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HOW IRISH POLITICAL PARTIES ARE USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES TO REACH GENERATION Z: An insight into a new online social network in a small democracy

Kevin Lynch & John Hogan

Introduction

Political scientists have pointed to falling levels of participation, trust in institutions and party activism in modern democracies (Dalton, 2007). In many democracies political engagement with young voters has proven challenging. The worry is that potential first-time voters, if alienated from the political process, will disengage from it (Huggins, 2001). Fieldhouse et al. (2007) discovered that in 22 Europe democracies voter turnout of those under 25 was almost 25% lower than amongst the general electorate, while in Ireland the gap was 31.5%.

Political party membership has declined in Ireland to just 118,500 (Weeks, 2009: 155). This suggests that only 2.5% of the population are members of political parties. Yet, membership in other group activities, such as community groups and sectional groups, is increasing (Jordan and Maloney, 2007).

According to Tolbert and McNeal (2003: 175) evidence suggests ‘that changes in communication technology may play an important role in influencing electoral behavior’. In particular, the internet has been promoted as a channel through which the young may become politically mobilised (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010: 25). Here we examine the use of social networking sites in political communications in Ireland. Boyd and Ellison (2007: 211) define such sites as:

... web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

This study, using in-depth interviews and focus groups, examines perceptions of social networking sites as a means of communicating with Generation Z, from the perspectives of the major Irish political parties using these online resources and the perspective of their young target audience. There are two research questions: (1) How do political parties perceive social networking sites’ role in communicating with Generation Z? and (2) How do members of Generation Z perceive social networking sites’ role in communicating with political parties?

Perspectives on the Internet and Political Engagement

From one perspective, the more people are involved in online political activities, the more likely they are to be involved in similar activities offline (Wellman et al., 2001). Lupia and Philpot (2005: 1124) argue ‘the web’s potential as an instrument for increasing political interest comes from the fact that it allows people to post, at a minimal cost, content that can be viewed all over the world’. According to Verba et al. (1995: 345) ‘citizens who are interested in politics are more likely to be politically active’. Consequently, the declining interest in politics among young people may be reversed if political parties can portray politics in a manner that seems relevant to them (Lupia and Philpot, 2005). From this perspective, ‘the internet is a powerful tool for stimulating political participation’ (Zhang and Seltzer, 2010: 164).

An alternative perspective is that ‘if citizens do not drink from the same well of information, will they splinter into communication ghettos?’ (Graber, 2001: 166). Bennett and Iyengar (2008: 717) argue the explosion of media outlets on the internet has created a fragmented information environment, what they call ‘stratamentation’ (stratification and simultaneous fragmentation).

The growth of social networking sites has been one of the notable trends on the internet, as has their increasing utilisation by political parties. In 2002 Friendster appeared, followed by MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook, Bebo, Flickr, YouTube and Twitter. The shift from Web 1.0 to 2.0 is characterised by the move ‘to blogs and blog site aggregation, from publishing to participation, [and] from web content as the outcome of large up-front investment to an ongoing and interactive process’ (Flew, 2008: 73). Web 2.0 gives voters the ‘chance of entering into a real online dialogue with representatives’ (Mackay, 2010: 23). Such dialogical interactions allow for the possibility of relationship building (Briones et al., 2011). The cultivation of relationships between parties and voters serves to foster positive attitudes towards the parties (Seltzer and Zhang, 2011: 42). By dialogic communication we mean the potential, active and quality dialogue that can take place between an organisation and its public (Kent and Taylor, 1998) that is two-way and symmetrical (Zhang and Seltzer, 2010).

