

e-politics: What's going on?

The case of the Finnish Parliamentary elections in 1999

Pekka Reijonen
reiska@cs.utu.fi
University of Turku/Laboris

Abstract

"The electric energy can be applied indifferently and quickly to many kinds of tasks" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 350). When applied in the Internet and www the man has created a new extension, a new medium. The application of this medium has effects on many areas of social conduct. In this paper we explore the application of the Internet and www in party politics and our case material is gathered around the Finnish Parliamentary elections in March 1999. The empirical data shows that there was a lot of electoral material available in the www, in addition to political parties there were also other suppliers, the elections increased the activity in the www, and the web sites of political parties were maybe not so popular as could be expected. We interpret the results from the voters' perspective and discuss the possible future effects and role of the Internet and www for the political parties.

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Politics in the Internet and www

Communication is a fundamental part of politics and it can be argued that "there is some form of communication in almost every political phenomenon" (Danziger, 1994, p. 241). Only a few of us, however, derive our information about politics through direct experience but get it mediated through some medium of communication (Nimmo & Combs, 1990). The media of communication range from non-verbal communication to satellite communications and multimedia. Mass communication media, like newspapers, radio, and TV, have been and still are very central as mediators of political information (Dowse & Hughes, 1972, Danziger, 1994). The rapid diffusion of the Internet and World Wide Web (www) have, however, lifted up the computer-based communication to a notable competitor of the conventional mass media. For example, in the USA users of the Internet spend 12 percent less time reading newspapers and 22 percent less time watching TV (WebCensus, 1998).

Throughout their short history the Internet and www have also served politics and been a channel for political communication - and actually, the Internet is itself the results of political decisions. Political decisions about the Internet concern citizen's rights like freedom of speech, unlimited and uncontrolled communication, and equal access to information. The political side of the foundations of the Internet is specially visible in situations and places where the www-democracy is threatened. For example, the Chinese government has used a lot of efforts for gaining control over the Internet use (and users!).

Globally reported events, like the Gulf war in 1991 and the Kosovo crisis in 1999, show how the role of the Internet has rapidly changed. In 1991 - prior to the www - the

activity took place in email-based news and discussion groups and information was mediated through mailing lists. The activity was mostly a hobby for the academics only, because most of the Internet connections at that time were at the universities. The most lasting computer-related incident from the Gulf war is probably the computer virus developed by the National Security Agency, smuggled into Iraq in a chip in a printer, paralysed the Iraqi air defence systems - and was actually a 'silicon legend' first published as an April Fool's story in the InfoWorld (Crypt Newsletter, 1999).

In 1999, after the global breakthrough of the www, it is actively used as a communication medium by different parties. For example, the US State Department (1999) has a www-page for the official Kosovo information and several mailing lists for transmitting additional information. Today the www is a well functioning medium for information gathering and communication also for all kinds of official or unofficial, geographically dispersed interest groups. For example, people fighting for animal rights can get instructions of how local activist cells can communicate securely (see e.g. A.L.F, 1999) and terrorists can gather reliable information about chemical terrorism (see e.g. CSIS, 1999, the report is a scientific report but can also be read as an instruction manual).

Even though the www had been used in political communication before, the publication of the material of the Clinton-Lewinsky case in September 1998 can be seen as a kind of culmination. Here the www was set on the same line with the traditional media so that the material was published simultaneously in all of them. The www-publication gave all the www-users a direct access to information which they earlier had received in interpreted form through newspapers, radio, and TV. And the access was world wide. The publication of the material in the www was not only a political action but it also gave authority to the www and served as an important incident in the legitimization process of the www: the material was made available by the U.S. House of Representatives and the White House which can be classified as "the officially accredited definers of reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 115). It is, however, difficult to find out what other effects - and on what - this and hundreds of thousands other documents on the subject found in the www may have on the reality.

The material of the Clinton-Lewinsky case is an excellent example of a product which fits the www perfectly: the topic is politically important, the content inspires imagination, and it is easy to deliver in electronic form. And so fits actually all political material - even though it may not always inspire imagination! The production process in politics consists of speech and the products are text in the form of legislation, budgets, party programmes, and so forth. In other words, both the process and products of politics are such that they are well suited for the presentation in and the transmission through the Internet (Hagel III & Armstrong, 1997). The problems of logistics and monetary transactions encountered in electronic commerce are non-existent.

In order to get an idea of how the www is used in communicating political processes and products, we have explored the use of the www in connection with the Finnish Parliamentary elections in March 1999. Even though it can be argued (Dowse & Hughes, 1972) that elections have actually very little influence on the political decision-making and have a strong mythic or ritualistic element, the elections are an important 'moment of truth' for the only organisations which compete for votes, the political parties (Panebianco, 1988). With only some exaggeration it can be maintained that for a political party the ultimate goal of politics is actually 'the art of winning the elections', or as Downs (1967, p. 28) has asserted; "parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies". This art is carried out constantly, i.e. all of the activity of political parties can be seen as a preparation to elections.

However, the time preceding the elections is of special importance: at least at this point the parties and the candidates must convince the governed their suitability and persuade the governed to hand over the only one he has - his vote.

According to the famous and often misinterpreted statement of McLuhan (1964), "The medium is the message", media research should concern the media as a holistic entity and concentrate on "their psychic and social consequences" (ibid. p. 4) rather than in their content (because the content of one media is always an other media!). Keeping McLuhan's slogan in mind while exploring the latest of the "extensions of man", the www, we proceed by first giving a short presentation of the procedures of the Finnish Parliamentary elections and data gathering. Then we present the www-supply of the political parties and mass media and the demand by voters, i.e. the use of the www. Finally we evaluate the role of the www in our case and discuss its possible significance as a medium of political communication in the future.

