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# Party and Candidate Websites: A Comparative Explanatory Analysis

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This study provides a systematic investigation of party and candidate websites across five countries. It examines three prominent features of current online political communication (interactivity, political personalization, and mobilization). Furthermore it assesses to what extent country, party, and source characteristics explain differences in the usage of these features. In total, 63 websites and 416 pages in Germany, Romania, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Great Britain were subject to a systematic content analysis. The findings suggest that differences in party and source characteristics explain variation in levels of mobilization, interactivity, and personalization, with, for example, party websites trying to mobilize citizens while websites belonging to politicians are used as a platform for self-promotion. In general, results show that the division of countries into East and West European is less important.

In the 21st century, the political fight for votes is increasingly carried out online. Political parties make use of the Internet when competing for voters' attention and support so that web campaigning today is an integral part of a party's election campaign efforts (Chadwick, 2006; Foot & Schneider, 2006). A party's online communication, however, stretches beyond the intense periods of election campaigns, and political parties generally increasingly invest in online resources (such as websites, Twitter, and Facebook) to communicate with their voters in a direct fashion (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Lee & Shin, 2012). At the same time, citizens use the Internet to inform themselves about politics by reading about politics online or, more relevant for this study, by means of direct communication with political parties or candidates via their (personal) websites (Bimber, 1998). As a result, online political communication bears great opportunities to intensify and renegotiate the link between political parties, candidates, and citizens. The use of increasingly complex online resources for political mobilization fits well into the framework of an ever-increasing professionalization of political campaigning and increased use of political consultancy (Ward & Lusoli, 2005).

This study investigates party and candidate websites in five countries from Eastern and Western Europe. The analysis focuses on three important aspects of websites: mobilization, political personalization, and interactivity

(Lilleker et al., 2011; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012). Beyond a descriptive account of the appearance of these features across countries and parties, this study seeks to contribute to a systematic understanding of the variation in the use of these features. This provides an opportunity to assess the degree of professionalization of online political communication by different political actors in different contexts. Understanding such differences or similarities allows for an assessment of whether online political communication has certain general characteristics, independent of who communicates in which context, or whether such convergence is still absent. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to investigate *whether and how the variation in the use and adoption of the three features—mobilization, political personalization, and interactivity—is explained by party and source characteristics.*

Furthermore, we distinguish between Eastern and Western European countries. After all, one can argue that online political communication can follow different patterns in the Eastern compared to Western countries (Gross, 2004; Voltmer, 2008), and the countries included in our analysis show fundamental differences in a number of potentially relevant aspects. Western European countries have longer democratic traditions (Dalton, 1996) than the Eastern European countries, which are still considered to be in transition from communism. The latter might adopt online communication differently. Also, media developments are different: East-European countries have a lower level of free press (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008), and the transformation from state-controlled media to an open market (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008) might influence the use of newer forms of online media. Moreover, the economic development in the East-European countries in our sample is very different from the West. Romania is, for instance, among the weakest competitive European economies (“Ranking,” 2012) and, therefore, budgets for online communication might have lower priority. Finally, Internet access is generally higher in Western Europe (International Telecommunication Union, 2011), making investments in online communication more relevant to reach out to potential voters. In sum, the Eastern–Western distinction in our country sample captures variation in a wide variety of factors that together represent various aspects of the (political and media) environment that are likely to relate to online political communication. Yet the study is explorative in nature, focusing on a few countries only that, we argue, are representative of Eastern–Western differences.

Finally, the analysis looks at a period of routine politics rather than at an election campaign. This brings about the advantage of assessing politicians’ and party’s *normal* behavior outside the craze of an election campaign and the material and personal resources of the campaign. For parties facing voter delineation (or those that never had core voter groups in the case of

Eastern countries; e.g., Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000) it is increasingly relevant to facilitate attachment to their core constituencies also during noncampaign periods. If anything, by considering routine periods in all countries, our study provides a rather conservative assessment of the status of online political communication.

## EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Over the past decade, many scholars have investigated party websites in a range of different contexts (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Lilleker et al., 2011). Websites are historically the first online platform that political parties used, and they are still among the most prominent ones. Nowadays, there will be very few national elections in which not all relevant political parties have a website that they use for campaigning purposes. Overall, studies suggest that online communication of political parties varies between and within countries (Van Os, Jankowski, & Vergeer, 2007). There is considerably less focus in the literature, however, on websites of individual politicians and political candidates (with the exception of Ward & Gibson, 2003). Moreover, the link between the growing use of candidate websites and the ongoing processes of personalization in politics, according to which political campaigns and news coverage focus increasingly on the individual (McAllister, 2007; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010), has, surprisingly, hardly been made (with the exception of Hermans & Vergeer, 2012). Also, it appears that parties do point attention to individual politicians' websites, and these are frequently interlinked through, for example, Facebook or Twitter accounts. Hence, there is good reason to stretch research of online political communication to the websites of individual politicians.

In this study, we explicitly compare party websites and politicians' websites. Including politicians' websites, on one hand, aligns with major trends in political communication (political personalization, as just argued) and, on the other hand, yields a broader sample of websites that are relevant but potentially also very different from more traditional party websites (see below). These days, it is rather easy for politicians to publish their viewpoints and opinions on personal websites, blogs, and social media without help from or approval of party officials and without interventions from journalists (Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). By contrast, according to Kluver, Jankowski, Foot, and Schneider (2007), party websites are more often used to disseminate information. So, in general, party and individual websites can have different functions.

Furthermore, most of the prior literature focuses on single country cases and on Western countries exclusively (with the exception of Kluver et al.,

2007), with a dominance of the United States and Western Europe (Gibson, Margolis, Resnick, & Ward, 2003; Lilleker & Malagón, 2010; Strandberg, 2009). Only a few examples specifically address a political party's online communication in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Kluver et al., 2007; Lilleker et al., 2011; Semetko & Krasnoboka, 2003), whereas the political communication context in those countries is markedly different, and this might impact the way political actors use websites in their campaigns. The current study fills this gap. If contextual variation (in media, political, and economic terms) between far-ranging countries, such as Romania versus the United Kingdom, does *not* affect styles of online political communication, we can argue that intracountry variation is more important than differences between countries. This research adds to the existing literature by providing (a) a systematic investigation of party and candidate websites in a broad sample of five European countries, three from Western and two from Eastern Europe; (b) a specific look at a noncampaign period (in all countries) to assess candidate-voter communication outside the less-than-normal periods of electoral competition; and (c) websites of both political parties and individual politicians.