Despite the possibilities offered by online social networking for interactive engagement between politicians and voters, studies show this potential is not being actualised, as from the politicians’ perspective it risks their losing control of the conversation (Fernandes et al., 2010). Bortree and Seltzer (2009) found that many organisations are not using social networking sites in a dialogic manner. The social networking sites used by political parties appear to be appreciated for the depth of information presented and ease of accessibility offered, as opposed to their interactivity (Fernandes et al., 2010). This suggests online political communications has advantages in targeting voters, but may pose challenges for democratic interaction (Sweetser et al., 2008). Consequently, Seltzer and Zhang (2011) argue political parties should consider adopting a relational perspective in their communications strategy, focusing on building lasting and mutually beneficial relationships with voters.

The nexus of politics and Web 2.0 requires research, as social networking offers the possibility of a level of interaction between political parties and the public that was previously absent. However, little research – apart from Gueorguieva (2008), Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) and Baumgartner and Morris (2010) in the United States – has been devoted to examining how social networking sites affect political participation. Examining perceptions of the effectiveness of social networking sites in

communicating with Generation Z in Irish politics will contribute to the national and international debate.

The Electoral Context in Ireland

Intraparty electoral competition is integral to the proportional representation by single transferrable vote (PR-STV) electoral system in Ireland (Gallagher, 2005). In this system the primary decisions to be made by voters concern their choices of representatives for their constituency. The result is the concept of a connection between voters and candidates that is stronger than the notion of party representation in the proportional representation (PR) list systems in other European countries (Sinnott, 2009: 112). Citizens primarily vote for candidates, as opposed to parties or their policies. There is debate concerning the extent to which PR-STV is responsible for the preoccupation of Teachtaí Dála (TDs) with constituency service (FitzGerald, 2002).

With the major parties running up to three candidates in each multi-seat constituency, candidates are primarily competing with each other for the first preference votes of constituents committed to their party, much more so than competing with candidates from rival parties (Gallagher, 2005). That said, they would like to attract the second and third preferences of constituents who support rival parties. Thus, there is a need for a candidate to want to be liked by all constituents, resulting in their desire to be regarded as good constituency workers. Consequently, a TD's primary focus is perceived to be on constituency issues, with national affairs coming second.

In this context, face-to-face interaction between candidates and constituents plays a significant part in elections. Over 60% of people received some personal contact from either candidates, or their volunteers, in the 2007 general election (Sudulich and Wall, 2009: 459). The use of social networking sites has to be understood in this highly personalised/localised environment.

However, whereas social networking sites span constituency boundaries, voters do not. Consequently, a candidate may have followers on social networking sites who cannot vote for them. Dylan Haskins, an independent candidate in the 2011 general election, had 3,304 followers on Twitter and 2,402 friends of Facebook,¹ yet received only 1,383 first preference votes.²

Research Motivation: Perceptions of Social Networking Sites in Communicating Politically with Generation Z

Between the 2007 and 2011 general elections there was a dramatic increase in the use of social networking sites by political parties. Yet, the parties' use of these sites as a tool for engaging in dialogical interactions with the public was not evident. Consequently, Ireland, due to the traditional forms of political communications still heavily employed, constitutes an interesting environment for the study of online campaigning. Underlying this investigation is the possibility that if political organisations can 'present politics in ways that are more relevant to young voters, the current decline in their political interest levels may be slowed, stopped, or perhaps even reversed' (Lupia and Philpot, 2005: 1123). Social networking could be a means of engaging Generation Z in politics.

1 http://candidate.ie/?page_id=572 (accessed 4 May 2011).

2 <http://www.electionsireland.org/result.cfm?election=2011&cons=104> (accessed 24 April 2011).

The Political Parties and the Use of Social Networking Sites by TDs

The political parties examined are Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party, which have historically constituted the three main parties of Irish politics. Between them they won 89% of the seats in Dáil Éireann in the 2007 general election and 80% in the 2011 general election. Table 1 shows the number of seats, out of an overall total of 166, held in the Dáil by each party following every general election since the turn of the century. In the 2011 general election, while support for Fianna Fáil collapsed as a result of its economic mismanagement, most of its lost seats went to Fine Gael and the Labour Party.