WWW and the Finnish Parliamentary elections

Parliamentary elections procedures in Finland

Parliamentary elections are held in Finland every fourth year (if the president does not dissolve the Parliament in midterm) and 200 representatives are elected (Ministry of Justice, 1999). Every Finnish citizen who on election day at the latest turns 18 years is entitled to vote. People may vote either in advance (during one week, advance voting ends few days before the election day) or on the election day. Candidates may be nominated by registered parties or by constituency associations.

The threshold for establishing a party or constituency association is rather low. In order to start a national party you need appropriate rules and signatures of 5000 supporters, who are entitled to vote in the Parliamentary elections. For a constituency association, which may nominate one candidate in one electoral district, you just need 100 names. As a consequence there is a lot of this kind of entrepreneurship in the Finnish politics: 18th December 1998 there were 19 registered parties of which 18 had candidates in the Parliamentary elections (Ministry of Justice, 1999). In addition there are some constituency associations in certain districts. In other words, there is a lot to choose from - as is typical for countries where the proportional electoral systems are applied (Dowse & Hughes, 1972). In Finland, the role of the smallest parties has traditionally been, however, rather marginal: in the 1995 Parliamentary elections the seven largest parties received about 92 % of votes (Statistics Finland, 1999).

When counting the ballots a proportional election method (d'Hondt's method) is used. In practice this means that both the personal and party's (or electoral alliance's) number of votes is important. It also means that small parties or constituency associations have it difficult to get their candidates elected.

Data gathering

We have used so called non-reactive measures to collect the data, i.e., we did not ask the www-users to react on, for example, a survey questionnaire. Most of the data have been gathered, naturally, from the www. While the number of Internet domains and users is growing so rapidly the www is the only place to get at least reasonable fresh information (see Taloustutkimus Oy, 1999). Also, the results of the elections were available in the

www on the next day after the elections and the confirmed final results on the third day after the elections (Ministry of Justice, 1999) whereas a printed book representing the same data appears about half a year later, in November 1999 (Statistics Finland, 1999).

The other reason for using the www as the main source is that most of the relevant information in this case will never be printed - except with office printers by the visitors of the www-pages. Timeliness of the data in the www is a bonus but it has also several side effects. For example, not so many of the www-pages of the parties will be maintained in a format which could be accessed later, e.g. after fifty years.

Searches in the www were executed using AltaVistaTM and Ihmemaa (searches Finnish domains) search services. They were used, for example, to get an idea of the amount of material connected to political parties and electoral candidates.

Data concerning people's activity in the www during the electoral period was collected from 1) the visitor counters of parties (5 parties, see Appendix A), 2) the webmasters of the parties' homepages (or other contact person) via email, 3) visitor statistics of YLE (1999) and MTV3 (1999), and 4) operators' traffic statistics (FICIX 1999).

Visitor statistics for the five parties which had a visitor counter on their www-pages (Appendix A) was attained by simply reading the counter on three consecutive Mondays. For the rest of the parties having a www-site, information manager/secretary or equivalent person at the party's main office was contacted by sending an email message telling the purpose of the study and the information we wanted to obtain. If the first email message was not answered in one day the email was forwarded to the next suitable person at the party office. The names, occupations, and email addresses were obtained from the parties' www-sites. With maximum two emails a contact person was found in all other parties except RKP and EKO who never replied our email messages.

Supply by the political parties

A www-search executed on the first day of advance voting (10.3.1999) showed that practically all the parties had a recently updated www-site. There were only three minor parties (0.6 % of votes in the 1995 elections, Statistics Finland, 1995) whose www-site was not found (see Appendix A). 'Look and feel' of the www-pages of the different parties varied substantially: from a textual presentation with the whole window full of blue text in small font size on a yellow background (REM) to a more designed pages with the same picture and theme as in the TV advertisements and electoral posters (KESK). According to Taloussanomat (1999) the pages were implemented by the people of the party offices with no help from advertising agencies or multimedia companies and the evaluations given by a multimedia expert were rather negative.

Even though the 'language party' (RKP) fishes a great majority of the votes of the Swedish speaking people, eight other parties had also at least some information in Swedish which is Finland's second official language. The information in English, offered by eight parties, must have been meant for the international press, because the number of English speaking voters is unsubstantial.

The common denominator of the web sites was that they offered some kind of slogan or manifesto, texts with the party's political message, and a list of the candidates arranged according to the electoral districts or alphabetically for the whole country. The list served usually as a link to a more or less profound presentation of the candidates. In other words, if the potential visitor was able to find the party's homepage she/he had a straight forward access to the presentations of the candidates of that party. Or after finding the VIHR home page, which contained, brotherly, links to other parties home

pages as well.

There were no surprises nor 'inventions' on the pages. When evaluating the pages from the voter's perspective they served mainly a voter, who had already decided the party but was insecure about the candidate. In order to make the selection of the appropriate candidate easier had one party (KOK) a 'polling agent' (see chapter 'Supply by mass media and third parties) on their pages. Before the voter can compare the candidates he/she must, however, find the party's home pages.

Searching for the parties and candidates

In order to make the finding of the party's homepage easier (and maybe in order to give a progressive image) about half of the parties (7/15) had their www-address printed on the electoral posters (Appendix A).

The addresses of the home pages had for the most part the commonly used "short" name of the party, e.g. "sdp" or "kokoomus", hence an advanced www-user could rather easily guess the addresses.. There were addresses, however, which were impossible to guess, so the potential visitor must try to find the address by other means, e.g. using a search service. According to our experience and observations most people use the default settings of the search services which tend to be of the type "simple query", i.e. all the documents including at least one of the searched words are delivered. In this case a simple AltaVista™ query with the official names of the parties (e.g. "Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue") produced a total of 1'745'264 documents. Out of these over 800'000 were hits for the "Swedish People's Party in Finland" ("Svenska folkpartiet i Finland"). Using exact string query ("name") or advanced query (word & word) reduced the total number of documents to about 4000. However, a search service with only Finnish domains ("Ihmemaa" at <http://www.fi>) which has exact search as the default value produced a sum of about 11 thousand documents. It is worthwhile to note that this search service did not find any documents with the string "Svenska folkpartiet i Finland" (RKP, see appendix A) but about 300 documents when the name of the party was spelled in Finnish (Ruotsalainen Kansanpuolue).