The analysis concentrates on three features of online political communication as presented on political websites: interactivity, political personalization, and mobilization. Two of these reflect much of the current literature on political websites in the web 2.0 era, that is mobilization (Foot & Schneider, 2006) and interactivity (Lilleker & Malagón, 2010; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). Both are argued to affect individuals' affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegthart, & De Vreese, 2013) and are therefore important to include in any study of political websites. In addition, interactivity is often regarded as a key variable in online communication research (Sundar et al., 2003). Furthermore, we consider aspects of political personalization, which bears direct relevance to the fact that we also consider politicians' rather than only party websites. Political personalization is considered a central feature of current political communication and has appeared prominently in recent literature on traditional news media (for an overview, see Van Aelst et al., 2012; Vliegthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2011).

In a first descriptive step we are interested in the similarities and differences in the occurrence of mobilization, interactivity, and personalization features between (a) countries and (b) party and politician websites. Such a descriptive account is valuable as such, considering the broad range of data collected here. In a second step, and to arrive at a more systematic understanding of these differences, we build an explanatory model that explains the variation in the presence of the three features. We specifically ask whether party characteristics (e.g., size and incumbent status) and characteristics of the source (e.g., whether it is a political party or an individual

politician's website) predict the prominence of mobilization, interactivity, and political personalization features on websites.

We are also interested in whether the country of origin of a website makes a difference. Certainly, there are a number of economic, political, and media system characteristics that could possibly account for variation in mobilization, interactivity, and political personalization features (see also next). Due to the limited number of countries included in our analysis, however, we are not able to empirically test specific characteristics, and thus we rely on a crude country distinction. We argue that a classification into Eastern and Western European countries is useful here, as it reflects differences in key variables in democratic traditions, economic resources, and Internet penetration. Such crude and admittedly somewhat limited contextual comparison is useful because it reveals to what degree findings of single country or case studies can be understood in general terms, and whether we thus see that web communication is similar in various European contexts.

### Three Different Communication Features on Political Websites

The following section deals with each of the three aspects introduced above; mobilization, interactivity and political personalization. We address for each of the aspects how they were conceptualized and were used in previous work; how they relate to online political communication; and what differences across country classifications, parties, and sources can be expected.

*Mobilization.* The primary goal of much of the communication of political parties is to convince citizens to vote for them. This is equally true for offline and online communication. Many of the existing studies analyze mobilization as an instrument used by campaigns to obtain an electoral advantage, usually measured in votes (Norris, 2006). However, next to the more traditional "get-out-the-vote" appeals, political parties use their websites to transform citizens into supporters of and ambassadors for the party in the long run. These functions are especially important outside election campaign periods. As Bimber and Davis (2003) pointed out, from the moment one brings a visitor to the campaign website, it is up to the online tools and mechanisms available to turn him or her into a campaign supporter. In all of those instances, the importance of studying mobilization in the context of online political communication lies in the fact that, through mobilization, this type of communication can successfully lead to measurable effects in offline behavior. For example, Rackaway (2007) found that the use of online fund-raising practices had a positive effect on votes. Online mobilization features make it easier for citizens to participate in online political activities. Becoming a member for a political party or making a donation

can be done with one click of a button, which lowers the threshold to participate in politics.

On a political website, mobilization is represented by a series of online features that allow for utterances of unidirectional support from the visitor for a certain political party or leader (Lilleker et al., 2011). These features include, for example, e-volunteering, online donations, online memberships, and supporter registration (Lilleker et al., 2011; Schweitzer, 2008). Political mobilization efforts outside election campaigns then aim to develop connections with citizens whom politicians or parties can rely on at the ballot box or possibly even for campaign activities such as canvassing. Basically, this ongoing deployment of mobilizing online allows us to talk about a strategic effort to keep the electorate alert and potentially mobilized for the elections. The mobilization features keep voters engaged in the interval between elections, so that they can be easily activated during elections, in order to multiply electoral messages and yield electoral success.

Although only low (financial or technical) barriers exist to employing features that are aimed to get citizens involved with the party, there may be substantial variation in the actual use of those features. First, on the country level, we anticipate that Western European countries with long-standing democratic traditions (Dalton, 1996) and political parties with long histories are more likely to employ mobilization features than parties in the newer Eastern European countries. After all, there are core voter constituencies that parties can fall back on and attempt to mobilize. This is in line with previous studies; in Eastern European countries, websites often are used to give information (top-down) rather than inviting users to participate, such as donating money and recruiting volunteers. (Danyi & Galacz, 2007; Oblak & Zeljan, 2007). Second, on the party level, as shown by a previous study (Lilleker et al., 2011), we expect mobilization to be a feature more common to larger political parties, which benefit most from a considerable number of online supporters, whom they can mobilize through the website. Finally, on the source level, we assume that mobilization elements are present on websites belonging to political parties than to candidates (Foot, Schneider, Kluver, Xenos, & Jankowski, 2007). The former are considered the main landing page for political supporters (Lilleker & Jackson, 2009) and the overall forum that offers institutionalized forms of participation (such as membership), unlike the party leaders' web pages.

Overall, these considerations result in the following hypotheses regarding the explanation of variation in mobilization:

- H1a: The use of mobilization features is higher on Western European websites than on Eastern European websites.
- H1b: The larger the political party, the more it will use mobilization features on its website.



H1c: The use of mobilization features is higher on party websites than on politicians' websites.