Table 1: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour in Dáil Éireann

	2002	2007	2011
Fianna Fáil	81	77	20
Fine Gael	31	51	76
Labour Party	20	20	37

Source: <http://electionsireland.org/results/general/>

A 2010 Pembroke Communications survey found that 86% of the TDs they sampled were using Facebook, 42% Twitter, 35% blogs and 11% YouTube to communicate with the public.³ However, over 90% of Fine Gael TDs were using Twitter, as they considered it an important part of their communications mix. Overall, 77% of all TDs were using social networking tools, up from 32% during the 2007 general election.⁴ The survey discovered that while almost 90% of politicians felt social networking was altering their communications with constituents, 60% believed face-to-face communication was critical.⁵ As Table 2 shows, the survey discovered TDs intended to increase their use of social networking sites.

Table 2: TDs' usage of social networking sites in 2010

<i>Social networking sites</i>	<i>% Usage 2010</i>	<i>% Future Usage</i>
Facebook	86	96
Twitter	42	65
Blogs	35	50
YouTube	11	50

Source: http://archive.galwayindependent.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23214&Itemid=82

³ http://archive.galwayindependent.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23214&Itemid=82 (accessed 14 December 2011).

⁴ http://archive.galwayindependent.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23214&Itemid=82 (accessed 14 December 2011).

⁵ <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/finance/2010/0521/1224270806356.html> (accessed 14 December 2011).

During the 2011 general election, most of the 566 candidates had a profile on Twitter, Facebook, or sometimes both. For example, in the rural constituency of Cavan-Monaghan only two of the 14 candidates were not on either Twitter or Facebook (Denning, 2011). Table 3 shows that in the 2011 general election the majority of candidates from the three major parties had either a Twitter or Facebook profile, with the majority of Fine Gael and Labour candidates having both.

Table 3: Candidates' presence on Twitter and Facebook during the 2011 general election

	<i>Number of Candidates</i>	<i>On Twitter</i>	<i>On Facebook</i>	<i>On Facebook and Twitter</i>	<i>No Presence</i>
Fianna Fáil	72	26	44	19	21
Fine Gael	103	73	90	69	9
Labour	67	44	56	40	7

Source: http://candidate.ie/?page_id=213

Identifying Generation Z

While there is no specific definition for Generation Z, it is regarded as that First World generation born after the advent of the internet (Tapscott, 2009: 16). Generation Z is considered as beginning around 1990, making its oldest members 21 years of age. Based on the 2006 census, we estimate there are 225,000 members of this generation eligible to vote in Ireland. A major difference between Generations Z and Y – Y being born between 1978 and 1990 (Tulgan and Martin, 2001) – is that some members of Y existed in the pre-mass technology world. Generation Z constitutes a cohort of digital natives raised surrounded by technology (Bennett et al., 2007: 776). Whereas people from other generations can become ‘digital settlers’ members of Generation Z live their lives online and do not distinguish between their online and offline identities (Palfrey and Gasser, 2009: 4).

Research Methodology

Our research involved in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted during the spring/summer of 2010, which were recorded and transcribed.

The in-depth interview is a qualitative technique that gives researchers an opportunity to gain an understanding of how others interpret their world. Kevin conducted paired in-depth interviews with party officials in charge of media strategy. Each official works closely with their party leader and oversees all communications emanating from the party across a broad range of media. Chisnall (2005) considers paired interviews valuable as subjects can feel less inhibited in pairs. 15 open-ended questions were asked and the interview transcripts coded using a grounded key-word-in-context approach where key terms in the sentences are used to tease out themes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

Focus groups also encompass an in-depth approach to interviewing (Stewart et al., 2007). This generates ‘primary data that is discursive in nature and is best addressed through an analytical lens sensitive to the intricacies, complexities and sub-

tleties of talk-in-interaction' (Freeman, 2009: 229). Groups of strangers are considered more productive focus groups – such discussants may disclose more to each other than groups of friends (Freeman, 2009: 234). In all, 18 open-ended questions were put to the groups. We examine the data through a thematic lens – identifying patterns and relationships between themes – by employing a key-word-in context approach (Lofthlan and Lofthlan, 1995). Eight focus groups, of four to six members of Generation Z, were conducted – totalling 39 participants in all. Two focus groups were conducted in each province with participants drawn from urban and rural settings. Some had second level while others had third level educations; some were employed, others unemployed. The focus groups were moderated by Kevin, who was 22 at the time, placing him just outside Generation Z's age profile.