It can be hypothesized that the number of documents found would be somehow related to the relative size of the party. This is also the case: the correlation between the number of web documents and the election turnout is 0.69 ($p = 0.02$). Despite of the high correlation there are large differences between the parties (Figure 1). For example, SDP's and KOK's (for abbreviations see Appendix A) search result are rather low while NUORS is heavily "over-represented" in the www. The over-representation of NUORS is easy to understand when its web-site is looked closer: the party is actively using the Internet as a communication media and the web site is actually an electronic magazine which has been published since May 28th 1995. It must be remembered, however, that other search strings (e.g. the abbreviations of party names or favorite names like 'kepu' or 'sosdem') would produce somewhat different results and types of documents.

In the Finnish electoral system the governed votes in the first place a candidate and secondarily the party which the candidate represents. This makes it important for the candidates to be seen and heard - and found in the www. It is well known that the www already contains all kinds of information and the relevancy of the found information is not always the best possible. In order to get an estimate of the hit rate while searching for a certain candidate we drew randomly twenty candidates from two electoral districts (Helsinki and Kuopio, ten candidates from each). The sample was drawn from the combined list of candidates provided by the Ministry of Justice (1999) so the drawn

candidates presented parties randomly. A search service for Finnish domains (Ihmema, 21.3.1999) was used to find the candidates with the candidates first and last name as the search string.

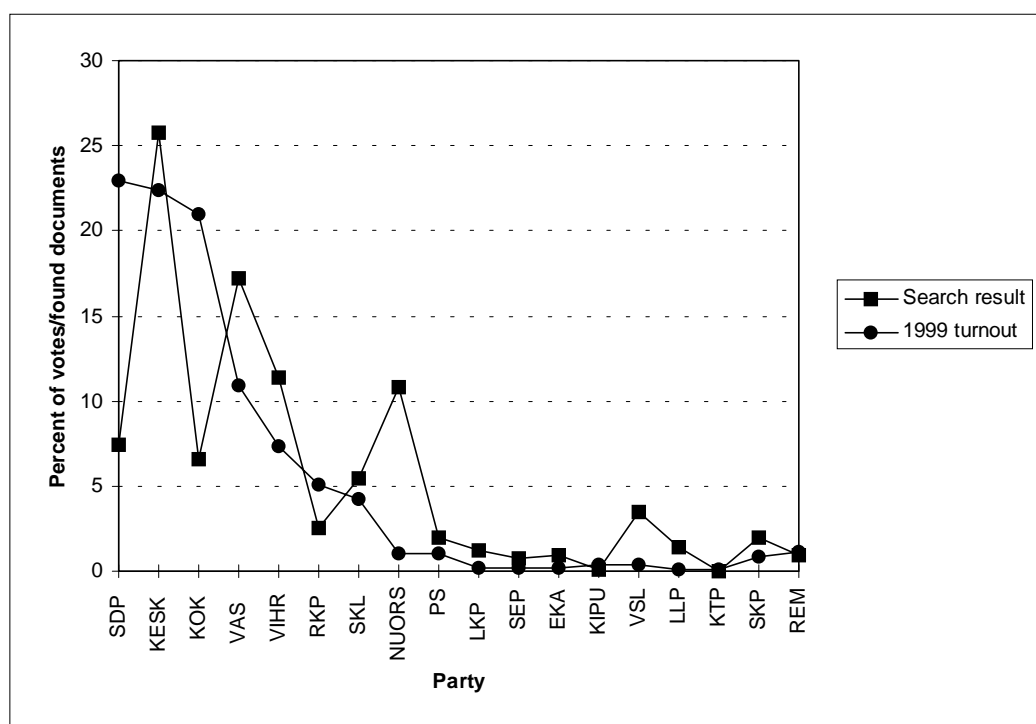


Figure 1. Documents found in the Internet and the election turnout in 1999 by parties (sum of documents 11304, Ihmema search service 10.3.1999, the search string was the official Finnish name of each party without the ‘rp’ (registered party) addendum; voting turnout Statistics Finland 1999). %

The result of the searches was more than ten thousand documents, i.e. in average more than 500 hits per candidate and the range per candidate was from 1 to 3749. Using considerable time we were able to find at least some documents connected to the searched person in 7 cases in the Helsinki district and 5 cases in the Kuopio district. The difficulty in finding out the right documents among hundreds of “hits” is time consuming and the potential voter must be deeply interested in the candidate for doing it. If a candidate wants to be found by search services there is one obvious solution: changing her/his common name to an uncommon one. When searching Ben Zyskowitz 294 documents were found and all of them seemed to have a connection to the target person. Searching Antti Koskinen produced a list of 3749 documents - and the candidate Antti Koskinen was not found. A “web-compatible” name is not, naturally, the only presupposition, but the candidate must also have documents available in the www. For example, Stella-Marita Jussila and Sami Chebab had only one hit and in both cases it was the same document: they had answered, like about 1700 other candidates, the question “Do you think that the relationship of a couple having the same gender should be legalized?” (a survey arranged by SETA ry, SETA, 1999).