*Interactivity.* Interactivity has attracted a lot of attention from scholars in diverse research fields. Despite the extensive body of interactivity literature, to date there is no consensus among researchers about the conceptualization of the concept, as reflected in several extensive literature reviews (Johnson, Bruner, & Kumar, 2006; Liu & Shrum, 2002; McMillan & Hwang, 2002; Song & Zinkhan, 2008; Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002) and a couple conceptual publications (Stromer-Galley, 2004; Sundar, 2004). Stromer-Galley (2004) referred to this as “the murky water of interactivity” (p. 1). In general, interactivity can be studied as a function of the user or as a function of the system (Sundar, 2004). The user perspective focuses on whether the user actually engages with the interactive environment and on the users' experience of interactivity on websites. In the functional perspective, interactivity is studied as an attribute of the technology, or the medium, focusing on the actual interactive features on websites. The functional perspective can thus be conceived of as a prerequisite for the user perspective. The advantage of focusing on actual interactivity, and not on user perceptions, is that it provides insight into the technological elements contributing to interactivity effects (Sundar, 2004; Van Dijk, 1999), and thereby it focuses on the communication capacities and, more specifically, the opportunities for citizen participation in the political process.

Although there is no consensus about the conceptualization of interactivity, scholars do agree that interactivity is a multidimensional construct. Different dimensions are distinguished within and outside the realm of political communication, but all authors mention a dimension related to two-way communication (e.g., Liu & Shrum, 2002; Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2011) though different terminology is used, such as *direction of communication* (McMillan & Hwang, 2002), *communication* (Song & Zinkhan, 2008), *interactivity* (Gulati & Williams, 2007), and *bidirectional flow of information* (Liu, 2003).

Two-way communication refers to the possibility of reciprocal communication between the organization, in this study the political party or politician, and the website user (i.e., vertical communication), and between website users (horizontal communication; Lilleker et al., 2011; Norris, 2000). As two-way communication is the overarching dimension in interactivity research, and because we adopt a functional approach, we thus define interactivity as those features that allow website visitors to interact with each other and the site host. Website attributes such as discussion forums, chat rooms, and hyperlinks to e-mail addresses of politicians facilitate two-way communication on political websites (Lilleker et al., 2011).

Interactivity is considered an important feature of online communication. Studies have shown that higher levels of interactivity result in more positive evaluation of the website and the content that is presented. For example, Sundar et al. (2003) found that moderate levels of interactivity on party websites lead to more positive evaluations of the political candidates. Other studies focused on cognitive responses to interactivity and demonstrated that higher levels of interactivity result in more favorable responses. Website visitors seem to retain more of what they have seen on websites that are relatively interactive (Van Noort, Voorveld, & van Reijmersdal, 2012; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005). Although behavioral responses are generally neglected, some research indicates positive effects of higher levels of website interactivity. For example, Tedesco (2007) found that exposure to interactive websites increases the likelihood that individual value voting as an important engagement activity, and Vliegenthart and Van Noort (2010) found that the level of interactivity on party websites is related to election results. Another study found that exposure to social media that uses interactive communication affects candidate evaluations and can lead to stronger voting intentions among citizens who usually avoid social interaction (Lee & Shin, 2012). Previous research argues that exposure to interactive features on a website can affect political engagement because of the opportunity for two-way communication. Direct and reciprocal communication without the interference of journalists and other media may enhance feelings of closeness and intimacy with politics (Lee & Shin, 2012). This may consequently affect political engagement. Thus, it seems worthwhile for political parties to invest in interactive communication tools, as more interactive political websites seem to be successful in generating positive evaluations of the party, the website content and potentially also influence voting behavior.

Prior studies within the field of political communication that examined the level of interactivity in political websites talked about low interactivity in the case of candidate websites from the 2006 U.S. campaign for Congress, with interactivity defined as the possibility of direct interaction with the candidate (Gulati & Williams, 2007). The same is true for Republican and Democratic websites, again in the United States, which used interactive elements only to attract new volunteers or raise money, not to engage citizens in a public debate (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007). In Europe, the 2007 French presidential elections show top-down interactivity, identified on the main candidates' websites. Top-down interactivity implies that the campaign staff chooses mostly interactive elements that provide control over communication (e.g., moderated comments) and, at the same time, presents the candidate as being *open for discussion*. This creates the illusion of veritable interaction (Lilleker & Malagón, 2010). Furthermore, Oblak and Zeljan (2007) pointed out that the majority of Slovenian political actors

are still not using new media as services for conversation and interactive communication. Taken together the use of two-way communication possibilities by political organizations seems rather limited.

Despite the narrow use of interactive features, there exists considerable variation across various parties. In this respect many scholars point to the *normalization* hypothesis (Schweitzer, 2008), arguing that online communication reflects the existing power relationships, or at least the availability of resources at the party level. In Germany, for example, scholars remark that although more and more small German parties developed a presence online, these did not include interactive elements on their website, preferring the classic one-way communication, unlike the bigger parties, which invested in the development of this type of elements (Lilleker et al., 2011; Schweitzer, 2008). Thus bigger (as compared to smaller) parties seem to have more resources and have more opportunities to integrate two-way communication features in their websites.

As it has been demonstrated that campaign expenditures positively predict the level of interactivity, we expect that parties that have more resources, mainly financially, are likely to invest more in interactive features. These resources might be situated at the party level, but also differences in general levels of welfare across countries might come into play. In wealthy countries, parties have more money to spend and we are likely to find more (advanced) interactivity features. In addition, scholars argue that when the percentage of citizens who have Internet access in a particular state is higher, it is more likely that campaign organizations use interactive features on political websites (Foot & Schneider, 2006). Obviously, using interactivity on political websites in countries with higher Internet penetration rates makes more sense than using it in countries with lower penetration rates. When more people are online, political actors can see the benefits of actually communicating with citizens, which would not be possible when less people are online. As Internet access in Eastern European countries is often lower (e.g., Romania: 44.0% in 2011) compared to Western European countries (e.g., the Netherlands: 92.3% in 2011; International Telecommunication Union, 2011), we tentatively expect that the levels of interactivity used on websites is higher in Western European countries. This translates into the following hypotheses:

- H2a: The use of interactivity features is higher on Western European websites than on Eastern European websites.
- H2b: The larger the political party, the more it will use interactive features on its website.