Political Parties' Perceptions of Social Networking Sites as a Medium to Communicate with Generation Z

Fianna Fáil

From our interviews with the officials in charge of Fianna Fáil's media strategy it was clear they do not regard social networking sites as a superior tool when communicating with voters in general, or Generation Z voters in particular.

Kevin: Do you think communication through social networking sites has the possibility of changing long term Generation Z voter behavior?

FF1: Let me turn that question on its head. Do I think that if you wanted to get elected tomorrow morning and if you had a great web strategy and decided you didn't really want to meet people would you get elected? Probably not. Could you get elected without a web and internet presence? Probably!

Kevin: Why is that?

FF1: Well ... people will say that politicians should be legislators and that they should deal with national issues, but if you look at the exit polls after an election people will say that the biggest factor influencing who they voted for was what the candidate did for them and their constituency.

FF2: Irish people like meet their politicians, look them in the eye, question them, challenge them, and communicate with them. If you take that out of the communications mix then I think you significantly decrease your chance of getting elected.

Kevin: Why do you think that in the 18–24 age demographic voting numbers have declined?

FF2: Politicians from all parties haven't been great in appealing to them, or communicating as effectively as they could.

Kevin: Do you think members of Generation Z have a problem interpreting the messages from political parties?

FF1: No I don't. I think, if anything, people have become a lot more discerning.

FF2: A young person's life is full of media clutter. They have all sorts of filters to deal with that sort of stuff. So, I think you can develop a great website and great packaging, but you'll need a lot more substance than that.

Kevin: Is it important to keep up with online trends?

FF2: About a year and a half ago we approached a company called Blue State

Digital, they were the guys who worked with Obama, putting his web strategy in place. They work with us in terms of our particular online presence and strategy. However, America is not Ireland.

FF1: Look ... you have to Irishise these things. Tastes and cultures and lifestyles and attitudes are very peculiar to countries. But, I think parties can learn and I do think parties can do it a lot better if you look at what are relevant issues and of importance to younger people – youth unemployment, people looking for their first job.

While the Fianna Fáil officials cautiously regard social networking as a useful tool to get their message across, their primary online objective is to have an effective party website.

FF2: Communicating internally with our members is important, as we have 3,000 branches and 65,000 members. We've got a big job to do and use social networking sites as tools to help us organise and communicate better, as well as providing forums for people online. I think that is where the great untapped potential of web is. The centre can connect with the members and the members with the centre more.

This means a website with up-to-date information on what the party is doing and that can draw on the untapped potential of the party's internal market. However, this does not necessarily involve interacting with voters.

FF1: Politics, in many ways, is about communicating to people.

'Communicating to' is in line with the use of social networking sites as a broadcast medium, as opposed to a one wherein parties interact with the public. This finding is similar to Fernandes et al. (2010), who found that during the US presidential campaign of 2008 social networking sites were used by political parties as a means of presenting information as opposed to generating interaction. In all, the officials recognised the untapped potential of social networking sites in generating a two-way relationship between voters and the party.

Fine Gael

The officials managing Fine Gael's media strategy told us the party has been using social networking sites for a number of years.

Kevin: Tell me about style and substance when using social networking sites for political communications.

FG1: Your message must have substance; it must be driven by policy. If this is not the case then it becomes an issue of style over substance, and this undermines the message.

Kevin: Is an online presence important?