Candidates’ own home pages and e-mail addresses

The availability of home pages in the www and e-mail addresses among the candidates was estimated by counting their existence for the candidates of two parties (VAS and

KESK) in 14 electoral districts (no candidates in the 15th district, Åland). The data was gathered from the lists of candidates available on the parties' home pages. In average, half of the candidates of VAS and 60 percent of the candidates of KESK had home pages in the Internet. E-mail address was available for half of the candidates of VAS and for 80 percent of the candidates of KESK.

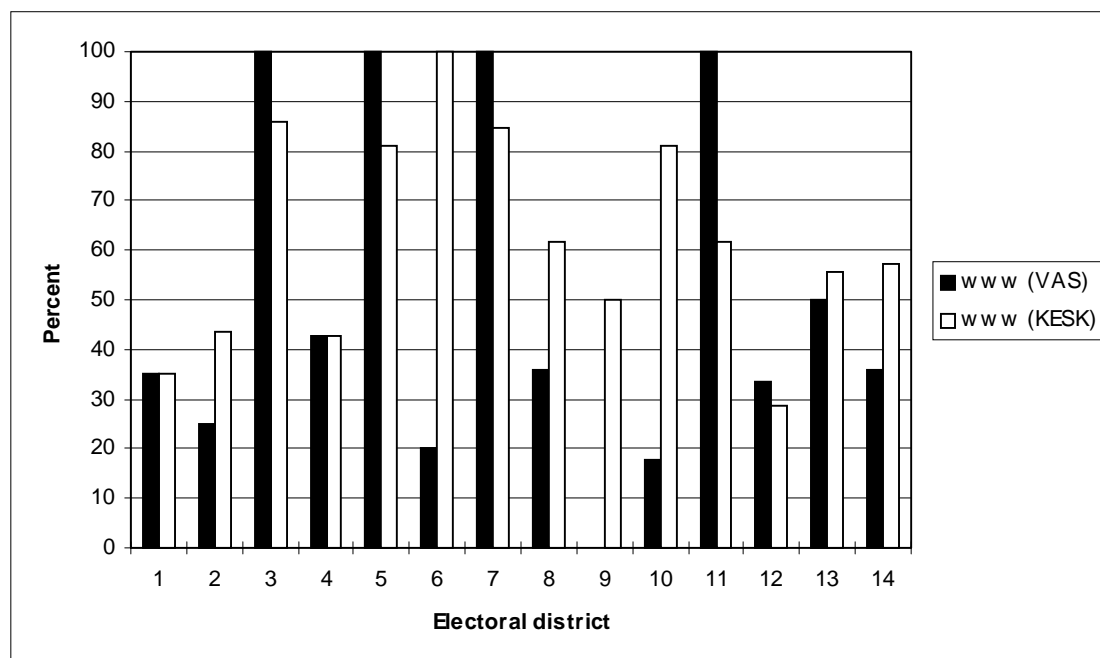


Figure 2. Percentage of candidates having own homepages by electoral district for VAS and KESK (the district numbers proceed roughly from south to north so that number 1 is Helsinki and number 14 is Lapland). $n_{VAS} = 212$, $n_{KESK} = 223$

When the "homepage densities" between the parties are compared it is obvious that there are no standard procedures inside parties: in some districts all the candidates of a party have www-addresses while in others the density is about 20 percent (Figure 2). The geographical distribution is not uniform either but there are large differences between the electoral districts. It is clear, however, that www-culture is not concentrated in the high population areas around the capital, rather the contrary (in Figure 2 electoral district 1 represents Helsinki and 2 the surrounding province Uusimaa).

Even though most of the candidates maintain that their electoral budget is very reasonable some of them buy advertisement space in newspapers or in some TV channel. We studied the occurrence of www-addresses in newspaper advertisements by checking two newspapers from March 10th to March 17th 1999. The newspapers were the nationwide Helsingin Sanomat and the provincial Savon Sanomat. Each newspaper published 8 numbers during the period. There were in total 382 advertisements of which 37 % included a www-address which specified either a party's or a candidate's homepage.

There is a rather large difference between the appearance of www-addresses between the two newspapers: in the Helsinki based HS the proportion of advertisements including a www-address was 44 percent whereas it was only 28 percent in the provincial, Kuopio based SS. As depicted in figure 3, this is due to the three main advertisers (SDP, KESK, KOK). There was also a considerable difference between the parties.

When information once has been put into the Internet it seems also to stay there,

often outdated, until the server falls in pieces or for some other technical reason. Election posters should be removed during the next day after the election day. Because electronic "posters" are easier to remove we checked the situation in the parties' web sites already twelve o'clock at noon the day after the elections: only two parties (VIHR and PS) had made (clearly visible) updates like present their new Members of the Parliament and thank their supporters. For example, on the homepage of SDP the "election clock" which had counted down the time left to the elections was still in place. The text told, however, that "Elections are over". In our opinion this indicates strikingly the attitude held by the most parties towards the www as a communication media: it is important to have a web site - and that's it.

