A study of voters’ online behaviour when using political parties’ and candidates’ websites and social media sites during the 2011 Scottish Parliament election campaign

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May 2011: Scottish National Party (SNP) swept to power in Scottish Parliament election

“...the first European election where online has swayed the vote”

“...a model for political parties all over the world”
Aims of User Study

- Identify motivations for, and barriers to, public use of campaign sites
- Investigate the types of information, tools and technologies the public most values
- Assess the likelihood of campaign sites being visited again
- Explore the extent to which they influence voting behaviour
User Study

- Hosted by Rosemount Community Centre, Aberdeen
- Recruited 64 participants, from a range of age groups and socio-economic classes
- 63 were Internet users; 35 were social media users
- Used laptop and mobile broadband ‘dongle’
- Used the ‘interactive, electronically-assisted interview’ method
Candidate Information

- 26 participants looked for information on their local candidates

- Mixed opinions on need for candidate biographies

- Disappointment at lack of personal policy statements, particularly on local issues
35 participants looked for party policy statements

- Reluctant to read lengthy manifests

- Need for concise policy commentary
• Need for *local* policy commentary

• Frustration at lack of information relating to Aberdeen area
40 participants looked at social media sites, mostly Facebook

Vast majority were unimpressed with politicians’ offerings

Perceived lack of substance to posts:

“trivial”  “puerile”

“shallow”  “superficial”

Too many photos of campaign activities:

“boring”  “rubbish”
• Disappointed at lack of dialogue between politicians and voters

• But unwilling to publicly ask questions or make critical comments themselves

• Also reluctant to publicly show support for a party or candidate
• Concerns about lack of currency on candidate sites
• Concerns about lack of information in alternative formats and languages
• Uncomfortable with imagery used by parties at extreme ends of political spectrum
Other Issues Raised (2)

- Preference for positive campaigning
- Cynical about celebrity endorsements
Post-search Evaluative Questions

- 77% thought campaign sites are a useful way of providing information
- 97% found them easy to use
- 77% found the content interesting
- 69% might look at campaign sites again
For 94% the campaign sites had no influence on their voting intentions

Little evidence of “online swaying the vote”

Instead, a continued preference for ‘traditional’ information sources and campaign methods