Furthermore, we expect another difference on the party level, namely, between government parties and opposition parties. The latter have more

reason to use interactive features to mobilize citizens to foster political change but also to demonstrate that they listen to the people to develop an alternative to the parties in power (Strandberg, 2009; Vliegenthart & Van Noort, 2010). Thus, our hypothesis reads as follows:

H2c: The use of interactive features is higher on websites of opposition parties compared to government parties.

Finally, we anticipate a difference between websites of parties and politicians. Comparing the party website with the website of the leader of the same party, we expect to identify more interactive elements on the leaders' website—due to the fact that interactivity is more suited to the individual dimension of political communication, in comparison to its institutional one. Interactivity is rather something between individuals than between an institution and an individual. This view is supported by Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, and Landreville (2006), who found that political candidates increasingly use interactivity on their websites.

H2d: The level of interactivity is higher on websites belonging to individual politicians compared to party websites.

*Political personalization.* The final characteristic that we take into consideration is political personalization. Political personalization refers in its most basic form to a quantitative shift in attention from political parties to individual politicians (Vliegenthart et al., 2011). A wide plethora of other phenomena is also put under the umbrella term of political personalization, such as increasing attention for the competences or personal characteristics of politicians, as well as their private lives, but also the perceived importance of political leaders for vote choice (Langer, 2007; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). All those elements share an emphasis on the individual politician (individualization) and their private life (privatization; Van Aelst et al., 2012). Political personalization is considered especially relevant in the context of online political communication, as the inherent characteristics of the Internet and social media give ample opportunity for politicians to profile themselves personally (Kruikemeier et al., 2013). This puts the political candidates more to the forefront than the party they represent. Kruikemeier et al. (2013) demonstrated the effectiveness of online political personalization through an experiment, showing that more personalized online content results in higher levels of involvement among users. Another recently conducted experimental study found that personalized communication has positive effects on voting (but only for socially active individuals; Lee &

Oh, 2012). The reason why personalized communication is mobilizing can be found in previous work. Scholars emphasized that personalized communication can affect citizens' engagement in politics, because communication expressed by politicians give a party's policies a face and a voice (Brettschneider, 2008). Communication that is presented in a more personalized way may therefore be more influential than communication that is less personalized. This is also argued by Lee and Oh (2012). They stressed that the perception of being in contact with a politician instead of a political organization helps users to draw *a vivid picture* of the politician. Consequently, users feel more intimacy with and emotional presence of the politician (Lee & Oh, 2012). The information on the website becomes subsequently more relevant to users, which affects their engagement in politics (i.e., voting).

How can we expect political personalization to differ across parties and type of websites? Party characteristics are likely to matter. Larger parties generally have more politicians that are well known and (often) popular among the electorate. It can be a strategic consideration to feature those politicians' prominently on party websites or to facilitate the creation of personalized websites:

H3a: The larger the party, the higher the level of personalization will be.

The difference between parties' websites and individual politicians' websites is likely to be straightforward. Both parties' websites and those of individual politicians can have political personalization features. Party websites, for example, can refer to candidates and their qualities or have links to personal websites. One can even imagine that parties with a strong leader largely focus on this person and score highly in terms of political personalization. Still, it is likely that, in general, the websites of individual politicians score higher on personalization characteristics, simply because these sites mainly focus on the individual. Thus, our final hypothesis is as follows:

H3b: The level of personalization is higher on websites belonging to individual politicians compared to party websites.

Finally, we have no good reason to believe that the level of political personalization should be higher or lower in Western versus Eastern European countries. On one hand, it could be argued that because in the Western countries the political parties have a longer history and a stronger institutional position (Goldfrank, 2007), an overly high emphasis on individual politicians and their characteristics is counterbalanced. On the other hand, one could speculate that characteristics of postmodern politics, such as

political personalization, are more evident in more developed countries. Considering this ambivalence in possible arguments, we chose to pose a research question here:

RQ1: Is the level of personalization higher on Eastern European websites than on Western European websites?

## METHOD

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a content analysis of political websites in the five countries: the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, and Romania. The selection of those countries is based on both substantial and pragmatic reasons. The countries represent considerable variation in their political and media system characteristics. Yet the sample includes countries from both Western and Eastern Europe, which we believe to be a key independent variable at the country level. Romania (to a large extent) and Hungary (to a smaller extent) are selected because they have less free press and a *younger* media system (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008). They also recently joined the European Union, are less wealthy, and have young democratic traditions. By contrast, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany have a long democratic tradition, are *old* members of the European Union, and have a public broadcasting system and a commercial press. In addition, the countries are wealthy. Moreover, these three Western European countries have high Internet penetration rates, whereas Romania and Hungary have a low Internet penetration rate. Finally, the selection also reflects the background and language capacities of the authors of this article. The data for the content analysis were collected during the 1st week of January 2012. During this period, there were no election campaigns ongoing in these countries. We downloaded all party websites and the individual websites of party leaders who are members of the national parliament or have a credible chance of being elected into parliament at the next elections (e.g., because they are listed in recent polls). The selection of most prominent politicians was based on information and judgments from country experts. Criteria for selecting the websites were as follows: (a) We gauged all the major political parties within each country; (b) we included all the party leaders of each political party who had a website during the period of investigation from the parties that we already selected; and (c) after making a definitive lists, we consulted country experts to ascertain whether we included all the major parties and candidates. This resulted in the following numbers: We included six German, six Hungarian, eleven Dutch, eight Romanian, and three British party websites, and nine German, four

Hungarian, ten Dutch, three Romanian, and three British politician websites. In total, 63 websites were coded and analyzed. The variation in the number of websites included reflects the differences in the number of parties that compete in elections. Moreover, although this study focuses on a limited number of political websites, these sites are the most typical (i.e., all party websites in selected countries and the websites of the political leaders of these parties). The program Offline Explorer was used to download the websites.