FG2: Critical ... and it's not just about the party having an online presence. Its members and elected representatives should have an online presence also. So, whether it be the blog of a TD or their Facebook page, there is no point in those existing independently. Their connected online presence feeds into the party's online presence.

The Fine Gael media officials said they were always ready to help TDs maximise their exposure through social networking sites.

FG1: For instance, take Pascal O'Donoghue, he had a great online presence that has added to his overall profile. We provide advice about social networking to TDs of course, but very few elected representatives need to be told how to raise their profiles.

FG2: They [TDs] feel the big selling point of social networking is that it is unmediated, they can talk to constituents directly.

The interviewees said Facebook and Twitter allowed TDs keep in contact with thousands of friends/followers. This was demonstrated in September 2010 when Fine Gael's spokesman on Transport, Simon Coveney, TD, tweeted on then-Taoiseach Brian Cowen's subpar performance on *Morning Ireland*. Soon afterwards the number of Coveney's Twitter followers jumped from 200 to over 1,000.⁶

The party established a Young Fine Gael Facebook presence to increase its profile with Generation Z. The cultivation of such relationships can strengthen a party, as it positions itself as a node in a network of supporters (Dalsgaard, 2008: 12). However, Waters et al., (2009) found there has been a failure by nonprofit organizations to utilise the interactive potential of social networking sites to build relationships.

Kevin: How do you see political communications for 18 to 24-year-olds through social networking sites as opposed to door to door canvassing and meeting TDs in person?

FG1: I don't think you can ever fully replace face to face time.

FG2: Also, if you look at the statistics the amount of old age pensioners online is enormous. And they vote. So, I don't think we should narrow down social networking to the 18–24 year olds.

FG1: But, we do have to ask ourselves how are we using the media to interact with young voters to make politics more comprehensible to them? I think we have made ourselves comprehensible to them ... Enda [Kenny, leader of FG and now Taoiseach] tweets regularly, Fine Gael as an organisation tweets regularly... Enda is on Facebook. We get it!

These Fine Gael officials, like their Fianna Fáil counterparts, did not feel social networking was superior to door-to-door canvassing when connecting with Generation Z voters. Additionally, Fine Gael does not see social networking as a means of attracting Generation Z voters exclusively.

FG2: One of the criticisms of social media is that it's not social. That one is removed... that we establish relationships with people that aren't real ... that online relationships lack sincerity. Ireland isn't big enough for us to have transcended the importance of face-to-face interaction in politics. Social networking sites are add-ons. They are a fantastic means of getting out the message and their real beauty is they are unmediated.

⁶ <http://www.examiner.ie/breakingnews/ireland/coveney-i-just-reflected-views-of-angry-voters-473894.html> (accessed 19 September 2010).

They see social media as something to be used in conjunction with more traditional communication techniques.

At the beginning of 2011 Fine Gael redesigned its website, making it more interactive, in recognition of the potential offered by Web 2.0. However, within a week the website was subject to a cyber attack (Ó Caollaí, 2011). Perplexingly, this attack was conducted by the group called ‘Anonymous’ which more usually undertakes online protests in promotion of internet freedom.

The Labour Party

Labour used Facebook to promote its ‘Yes to Libson’ referendum campaign in 2008 and again during the 2009 Lisbon Treaty referendum.

Kevin: How do you feel about Labour’s use of social networking sites in connecting with Generation Z voters?

LP1: On Facebook you can specifically target people over eighteen. We did a series of ads on the second Lisbon referendum campaign. It had half a million views and it cost nothing for the ads themselves.

Kevin: The party liked those figures?

LP1: We were amazed at the amount of views.

Kevin: Is there a danger with Facebook that if you’re not entertaining or controversial Generation Z won’t take your message seriously?

LP2: No. I think that question is patronising to people on YouTube. Yes, we all do like the entertainment value of YouTube, but people will research stuff, particularly if it’s something they are interested in.

Kevin: How do you find using your YouTube channel to communicate with Generation Z?