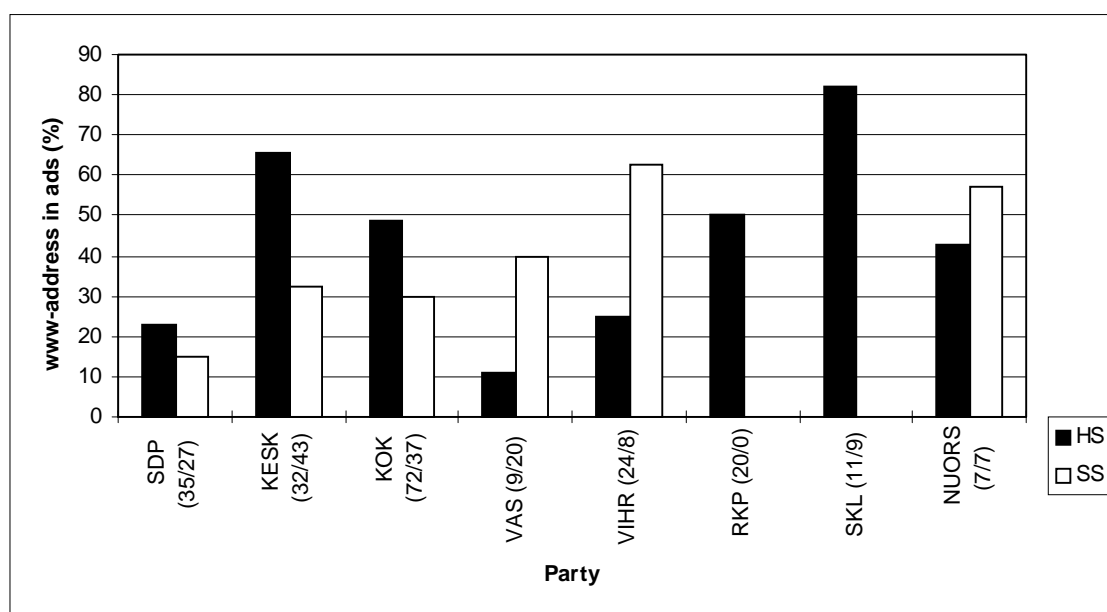


Figure 3. Percent of electoral advertisements including www-address in two newspapers (Helsingin Sanomat and Savon Sanomat) from March 10th to March 17th 1999 by most advertised parties (95 % of all ads). (xx/ = number of party's advertisements in Helsingin Sanomat, /yy = number of party's advertisements in Sanomat Sanomat,) n total = 361

Supply by mass media and third parties

Intensive www-rush which followed the publication of the material of the Clinton-Lewinsky case on the Internet would not have been possible without the conventional mass media. In practice, the only way to disseminate information effectively is still the traditional mass media like newspapers, radio, and TV (with the presupposition that programs of type Melissa, which copied itself by e-mail world wide overnight about March 27th 1999, are considered illegal!).

The Internet has received a lot of positive publicity in the Finnish mass media: news about its rapid diffusion, comparisons of the Internet densities in different countries, how women have found the Internet etc. In all, the Internet and www have a positive image in Finland.

Before the elections radio and TV used a lot of effort in advertising their electoral www-pages, where all kinds of electoral information like interviews and poll results were presented. Also the newspapers disseminated information about parties' www-pages and

other election-related information. Newspapers, for example, evaluated parties' www-pages (e.g. Taloussanomat, 1999), presented their own electoral www-pages (Helsingin Sanomat, 1999b), and reported on TV's www-pages so disseminating information about the "polling agent" found on the pages (e.g. Aamulehti, 1999, Savon Sanomat, 1999b). Some newspapers had also electoral www-pages which concentrated mainly on the candidates and electoral districts of their circulation area (except for the nation wide Helsingin Sanomat), but offered links also to parties' home pages. In the www, links to the parties' pages and lists of candidates were available also at innumerable other places. The official list of candidates (with standard information and no advertisements) was available at the web site of the Ministry of Justice (1999).

The polling agent seemed to be the www-hit of these elections. A polling agent is a data base containing the answers of the candidates (and/or parties). When the visitor has answered the same questions the polling agent creates a list of the candidates whose answers are closest to the answers given by the visitor. This kind of services were offered at several www-sites and the number and type of questions naturally varied substantially. For example, the questions set up by YLE (1999), Admaster (1999), and Turun Sanomat (1999) were in general politics whereas those of MPY (1999) concentrated on the questions of national defence and SETA (1999) had asked the candidates only one question about sexual equality.

The polling agent of YLE was used in average by 14 000 visitors per day (Aamulehti, 1999), the total number of visitors was over 200 000, and there were 27 000 visitors on the day of the election (YLE, 1999). The majority of the candidates had anticipated the popularity of the polling agents and answered the questions - or the candidates were willing to participate in anything that might increase their visibility. For example, the data base of YLE (1999) contained the answers of 1357 candidates (68 percent of the candidates) and the data base of SETA (1999) the answers of about 1700 candidates (85 percent of the candidates).

There was also other types of material, like a questionnaire asking for the price people were willing to sell their vote for (Pajala, 1999), trial election by parties (Admaster 1999), and trial elections with real candidates (Hi-Log Oy, 1999). To sum up, there was a lot of election-related more or less serious material available in the www by the mass media, authorities, and third parties.

Demand by the voters

In order to use the www people must possess proper technical infrastructure, the skills to use the technology, and willingness to do it. In a recent study (Taloustutkimus Oy, 1999), it has been estimated that there are about 1.7 million 15 to 74 years old Finns, about 45 percent of the age group, who have been using the Internet at least occasionally. About 15 percent of the population in this age group uses the Internet daily and about 31 % at least once a week. About half of the users are women, more than half of usage takes place at home, and the Internet is rather actively used throughout the country. So the infrastructure and skills aspects are in order.

We are aware of the difficulties encountered when trying to even approximate the number of visitors of a web-site: there are several different ways to count visitors (visitors, unique visitors, visits, etc.), the effect of proxies can not be eliminated, several persons may visit from the same IP-address (from home, school, library, etc.) - and we are unable to standardise the way each party is counting their visitors. Reading available counters and trusting in figures reported by parties' was, however, the only practical

solution we were able to find for approximating the number of visitors.

During the two week period (the weeks before and after the election day) there were totally about 130 000 visits on the parties web-sites (Appendix A). Nearly 80 percent of the visits took place before the elections. If all visits have been done by unique visitors it would mean that about three percent of the persons entitled to vote (or about seven percent of www-users) visited a web-site of some party. Three percent is in the same order as the number of party members participating in a meeting of the local party department at least once a year (calculated from the figures in Borg, 1997).