### Coding Procedure

The unit of analysis is the pages within the website. To collect these pages, we downloaded the home page of the websites and then followed all the hyperlinks in the main banners. Next, we downloaded all the pages that were accessed through the banner(s) on the home page. In this way, we were able to archive the first two layers of the website. We downloaded the first two layers of the website, because these pages are the most visited ones (Zeng & Parmanto, 2004). This is also common practice in research that studies the content of websites (Karlsson, 2011; Zeng & Parmanto, 2004). We then coded individual pages within a website, as single units and common design elements were not excluded for coding. This strategy is preferred, because we believe that when a feature is present on multiple pages within a website, this might also be an important feature. Because this may affect the results, we include a covariate in the model to control for the number of pages in the analyses. Websites that have more pages have more *space*. By using more online space, political actors have more opportunities to include, for example, photos of a politician or a chat facility. This indicates that websites with more pages are more likely to have (more) features present on a website. By controlling for this effect, bias will be minimized.

A total of 416 pages (of 63 websites) were coded: 100 German, 61 Hungarian, 141 Dutch, 81 Romanian, and 33 English pages. Four international coders, who were trained and supervised during regular coding meetings, coded the data. To determine the intercoder reliability of the data, the four coders coded eight Irish party and candidate websites (32 pages; equaling 6.9% of the total sample). We used Krippendorff's alpha to determine the reliability of the gathered data (Krippendorff, 2003). We chose this country for the intercoder reliability test because all the coders were able to perform the coding in English. Although websites of Irish political parties might differ from those of their counterparts in other European countries, we see no reason why the way mobilization, interactivity, and political personalization are presented would be fundamentally different. In our view, it is thus adequate material to perform a reliability test on.

### Online Political Communication, Three Dependent Measures

**Mobilization.** Mobilization was measured using a scale that was successfully used in prior research (Lilleker et al., 2011; Vliegenthart et al., 2011) and based on previous coding schemas developed for analyses of party websites (de Landtsheer, Krasnoboka, & Neuner, 2005; Gibson & Ward, 2000; Lilleker & Malagón, 2010). The scale consists of five items: (a) “Does the web page contain a general call to participate?” (b) “Does the web page contain a call to make a donation?” (c) “Is there a call to sign up as a volunteer?” (d) “Is there a call on the web page to join the party?” (e) “Does the web page have an online shop?” An index was constructed by averaging scores from these items ( $M = 0.33$ ,  $SD = .29$ ). To test whether the separate items form one hierarchical scale, Mokken scale analyses was performed (Van der Meer, Te Grotenhuis, & Scheepers, 2009). Because we use dichotomous items, we cannot perform a factor analyses to see whether the items load on one factor. Instead, we have to use Mokken scale analyses. Such analyses are appropriate for dichotomous items. In short, this technique asserts whether the separate items (the features) of the scale variables (i.e., mobilization, interactivity, and personalization) form one hierarchical scale (Van der Meer et al., 2009). The results of the Mokken scale show that the items of mobilization form a suitable scale ( $H$ -coefficient = .46). In addition, the mean coder agreement of mobilization was 0.93 (Krippendorff’s alpha).

**Interactivity.** Interactivity was measured using a scale that consists of six items, adapted from Vliegenthart and Van Noort (2010) and successfully used in prior research (Rafaeli & Ariel, 2007; Sundar et al., 2003; Tedesco, 2007) reflecting two-way communication, employment of hierarchical hyperlinks, and the opportunity for communication tasks (e.g., sending messages): (a) “Are links to social media present on the web page?” (b) “Is there a (part of a) blog or multiple blogs visible on the web page?” (c) “Does the web page have an explicit invitation to respond to a blog post?” (d) “Does the web page contain a contact link?” (e) “Is it possible to subscribe or register to an event?” (f) “Is there a chat function available on the web page?” An index was constructed by averaging scores from these items ( $M = 0.34$ ,  $SD = .14$ ). The results of the Mokken scale show that the items form a suitable scale ( $H$ -coefficient = .33) and the mean coder agreement of interactivity was 1.00 (Krippendorff’s alpha).

**Personalization.** Political personalization was measured by using a scale that consists of four items, which are also adopted by Vergeer, Hermans, & Cunha (2013) and Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2013): (a) “Are



there pictures of the politician present on the web page?" (b) "Is there a textual reference to a politician on the web page?" (c) "Is there a hyperlink on the web page linking to a politician?" (d) "Are there any photos on the web page that contains photos from a politicians' family and friends?" Again, an index was constructed by averaging scores from these items ( $M = 0.42$ ,  $SD = .26$ ). Again, the results of the Mokken scale show that the items form a suitable scale ( $H\text{-coefficients} = .31$ ). The mean coder reliability was 0.76 (Krippendorff's alpha).

### Independent Measures

*Country characteristic.* The variable called Eastern European countries versus Western European countries was included as a predictor (0 = Western European countries: Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany; 1 = Eastern European countries: Romania and Hungary).

*Party characteristics.* Two items measured party characteristics. The first item is *party size*, measured as the proportion of the party's parliamentary seats in January 2012. The second item is *government status*: whether the party is a member of the government (opposition = 0, governmental party = 1).

*Source characteristic.* Three items measured website characteristics: *party versus individual website* (whether the page belonged to a party website or an individual website: party website = 0; individual website = 1), *Home page* (whether the page was the home page: not the home page = 0; home page = 1), and *number of web pages* (the total number of coded web pages within each website). The last two variables are used as controls in our analyses.

### Data Analysis

First, we tested whether there were significant differences between the five countries on levels of mobilization, interactivity, and political personalization by using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) analysis with Bonferroni multiple-comparison tests. We used country as factor and the mean scores on the three scales as dependent variables. Second, ANOVA analyses for each country were conducted to test significant differences between individual and party websites on the levels of mobilization, interactivity, and personalization. Thus we first test the difference of the adoption of these features on country level, and second, we show the differences between party

and politicians websites within countries. These two sets of descriptive findings provide a first impression of the data and give substantial information on the differences between countries and parties.