LP2: We get a lot of views on it. Three years ago we decided to post all of the major Dáil events for Labour on YouTube. Even a low viewership would be a couple of hundred views within a couple of days of posting – that’s the equivalent of a public meeting in a small town – it’s worth the effort.

Labour has over 900 clips on its YouTube channel, including conference speeches, Dáil speeches and publicity speeches. This is a dramatic increase from only a couple of years ago, when there were a few clips of Pat Rabbitte (then party leader) posted on the site (Sudulich and Wall, 2009). Labour has been using Flickr since 2005 as a means of passing promotional images around the country and as a photo blogging site.

Kevin: Would Labour view YouTube as the most important means of connecting with young voters?

LP2: No. We use a range of tools. You would have press releases, leaflets, door to door canvassing, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, our Labour website has a blog, a lot of representatives have blogs, then there’s email forums and private members forums. People will also be on other forums like politics.ie, boards.ie, they’re across the board. That said, leaflets are important to a lot of people.

Kevin: Why are leaflets so important?

LP1: Well ... people might only see the candidates’ faces on the leaflets as they carry them from the front door to the rubbish bin, but that, in itself, is important.

LP2: Leafleting is all part of a bigger package.

LP1: I recall one guy doing a complete online campaign.

Kevin: How did that work out?

LP1: It didn't. Blogging alone is not going to get you noticed online, never mind get anyone elected.

Kevin: Which social networking site do you think is the more effective for reaching Generation Z?

LP2: Email is probably one of the biggest, and then you can't ignore how Facebook directs people to the party's website. I love Twitter, but it doesn't direct people in the way Facebook does.

The interviewees felt it was too early to tell if social networking sites were effective in reaching Generation Z, or in changing voter behavior.

Kevin: Do you feel communications through social networking sites will be effective in changing long-term voter behavior?

LP2: I don't really have an answer. It's all new... we're only a few years into it.

LP1: If there will be a change it will gradual.

LP2: One of the things with social networking is it helps the party be in the places people are. It makes the party accessible to them. I've noticed at party conference that there are more young people present. Young people seem to be becoming more interested in politics, but I think that has much more to do with youth unemployment than social networking.

The interviewees also felt it was too early to make a definitive judgment on to the value of social networking to the Labour Party.

Kevin: As the number of online sites providing information increases does it become harder for the Labour Party to get its message across?

LP2: You don't have control of the message, as other websites can spin what you said. Historically a journalist for a particular paper with a particular slant could come up with something negative about your message.

Overall, the party uses social networking in conjunction with traditional communications methods. Candidates have their own approach to online campaigning with some favouring one, or a range of social networking tools.

In summation, no party regarded social networking as better than the traditional communication methods. However, all recognised that in using social networking, they were not communicating exclusively with young voters, but with the broader demographic of social media users. They were also concerned as to the sincerity of Facebook friendships. Until recently, the parties saw social networking as a valuable supplementary tool to be used in communicating, as opposed to interacting, with the public. The unmediated nature of social networking was attractive to the parties. However, there are suggestions the parties are beginning to recognise the interactive potential offered by Web 2.0, and are changing their websites accordingly. Seltzer and Zhang (2011) point out that two-way symmetrical communication (dialogic communication) with voters is important in establishing and maintaining a healthy rela-

tionship that keeps voters satisfied with a party. Also, from early on, each of the parties found social networking sites to be a valuable resource for internal communication. The fact that there were no significant differences between these parties' perspectives on the use of social networking sites hints at the cartel nature of Irish politics, with each of these parties positioning themselves as centre right.

Generation Z's Perception of Political Parties' Use of Social Networking Sites

The focus groups' members, aged 18–22, had Facebook accounts, were regular visitors to YouTube and most had Twitter accounts. Their time on social networking sites ranged from a few minutes to a few hours per day. However, most participants admitted they tended to avoid political tweets. Here are two fairly representative responses:

Participant 6: I don't listen to any tweets from political parties.

