise Systems: The Stratarchical Organizational Imperative. *Party Politics* 10(1): 5-24.

Casero-Ripolles A, Feenstra R. and Tormey S (2016) Old and New Media Logics in an Electoral Campaign: The Case of *Podemos* and the Two-Way Street Mediatization of Politics. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21(3): 378–397.

Chadwick A and Stromer-Galley J (2016) Digital Media, Power, and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns: Party Decline or Party Renewal?. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21(3): 283-293.

Dennison J (2016) *The Greens in British Politics: Protest, Anti-Austerity and the Divided Left*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Duverger M (1954) *Political Parties*, London: Methuen.

Electoral Commission (2016a) Labour Party Accounts. Available at: <http://search.electoralcommission.org.uk/English/Accounts/ST0013244> (accessed 22 June 2017)

Electoral Commission (2016b) Green Party Accounts. Available at: <http://search.electoralcommission.org.uk/English/Accounts/ST0013237> (accessed 22 June 2017).

Faucher-King F and Le Galès P (2010) *The New Labour Experiment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Finlayson A (2013) From Blue to Green and Everything in Between: Ideational Change and Left Political Economy after New Labour. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 15:70–88.

Foot K, Schneider S and Dougherty M (2006) Online Structure for Political Action in the 2000 U.S Congressional Electoral Web Sphere. In: Kluver R, Jankowski N, Foot K and Schneider S (eds) *The Internet and National Elections: A Comparative Study of Web Campaigning*. London: Routledge.

Gibson R (2015) Party change, social media and the rise of ‘citizen-initiated’ campaigning”. *Party Politics* 21(2): 183-197.

Gibson R and Ward S (2002) Virtual campaigning: Australian parties and the impact of the internet. *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37(1): 99-129.

Gibson R, Römmele A and Ward S (2004) The Future of Representative Democracy in the Digital Era.” In Gibson R (ed) *Electronic Democracy: Mobilisation, Organisation and Participation via new ICTS*. London: Routledge.

Goes E (2016) *The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband: Trying But Failing to Renew Social Democracy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Hacker K and Todino M (1996) Virtual Democracy at the Clinton White House: An Experiment in Electronic Democratisation”. *Javnost - The Public* 3(1):71-86.

Harmel R and Janda K (1994) An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 6(3): 259-287.

House of Commons Library (2017) *Membership of UK Political Parties*, London: Stationary Office.

Jensen J (1998) Interactivity: Tracking a New Concept in Media and Communication Studies. *Nordicom Review* 1: 185–204.

Jensen M (2016) Social Media and Political Campaigning Changing Terms of Engagement?. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 22(1): 23-42.

Katz R and Mair P (1992) *Party Organizations: A Data Handbook*. London: Sage Publications.

Koc-Michalska K, Gibson R and Vedel T (2014) Online campaigning in France, 2007–2012: Political actors and citizens in the aftermath of the web.2.0 evolution. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 11: 220–244.

Kreiss D (2010) Digital Campaigning. In Freelon D and Coleman S (eds) *Handbook of Digital Politics*. New York, NY: Edgar Elgar, pp.118-135.

Landemore H (2014) Neither Blind, nor Mute: Why the People Shouldn't Give up on the Voice. *Political Theory* 42(2): 192-197.

Lee B (2014) Window Dressing 2.0: Constituency-Level Web Campaigns in the 2010 UK General Election. *Politics* 34(1): 45-57.

Lilleker D and Jackson N (2010) Towards a More Participatory Style of Election Campaigning: The Impact of Web 2.0 on the UK 2010 General Election. *Policy and Internet* 2(3): 69-98.

Lilleker D and Vedel T (2013) 'The Internet in Campaigns and Elections'. In Dutton W (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, Oxford: OUP, pp.401-420.

Lilleker D, Tenscher J and Štětka V (2015) Towards hypermedia campaigning? Perceptions of new media's importance for campaigning by party strategists in comparative perspective. *Information, Communication & Society* 18(7): 747-765.

Marcinkowski F and Metag J (2014) Why Do Candidates Use Online Media in Constituency Campaigning? *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 11(2): 151-168.

Margolis M and Resnick D (2000) *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace 'Revolution'*. London: Sage.

Margolis M, Resnick D and Levy J (2003) 'Major Parties Dominate, Minor Parties Struggle: US Elections and the Internet'. In Gibson R, Nixon P and Ward S (eds) *Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?* London: Routledge, pp. 51—69.

Miller C (2016) *The Rise of Digital Politics*. London: Demos.

NESTA (2010) Online electioneering fails as voters demand more interaction. Press release. Available at:
www.nesta.org.uk/press/assets/features/online_electioneering_fails_as_voters_demand_more_interacti
[on](http://www.nesta.org.uk/press/assets/features/online_electioneering_fails_as_voters_demand_more_interacti) (accessed 02.05.2017).

Nielsen R (2010) Mundane Internet Tools, Mobilizing Practices, and the Coproduction of Citizenship in Political Campaigns. *New Media and Society* 13(5): 755-771.

Norris P (2001) *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information, Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*. Cambridge: CUP.

Römmele A (2003) Political Parties, Party Communication and New Information and Communication Technologies. *Party Politics* 9(1): 7-20.

Rose R (1964) Parties, Factions and Tendencies in Britain. *Political Studies* 1:33-46.

Sartori G (2005) Party Types, Organisation and Functions. *West European Politics* 28(1): 5-32.

Strandberg K (2008) Online Electoral Competition in Different Settings. *Party Politics* 14(2): 223 – 244.

Stromer-Galley J (2000) On-line Interaction and Why Candidates avoid it. *Journal of Communication* 50(4): 111-132.

Stromer-Galley J (2004) Interactivity-as-Product and Interactivity-as-Process. *The Information Society* 20(5): 391-394.

Vaccari C (2010) Technology is a Commodity: The Internet in the 2008 United States Presidential Election. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 7(4): 318-39.

Watson T (2015) It's Time for a Digital Revolution. *The Labour Party*, 3 July, available at: <http://www.labour.org.uk/blog/entry/its-time-for-a-digital-revolution> (accessed 23 June 2017).

Wilks-Heeg S, Blick A and Crone C (2012) *How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit*. Liverpool: Democratic Audit.

Appendix

- Interview 1, National Labour Party Official, February 2017, Phone Interview
- Interview 2, Regional Labour Party Official, London, January 2017
- Interview 3, National Labour Party Official, London, January 2017
- Interview 4, National Labour Party Official, London, February 2017
- Interview 5, External Party Consultant, January 2017, Phone Interview
- Interview 6, National Labour Party Official, London, March 2017
- Interview 7, National Green Party Official, March 2017, London
- Interview 8, National Green Party Official, March 2017, London
- Interview 9, National Green Party Official, March 2017, Phone Interview
- Interview 10, Green Party Consultant/Volunteer, March 2017, Phone Interview
- Interview 11, Labour Party Digital Activist, March 2017, Skype Interview
- Interview 12, Former Labour Party Staff, March 2017, Skype Interview