Third, we performed three separate multilevel regression analyses for each website function to examine the different effects of country, party, and website characteristics. Because multilevel models require a minimum of 10 to 15 cases on each level, we were not able to include a separate level for countries. Instead, we combined the country and party level and use two-level models, in which webpages are nested in country/parties.

## RESULTS

Figure 1 and ANOVA analyses revealed that the level of mobilization differs between countries,  $F(4, 411) = 38.81$ ,  $p < .001$ . Bonferroni post hoc analyses demonstrated that the British political websites had the highest level of mobilization and differed significantly from the Dutch, German, Hungarian, and Romanian websites. In other words, British political websites have incorporated more mobilization functions than the political websites in all the other countries (all  $ps < .001$ ). Furthermore, we found that Dutch websites had more mobilization functions than Romanian ( $p < .001$ ) and Hungarian websites ( $p = .003$ ), and German websites had more mobilization functions than Romanian websites ( $p < .001$ ).

The ANOVA results further show that the levels of interactivity and personalization differ significantly between countries,  $F(4, 411) = 6.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,

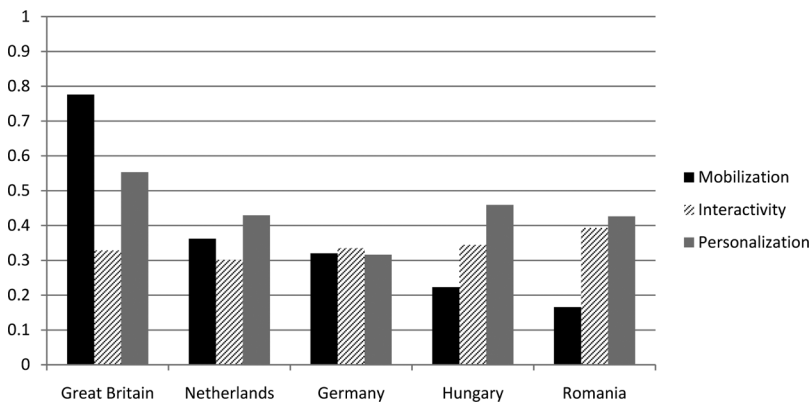


FIGURE 1 Level of mobilization, interactivity, and personalization in German, British, Dutch, Hungarian, and Romanian political websites.

and  $F(4, 411) = 6.88, p < .001$ , but the Bonferroni post hoc tests showed that those differences are rather limited. Post hoc tests showed that only Romanian websites had significantly more interactive features than Dutch websites ( $p < .001$ ) and German websites ( $p < .040$ ). German websites were significantly less focused on the individual politician than websites from the United Kingdom ( $p < .001$ ), the Netherlands ( $p = .007$ ), Hungary ( $p = .006$ ), and Romania ( $p = .039$ ). Overall these countries differences reveal less of a pattern in terms of East versus West differences than we had expected.

Next, we tested the significant differences between individual and party websites on the levels of mobilization, interactivity, and personalization. Table 1 shows that in the United Kingdom,  $F(1, 31) = 5.63, p = .024$ ; Germany,  $F(1, 98) = 90.88, p < .001$ ; Hungary,  $F(1, 59) = 50.43, p < .001$ ; and Romania,  $F(1, 79) = 9.20, p = .003$ , party websites had significantly more mobilization functions than individual websites. Next, Table 1 shows that websites from political parties from Hungary have fewer interactive features,  $F(1, 59) = 12.10, p = .001$ , than websites from political leaders. Furthermore, as we expected, in the German,  $F(1, 98) = 65.43, p < .001$ ; British,  $F(1, 31) = 9.03, p = .005$ ; Dutch,  $F(1, 139) = 37.12, p < .001$ ; and Hungarian cases,  $F(1, 59) = 34.71, p < .001$ , the level of personalization was higher on individual websites than on party websites. Apparently, individual websites and party websites have different functions: Party websites try to mobilize citizens, whereas individual websites are used by politicians to profile themselves.

Last, we assessed the characteristics that may explain the levels of mobilization, interactivity, and personalization present on political websites in a multivariate analysis. The multilevel analysis in Table 2 suggest that *Western versus Eastern European countries, party size* and two website characteristics (namely, *home page vs. underlying pages* and *party vs. individual website*) have a significant influence on the level of mobilization present on the political websites. More precisely, it seems that Western European countries have more mobilization functions on their websites than Eastern European countries. This finding supports H1a. Likewise, we observed that larger political parties have more mobilization functions on their websites than smaller parties, which supports H1b. Furthermore, we found that the home pages within websites have more mobilization functions than the underlying pages. To conclude, as expected in H1c, mobilization functions are also more likely to appear on websites of political parties than on websites of individual politicians.

Table 2 provides an answer to the question of which characteristics explain the level of interactivity present on political websites. We observed that opposition parties use more interactive features on their websites than

TABLE 1  
Level of Mobilization, Interactivity, and Personalization in German, British, Dutch, Hungarian, and Romanian Political Party and Individual Websites

	Great Britain		Netherlands		Germany		Hungary		Romania	
	Party web pages <sup>d</sup>	Individual web pages <sup>b</sup>	Party web pages <sup>c</sup>	Individual web pages <sup>d</sup>	Party web pages <sup>e</sup>	Individual web pages <sup>f</sup>	Party web pages <sup>g</sup>	Individual web pages <sup>h</sup>	Party web pages <sup>i</sup>	Individual web pages <sup>j</sup>
Mobilization	0.85 <sub>a</sub>	0.66 <sub>b</sub>	0.38 <sub>a</sub>	0.32 <sub>a</sub>	0.53 <sub>a</sub>	0.14 <sub>b</sub>	0.39 <sub>a</sub>	0.00 <sub>b</sub>	0.19 <sub>a</sub>	0.06 <sub>b</sub>
Interactivity	0.32 <sub>a</sub>	0.35 <sub>a</sub>	0.30 <sub>a</sub>	0.30 <sub>a</sub>	0.33 <sub>a</sub>	0.34 <sub>a</sub>	0.30 <sub>a</sub>	0.41 <sub>b</sub>	0.39 <sub>a</sub>	0.43 <sub>a</sub>
Personalization	0.46 <sub>a</sub>	0.69 <sub>b</sub>	0.35 <sub>a</sub>	0.60 <sub>b</sub>	0.15 <sub>a</sub>	0.45 <sub>b</sub>	0.33 <sub>a</sub>	0.63 <sub>b</sub>	0.42 <sub>a</sub>	0.46 <sub>a</sub>