Participant 14: I don't follow any politicians.

However, many participants felt it was a good idea for political parties to utilise social networking sites if they wanted to have contact with their generation. But, they felt that a Facebook account, on its own, was insufficient, and should be used by parties as part of an overarching communications strategy.

Participant 21: If they had funny YouTube videos and stuff like that, I think that would attract young people's attention, not just them talking about themselves.

Participant 23: The politicians look like they're trying to reach out.

Participant 18: Yeah, but it looks weird.

Most participants felt a similar situation confronts commercial organisations. However, they pointed out that Nike has multiple Facebook pages, and YouTube channels, and that these online communications are only a part of its media strategy. Waters (2009) argues that nonprofit organisations lag in social media adoption as they wait to observe how other organisations employ social networking.

Asked if political parties needed to communicate differently, the consensus was:

Participant 12: They need to sell political parties like they sell consumer products.

Participants who admitted to possessing little knowledge of politics were the strongest advocates of this perspective. Many remarked that as Generation Z is so exposed to marketing, if political parties fail to package their policies like consumer products, this audience will fail to understand their message. The language used by political parties on social networking sites needed to be closer to the language of marketing.

The focus groups' members were generally unenthusiastic about the parties' communications through YouTube. They felt the parties did not know how to exploit YouTube in a manner attractive to their generation. As Lupia and Philpot (2005: 1126) state 'viewer perceptions – and not those of site designers – determine how, and for whom, a website can change political interest.' However, participants felt that President Obama, whose online presence they were aware of – due to his global celebrity – was more competent than his Irish counterparts in using social networking sites.

Kevin: What did you think of the Obama campaign's use of Facebook?

Participant 7: I think that it helped. It also helped that he is good looking.

Participant 9: Yes, it helped he was a charmer.

Participant 28: It was such a positive campaign.

Party leaflets and flyers, followed by current affairs programs on television, were participants' primary sources of political information.

Participant 12: The leaflets they hand around would be the first place I'd ever think of.

Participant 18: Direct mail I would read, whereas I'd ignore an email from a political party.

Participant 4: I'd read a flier if it came through the door.

Participants admitted that reading leaflets/watching television might lead them to investigate matters on the internet.

Kevin: Would you go to YouTube for political information?

Participant 26: No.

Participant 30: I go on YouTube when I'm trying to understand something.

Participant 27: I would if, like, I was trying to figure out which of them to vote for.

Participant 29: Hmmm ... I'd rather read it.

The groups felt earlier generations were more in tune with politics.

Participant 14: I think thirty years ago, it would have been important to people our age to have been voting. They were constantly going out to protest. Whereas, the generation now are quicker to vote for X-Factor than for a politician.

Participant 23: We don't realise how import politics is. The people in the previous generation were in a worse off position. We grew up in a better position and we didn't have to actually face the strife.

Participant 4: We didn't need to think about politics because everything was cushy.

Participants also felt the parties' messages had to compete for their attention with other media. However, there was recognition by some that, given the depressed state of the economy, political apathy may begin to decline amongst Generation Z.

Kevin: Would you prefer to chat with your representative on Facebook or Twitter, or at the front door?

Participant 7: Both.

Participant 31: Probably on the doorstep would be more effective.

Participant 15: When you have them at the door they have to engage with you.

Participant 9: It can be difficult to relate to them face to face, as they are from a different generation.

Most focus group members said they prefer to see party representatives on the doorstep. They also felt that as Ireland is such a small country the use of social networking sites by parties might not be as important, or relevant, as in countries like Germany or the US, where constituencies are larger and more layers of government exist between citizens and national representatives.

Kevin: Do you think parties communicating through social networking sites could change long-term voter behavior?

Participant 10: Yes.

Participant 24: If they had a funny viral thing that caught my eye, then probably.

Participant 6: If they get my attention they have a chance of getting me to vote for them.

Participant 19: But, they have to tune into what we are interested in to get our attention.