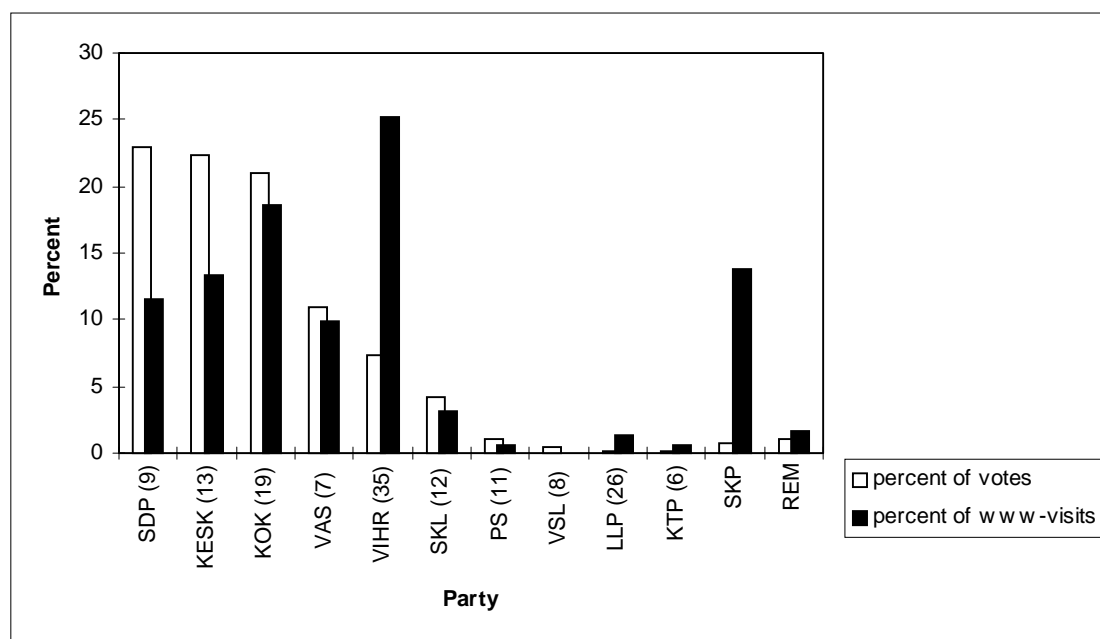


Figure 4. Percentages of votes and www-visits by parties (data in Appendix A). The figures in parentheses: percent of supporters under 35 years in the 1995 Parliamentary elections (Statistics Finland, 1995).

The correlation between the election turnout and the number of visits on the party's home page is statistically significant ($r = 0.59$, $p = 0.04$) but as seen in figure 4, there are considerable differences between the parties. The differences between the larger parties are mainly dependent on the age distribution of their supporters (see the percentages of young supporters by parties in Figure 4, c.f. Figure 5). The supporters of VIHR are, however, specially active users of the www. According to Borg (1997) the members of VIHR participate very actively also in the activities of their local departments. The high number of visits at the home page of SKP may be caused by a different way to count visitors - or replacing the picture of Lenin with the www-address in the middle of their election poster had this tremendous effect.

Even though the web sites of the parties were not a direct success, the total www-activity increased substantially during the elections. For example, there was 30-40 percent more data traffic on the election day (Sunday) than on the previous or following Sundays (FICIX, 1999); one polling agent had 200 000 visits (YLE, 1999); during the three weeks preceding the elections one TV-station had 1,14 million visits on their web site and 45 000 visits on their electoral pages (MTV3, 1999).

In short, the www-pages of the parties were not a great hit during these elections. The sum of visits gathered by all the parties in two weeks is a bit less than that gathered

by a TV-station during the week following the Parliamentary elections: 138580 votes were laid through the www in an election where the viewer could decide, which ice hockey match of the semi-finals in the Finnish ice hockey league should be show in TV (MTV3, 1999).

Discussion

The empirical results of our case studies can be summarised as follows:

1. there was a lot of election-related material available in the www
2. material was supplied by different organisations like the traditional mass media, political parties, associations, and private companies
3. the activity in the www was increased as a consequence of the elections
4. the www-sites of the political parties received less attention by the voters than the election-related sites of the mass media and third parties

The results give, in fact, quite positive picture of the use of the Internet during these elections, despite the fact that the web sites of the parties did not become more popular. The results are also understandable. The picture of Finland created by the mass media as an example of the information society with high densities of mobile phones and Internet connections together with the stamp of the Internet elections have encouraged people to seek electoral information from the www. But why should they visit the web sites of the parties and what would happen if they did?

The supply by the parties in the www was in general rather conventional: the pages included the party program, some text about a couple of actual themes, and a list of candidates with pictures and a short presentation. With this information a visitor, who has already decided for the party, can pick out a candidate by jumping back and forth between the list of candidates and the presentations of the candidates. It is probable that most visitors are already at entrance for the party and good so, because it would be anyhow extremely difficult to convince an opponent during her/his visit at the web site- quite independently of the way the possibilities of this medium are applied. Voting behaviour and political beliefs are the result of long lasting socialisation process, and therefore more strongly associated with factors like reference group or parents' voting preferences than facts (Dowse & Hughes, 1972, Danziger, 1994). Even many of the loyal party supporters have very little knowledge of the party program or are actually opposed to them (Dowse & Hughes, 1972). What they have, instead, is merely a holistic image of the party.

Basing on the popularity of the polling agents, it can be argued, however, that voters have also tried to find facts about the parties and candidates. They preferred the polling agents, because it is practically impossible to compare the parties by gathering information from the www-sites of the parties; the subjects taken up by different parties do not match. Or maybe it was only a recreational activity as much of the net-surfing because "some citizens also seek straight political information purely for its entertainment value" (Blondel, 1963, p. 80). It may still be true for the time being that the candidate, who had installed loudspeakers on his car, parked the car in the rush hours at a street corner in the centre of a city, promulgated for a while, and then drove to the next corner, had maybe more contact to potential voters than the candidate sitting at home fixing impressive www-pages.