Note. Means with a different subscript in the same row (within each country) differ significantly from each other at the  $p < .05$  level. <sup>a</sup> $n = 20$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 13$ . <sup>c</sup> $n = 94$ . <sup>d</sup> $n = 47$ . <sup>e</sup> $n = 46$ . <sup>f</sup> $n = 54$ . <sup>g</sup> $n = 35$ . <sup>h</sup> $n = 26$ . <sup>i</sup> $n = 67$ . <sup>j</sup> $n = 14$ .

TABLE 2  
Predicting Mobilization, Interactivity, and Personalization

	Mobilization		Interactivity		Personalization	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$
Constant	1.04* (.16)	-.00 (.12)	.26** (.08)	-.00 (.13)	.02 (.11)	-.00 (.09)
Country characteristics: Eastern-European (Western = ref.)	-.30** (.07)	-.50** (.11)	.04 (.04)	.15 (.13)	.02 (.05)	.04 (.09)
Party characteristics: Party size	.00† (.00)	.24† (.13)	-.00 (.00)	-.10 (.15)	.00† (.00)	.19† (.10)
Government status (opposition = ref.)	-.01 (.08)	-.02 (.12)	-.07† (.04)	-.25† (.14)	-.10† (.05)	-.19† (.10)
Source characteristics: No. of pages	-.00 (.01)	-.06 (.13)	-.00 (.00)	-.03 (.15)	.00 (.01)	.04 (.10)
Home page (other = ref.)	.06** (.02)	.08** (.03)	.04** (.01)	.10** (.03)	.19** (.03)	.27** (.04)
Individual website (party website = ref.)	-.24** (.02)	-.40** (.03)	.04** (.01)	.15** (.04)	.21** (.02)	.39** (.04)
Level-2 variance		.033		.010		.014
Level-1 variance		.024		.006		.031
Level-2 Total <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.33		.17		.22
Level-1 Total <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.27		.14		.30
Deviance		-211.58		-772.51		-142.06
Observations		416		416		416
No. of groups		35		35		35

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. Standardized  $\beta$  were obtained using standardized variables in the multilevel model.

†  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

governmental parties. We also found that interactive features were also more often present on the home pages of the websites. Interactive features were also more likely to appear on websites belonging to politicians than on party websites. So to conclude, H2c and H2d were supported, whereas we found no support for H2a and H2b: Eastern and Western European countries do not differ in their levels of interactivity, and party size does not exert a significant influence on levels of interactivity.

Finally, the influence of different characteristics on the level of personalization is examined (see Table 2). The analysis showed that websites that belong to larger parties are more focused on individual politicians than those of smaller parties. We also found that opposition parties use more personalization on their websites than governmental parties. Higher levels of personalization were also more often present on home pages and obviously also on individual websites. To sum up, H3a and H3b are supported: The larger the party, the higher the level of personalization, and obviously the level of personalization was higher on a website that belong to an individual politician. In response to our research question (RQ1), no significant differences in levels of personalization between Western and Eastern European countries are detected.

Comparing the analyses from the three characteristics of political websites, it can be seen that country differences predict only the levels of

TABLE 3  
Overview Hypotheses Tested

(H1a) The use of mobilization features is higher on Western European websites than on Eastern European websites.	Support
(H1b) The larger the political party, the more it will use mobilization features on its website.	Support
(H1c) The use of mobilization features is higher on party websites than on politicians' websites.	Support
(H2a) The use of interactivity features is higher on Western European websites than on Eastern European websites.	No support
(H2b) The larger the political party, the more it will use interactivity features on its website.	No support
(H2c) The use of interactivity features is higher on websites from opposition parties compared to government parties.	Support
(H2d) The use of interactivity features is higher on websites belonging to individual politicians compared to party websites.	Support
(H3a) The larger the political party, the higher the level of personalization will be.	Support
(H3b) The level of personalization is higher on websites belonging to individual politicians compared to party websites.	Support
(RQ1) Is the level of personalization higher on Eastern European websites than on Western European websites?	No difference

mobilization functions. Of interest, both party characteristics and whether the website belongs to a party or a politician predict a lot of the differences found in the characteristics used on political websites, often in line with our expectations. For an overview of the results for each of the hypotheses, see Table 3.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides a systematic investigation of party and candidate websites in five different European countries. It examines three key features of online political communication that are presented on political websites and investigates to what extent party and website characteristics explain differences in the usage of these features. Evidence reported in this study largely supports the notion of a unification of online politics across Europe. As the digital divide between Western and Eastern European countries decreases, the use of different digital features on political websites across Europe is also not very different. Although there are some differences between Eastern and Western European countries in the amount of mobilization features they incorporate on their websites, the amount of interactivity and political personalization do not differ between the two. The opportunity for two-way communication was present equally on all political websites. Furthermore, the focus on politicians was, in general, equal between the websites of different countries. This finding is to some extent in agreement with Trammell et al.'s (2006) conclusions that politicians are increasingly using websites as an interactive platform by creating their own online podia. It seems that this trend is not different between Eastern and Western European countries. As pointed out by Norris (2003), political websites are increasingly using many features that positively enhance relationships between politicians and voters by giving website users the opportunity for conversations as well as the opportunity for mobilization. Thus, based on our study, we can tentatively conclude that, at least for our sample of countries, there is more of a pan-European online political communication style that one might expect based on looking at the large differences that still exist between some countries in Eastern versus Western Europe. Within this rather uniform style of online political communication we also find that the amount of interactivity is, in general, still quite low. Political actors across Europe did not include interactive features in their online communication, which is in agreement with previous studies which emphasize that political actors mainly use non-interactive online campaigning or are reluctant to adopt new media tools (Lilleker et al., 2011; Vergeer et al., 2013).