Kevin: Would you be loyal to the party or to the candidate in your local area?

Participant 3: It would depend on what the candidate's done for the area and what they've done for me.

Participant 4: It would depend on what he would have done for me. I would change in an instant if somebody offered me a better option.

The message from the focus groups was that for the political parties to catch the attention of Generation Z their material must be relevant to that generation.

In summation, Generation Z participants felt social networking should form part of a party's overarching communications strategy. While Baumgartner and Morris (2010: 38) found the potential of social networking sites 'to increase youth political engagement had not been realized' we discovered this might be due to Generation Z perceiving the political parties as not paying sufficient attention to young people's concerns. If the parties were to alter their use of social networking, listening more to what Generation Z wants, as opposed to what they perceive it as wanting, then young voters' perceptions of the parties' use of social networking, and the parties themselves, may change. There was a feeling that in using social networking, and in communicating more generally, political parties could learn from corporations. Participants were more inclined to rely upon traditional media for their political information. Most preferred to speak directly to their politicians, although some had no problem engaging with them through social networking sites. Zhang and Seltzer (2010) argue that to stimulate political participation there needs to be more interpersonal discussion about politics based on dialogic communication between parties, politician and citizens. For the parties to engage participants through social networking they must do something innovative to catch their attention. But, in terms of voting, the crucial issue for participants was, as always, what a candidate did for the constituency.

Conclusion

While party officials and focus group members recognised the value of social networking as part of an integrated communications strategy, and that the use of social networking alone would not attract many voters, the focus groups' participants argued the parties were not utilising social networking sites to their full potential.

There was a sense that Irish political parties did not know how to utilise social networking sites. Most focus group members expressed a preference for interacting with politicians in person. Ultimately, the crucial issue for participants was a candidate's constituency service as opposed to the party's use of social networking.

Social media is a medium the parties are still getting used to. Party media officials regarded traditional political communications techniques as the most effective means of communicating with Generation Z. The various online techniques available were regarded as effective when employed in conjunction with traditional approaches. This is related to the conservative nature of Irish politics and the fact that the PR-STV voting system generates a deep connection between constituents and representatives. The intraparty competition this voting system fosters means electoral competition focuses almost exclusively on the services TDs provide at the local level, as opposed to any specific policy differences between rival candidates either from the same, or different, parties. This concentration on the local level impels TDs towards face-to-face interaction with voters. The role of social networking sites, and the fact they span constituency boundaries, has to be understood in the context of this highly personalised, and localised, political environment.

There is also a concern among political parties and politicians that through the interactive exchange of political ideas they may lose control of the discussion, while recognising that Facebook friends do not equate to votes. The unmediated nature of social networking has allowed the parties to use social media resources as largely broadcast, as opposed to interactive, media. Retention of a hierarchical, as opposed to a networked approach, may be explained by the parties' failure to appreciate the value, power, and interactivity of Web 2.0, and by their reluctance to accept suggestions from below. That said, we saw how in 2011 85% of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour election candidates were using social networking sites, a dramatic increase from just a few years before – as predicted by Sweetser and Lariscy (2008). Recent changes to the parties' websites suggest they are beginning to appreciate the interactive value of Web 2.0. The media officials regard social networking sites as particularly effective in facilitating communications between established networks within their parties.

Thus, the parties' media officials, and the focus group participants from Generation Z, favoured the traditional political communications approaches – leaflets, flyers, and face-to-face communication. However, as political parties continue to experiment with social networking – a prospect suggested by Fianna Fáil's consulting with Blue State Digital and Fine Gael's redesigned website – there may be a transformation in how they communicate with young voters. Parties may become less inclined to use social networking sites to broadcast their policies and more comfortable employing them to interact with the public in general and Generation Z in particular. Such a development may stem the declining interest and participation in politics. However, such an evolution will encounter the established structures of the Irish voting system and the deeply entrenched traditions of Irish election campaigns.

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