The Internet and www offer, however, a tremendous potential to be deployed in the (party) political activity. It must be remembered, however, that the www differs

radically from the earlier mass media like radio and TV, which are media for broadcasting messages and do not require active participation by the receiver of information. The www is a medium for broadcastcatching (i.e. for gathering information from different sources) and requires both skills, knowledge, and free will by the catcher of information. The differences between the media are so profound that also the methods of their deployment must be different. Effective methods for the deployment of the www have maybe not yet been even invented, but it is obvious that it presupposes the same kind of networking as e-commerce, at best so that "the members of a virtual community are its real creators" (Hagel III & Armstrong, 1997).

This kind of virtual community has to have some goal or ideology which drives its activity. Early examples of these kinds of communities are the GreenNet and PeaceNet. In Finland, the Green League (VIHR) is an example of a party which has its roots in loosely organised political interest groups (according to my knowledge it resembles the history of the Green Party in Germany described by Danziger, 1994, pp. 68-69). VIHR has also some of the characteristics of electoral-professional parties, which are by Panebianco (1988) seen as the successors of the "old" mass-bureaucratic parties. Electoral-professional parties have, for example, weak vertical ties, appeal to the 'opinion electorate', professionals in central roles, and more weight on issues than on ideology. Our informed guess (see Panebianco, 1988, Pekonen, 1997) is that this kind of parties will emerge in the future and they will gain advantage from the Internet and www. In Finland, there are at least five "positive" facts and trends which facilitate their development.

First, there is an increasing number of non-voters, i.e. potential voters. In the sixties the turnout percentage in the Parliamentary elections was 84, in the seventies 79, and in the eighties 76 (Martikainen & Pekonen, 1996, p. 32). In the 1999 Parliament elections the turnout was 68.3 percent, which means that nearly 1.5 million persons entitled to vote, did not vote. By vote-catching ten percent of these "free" votes a group would become the sixth biggest group in the Parliament. Second, voting activity is specially low in younger age groups, which are the large-scale consumers of the Internet. The voting activity and Internet usage in different age groups is depicted in figure 5. This kind of differences in voting activity between the age groups does not exist for example in Sweden (Martikainen & Yrjönen 1991, p. 20).

Third, at least among younger age groups, there are a lot of insecure voters who choose their candidate and even party - maybe rather spontaneously - just before the elections. In 1995 one month before the elections, about 35 percent of voters in the age group 18-30 years did not know for what party they are going to vote (Martikainen & Pekonen, 1996, p. 28). Fourth, young voters' loyalty to parties is not very high. In the Parliamentary elections in 1995 only about 60 percent of the voters in the age group 18-30 years had decided to vote the same party as in the communal elections in 1992 (Martikainen & Pekonen, 1996, p. 30).

Fifth, the geographical dispersion of members of the virtual community - and potential voters - makes the Internet and www to an appealing alternative for communication. There seems to be, however, a paradox built in into the www-based virtual communities: the www is an excellent communication medium for a virtual community, but it is difficult to build a virtual community using the www as the only medium (there are of course exceptions like the Linux-community). In our data, the comparison of the www-activity of NUORS (Figure 1) with their election results (Appendix A; few weeks after the elections the party council discontinued the party) seem to confirm this interpretation (see also Hamilo, 1999).

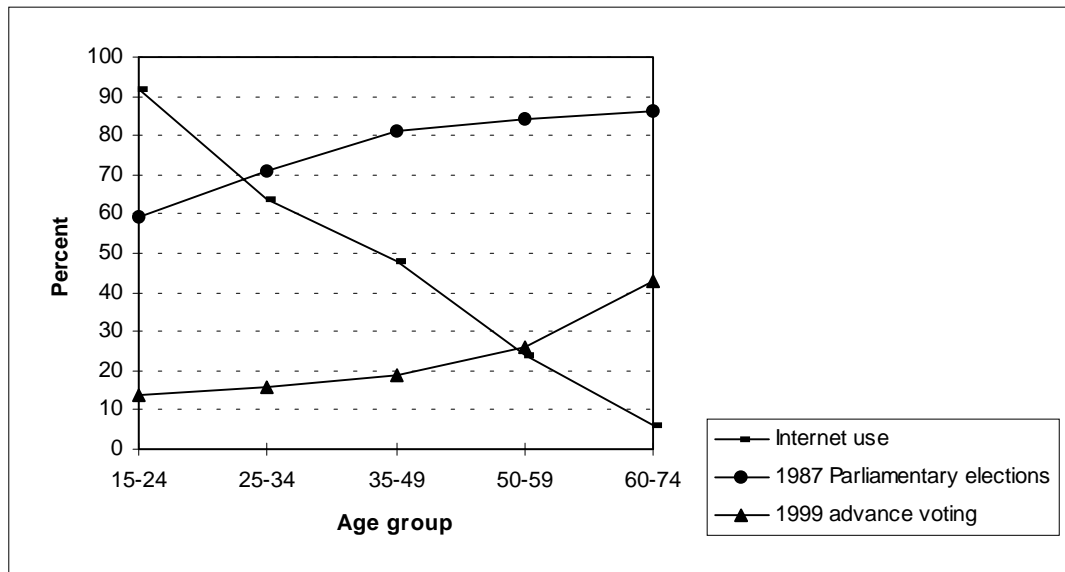


Figure 5. Internet use and voting activity by age groups (%). Internet use: Taloustutkimus Oy, 1999, n = 3019; 1987 Parliamentary elections: Martikainen & Yrjönen, 1991, all entitled to vote (3.75 million); 1999 advance voting: Tieto Corporation Oy, 1999, all advance voters (1.06 million). In the election statistics the values of the older age groups are approximations because the categories in the data sets are somewhat different.