Another important result from the current study is the fact that party and website characteristics explain to what extent different features were present on political websites. In concordance with Lilleker et al. (2011), we found that party characteristics often explain why some websites have, for instance, more mobilization or interactivity functions than others. In addition, we found that source characteristics matter as well, especially the fact that a website belonging to a party or politician made a lot of difference. Apparently, individual websites and party websites have different functions: It seems that party websites try to mobilize citizens, whereas websites belonging to politicians are used as a platform for self-promotion.

Before we reach our final conclusions, we must address some important caveats.

First, some caution may be appropriate with regard to the level of political personalization present on politicians' websites in particular. In the study's sample, we include websites of politicians that were linked to the party websites. However, not many politicians in Romania and Hungary have an individual website. As a consequence, we could analyze only the ones that were available. Although we believe that these websites can be representative of the whole sample, the low level of use of personal websites may be an indication of lower levels of political personalization in these countries in general. Further studies, which take such political culture variables into account, are therefore recommended.

Second, we were able to include only five countries in our analysis. The selection of countries focused on countries clearly representative of Eastern–Western differences. An extended list of countries (also from outside Europe), however, would enable us to include more specific country characteristics that might explain differences in online communication. Although our findings provide valuable insights into the usage of different functions on political websites and the characteristics that explain variation, including more countries from different parts of the world (e.g., Asia) may give a more in-depth understanding as to what extent different country characteristics explain the usage and content of online political communication. We believe that this is an important recommendation for future research. By including more countries (also outside Europe), we might learn more about which country characteristics (characteristics at the highest level), if any, influence the adoption of different online features on political websites. For now, it appears that across Europe the political parties and the candidates affect whether and to what degree interactivity, mobilization, and political personalization features are used on political websites.

In this study, we have collected data at one point in time (in 2012). However, due to technological developments, some website features will become



more popular, disappear, or be replaced by other features. This could be a limitation of our study. It is possible that, as website features change, future analyses will yield different findings.

Despite these limitations the results are important and may guide future (interactivity) research. First, in examining interactivity, this study took on a structural view (Sundar, 2004; Van Dijk, 1999) by assessing the interactive properties of political websites. The content analysis provides insights into the presence of interactive features, the potential for dialogic communication, and the frequency of certain features over others. Future research could therefore focus on the user evaluations of such features (interactivity-as-product; Stromer-Galley, 2004) and on the question of whether these features indeed lead to more human-to-human interaction, or to higher levels of citizens engagement in the political process (interactivity-as-process; Stromer-Galley, 2004). Second, following Vergeer, Hermans, & Cunha (2013), we emphasize that our research shows that country differences did not explain the variation in political websites. Future scholars should, however, focus on other variables at the country, party, and individual level. In this study, we isolated six factors at three different levels. Including more predictors would potentially offer more insights into why some websites are, for instance, attempting to mobilize citizens whereas others are not. Especially in terms of cross-national differences, electoral system characteristics, for example, might be useful to consider. Third, future studies should also include data from different points in time (longitudinal data). As argued by Vergeer, Hermans, & Cunha (2013), “Due to . . . rapid and ongoing evolution of the web, explanations that were valid in the early stages . . . might not be valid at later stages” (p. 143). This study focuses on one point in time. By focusing on political websites over several years (also election periods), we will gain more understanding of the adoption (or exclusion) of different online features over the course of several years and elections. Last, to understand the *reasons* why certain aspects are included on a website, scholars have to adopt a more qualitative approach. We suggest that a broad research approach—combining longitudinal data with, for example interviews with political actors—will enhance our understanding of the development of the reasons for the adoption of different online features on political websites.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE A1  
List of Names of Parties and Politicians Included in the Analyses

<i>Country</i>	<i>Party Name</i>	<i>Political Leader(s)</i>
Germany	Bündnis 90 die Grünen	
	Bündnis 90 die Grünen	Cem Özdemir
	Bündnis 90 die Grünen	Claudia Roth
	CDU	
	CDU	Angela Merkel
	CSU	
	CSU	Horst Seehofer
	Die Linke	
	Die Linke	Gesine Lötzsck
	Die Linke	Klaus Ernst
	FDP	
	FDP	Philipp Rösler
	Piratenpartei	
	Piratenpartei	Sebastian Nerz
	SPD	Sigmar Gabriel
Hungary	Fidesz	
	Fidesz	Viktor Orban
	Jobbik	
	Jobbik	Gábor Vona
	KDNP	
	KDNP	Semjen Zsolt
	Lehetmas	
	MDF	
	MSZP	
	MSZP	Attila Mesterhazy
The Netherlands	50+	
	CDA	
	CDA	Sybrand van Haersma Buma
	ChristenUnie	
	ChristenUnie	Arie Slob
	D66	
	D66	Alexander Pechtold
	Partij voor de Dieren	
	Partij voor de Dieren	Marianne Thieme
	PVDA	
	PVDA	Job Cohen
	PVV	
	PVV	Geert Wilders
SGP		
SGP	Kees van der Staaij	
SP		

(Continued)

TABLE A1  
Continued

<i>Country</i>	<i>Party Name</i>	<i>Political Leader(s)</i>
Romania	SP	Emile Roemer
	VVD	
	VVD	Stef Blok
	GroenLinks	Jolande Sap
	GroenLinks	
	PDL	
	PNG-CD	
	PNL	
	PNL	Crin Antonescu
	PNTCD	
	PPDD	
	PSD	
PSD	Victor Ponta	
UDMR		
UDMR	Kelemen Hunor	
UNPR		
Great Britian	Conservative Party	
	Conservative Party	David Cameron
	Labour	
	Labour	Ed Miliband
	Liberal Democrates	
	Liberal Democrates	Nick Clegg

*Note.* The website of the SPD was excluded due to technical problems (website could not be opened after storage).