In the late 1920's and 1930's the enormous increase in radio coverage enabled the less educated to get more political information and hence made more people to vote (Dowse & Hughes, 1972). In the Finnish Parliamentary elections in 1999 the Internet and www did not have the same effect - even though at least half of the potential voters could have been affected by the new medium. To sum up, e-politics seem to have several similar characteristics with the e-commerce: everybody is talking about it, it will come very soon, in order to be effective it needs a network of actors and customers, and the only ones who seem to make a profit on it are the data operators.

Conclusions and future research

In Finland, the Internet and www are for the moment actively used by about half of the population entitled to vote. The activity seems, however, to be concentrated more on other areas than politics. In this study we found out that there was a lot of election-related material available in the www during the Finnish Parliamentary elections in 1999. The material was offered by the political parties, candidates, conventional mass media, and third parties like companies and associations. The elections caused a notable increase in the www activity in general (as visible in tele-operators' statistics) and at the web-pages of the political parties and mass media. Despite of the rich supply and relative activity increase the demand by the voters stayed at a low level; only about three percent of the persons entitled to vote visited a web pages of some political party. It seems obvious that the effects of the www on the election results were at most marginal. This does not mean that the www would not have potential also as a medium for political parties. Taking advantage of the potential calls for, however, new types of activities.

In the current form, www does not activate but can inform an already activated

citizen. In order to inform their potential supporters voters the political parties should have a more tight connections to their supporters and offer a web-based arena for political interchange both at the local and national level. Interesting research questions are, for example, how political parties see the future possibilities of the Internet and www and what plans they have for its deployment. Even though the results of the present study can be used as a baseline data when comparing the political supply and demand in the www, more detailed information about the web-visitors would be needed. The data gathering could be carried out in co-operation with the political parties. For example, they could gather information about their visitors and visitors' activity on the pages (what visitors seek for). Also the activity on the web-pages of individual candidates and their e-mail exchange with the potential voters would produce important information both for the political parties and research. This would give us a rough profile of a politically active web-user. In order to get a more definite picture, a survey type of study would be needed. By these means it would be possible to gain knowledge of the effects of the Internet on the political behaviour. For example, do people visit only the web-sites of their "own party" or actually use the www to attain information for their decisions; if information does not affect their decision about the party does it have effect on the selection of the candidate; do visitors just surf or do they also vote; would voting through the www change the turnout of elections; etc.

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Appendix A

The Finnish Parliamentary elections in March 1999: List of the political parties, their abbreviations, and other relevant information.

Abbreviation	Name ^a	www-address (http:// +)	Language ^b
SDP	Social Democratic Party of Finland	www.sdp.fi	FSE
KESK	Center Party of Finland	www.keskusta.fi	F(SE)
KOK	National Coalition Party	www.kokoomus.fi	FSE
VAS	Left Alliance	www.vasemmistoliitto.fi	FSE
VIHR	Green League	www.vihrealiitto.fi	FSE
RKP	Swedish People's Party in Finland	www.sfp.fi , www.rkp.fi	FS
SKL	Christian League of Finland	www.skl.fi	FSE
NUORS	Progressive Finnish Party	www.nuorsuom.fi	F
PS	True Finns	www.kolumbus.fi/perussuomalaiset	F
LKP	Liberal Party	Not found	
SEP	Finland's Pensioners' Party	Not found	
EKA	Pensioners for the People	Not found	
KIPU	Ecological Party	www.dystopia.fi/~elonkeha/ekokoti.htm	F
VSL	Alliance for Free Finland	www.vapaansuomenliitto.fi	FS
LLP	Natural Law Party	www.llp.fi	F
KTP	For Peace and Socialism - Communist Worker's Party	www.kaapeli.fi/~ktp	FE
SKP	The Communist Party of Finland	www.skp.fi	FSE
REM	Reform Group	www.mbnet.fi/~remontti/index.htm	F

^a Statistics Finland (1999)

^b F = Finnish, S = Swedish, E = English

Abbreviation ^a	www-address in posters	Number of candidates ^a	Turnout in 1995 ^b	Turnout in 1999 ^a	Visitor counter visible	visits week before	visits week after	sum of www-visits
SDP	no	229	28.3	22.9	no	10026	4194	14220
KESK	yes	223	19.8	22.4	yes			16482
KOK	no	221	17.9	21.0	no	17613	5243	22856
VAS	no	212	11.2	10.9	no	9217	2996	12213
VIHR	yes/no	196	6.5	7.3	no	26925 ^c	4103 ^c	31029 ^c
RKP	yes	77	5.2	5.1	no			
SKL	no	73	3.0	4.2	yes	2704	1214	3918
NUORS	yes	80	2.8	1.0	no			
PS	no	55	1.3 (SMP)	1.0	yes	648	170	818
LKP	-	24	0.6	0.2	-			
SEP	-	20	0.1	0.2	-			
EKA	-	16	0.2	0.2	-			
KIPU	no	30	0.3 (EKO)	0.4	no			
VSL	no	66	1.0	0.4	no	18	14	32
LLP	yes	118	0.3	0.1	no	1336	361	1697
KTP	yes	69	0.2	0.1	yes	528	229	757
SKP	yes	139	0.1 (YVP)	0.8	no	12405	4578	16983
REM	no	83	-	1.1	yes	1707	385	2092
Others	-	68	1.2	0.8	-	-	-	
Total		1993	100.0	100.0		83127	23487	123097

^a Statistics Finland (1999)

^b Statistics Finland (1995)

^c Calculated from the number of log file rows (visitors = 4/100 x Rows). The coefficient bases on the statistics from MTV3 covering one year (n[rows] = 98 million).