

Campaigning and Digital Media in Alberta: Emerging Practices and Democratic Outcomes?ⁱ

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Abstract

This article examines the use and impact of an array of established and emerging digital media on the 2008 Alberta provincial election. Based on data collected from a range of methods, we explore the application of digital media by candidates focusing on the role of digital media in overcoming the media access gap between the dominant political party and other oppositional parties (democratization). As a source of comparison, data from the 2008 national election is employed. The article argues that the evidence supporting democratization is weak. Although there are indications that digital media is one area of campaigning that suffers from the lowest gap in rates of adoption and use different political parties and actors, we identify structural, human and financial factors that advantage the dominant parties' access to both conventional and digital media. This appears significant given the electoral success of the ruling Progressive Conservative Party, and the continued decline in voter participation. The inability of digital media to reinvigorate Alberta democracy lies in political, historical, social, and economic factors.

Introduction

Over the last three decades a growing literature has developed examining a “democratic deficit” or “malaise” in representative democracies (Castells, 2004). Canada is no exception and the malaise is cited at both national and provincial levels. Alberta is a case in point. For decades depicted politically as a province *pas comme les autres*, Alberta shares with other provinces and jurisdictions a loss of faith and trust in governments and political parties. While other Canadian jurisdictions have witnessed declining voter turnout at elections, in Alberta this has been particularly precipitous. In the 1963 federal election 79% of Canadians voted, falling to 59% in 2008 (Elections Canada, 2009) and putting Canada at the bottom ranks of countries along with Japan, Switzerland, and the United States (Milner, 2007). Albertan comparisons are even more startling. From a high of 86% turnout in the 1935 election which saw the upstart Social Credit Party capture power to new lows to 44% in the 2004 election, the lowest of any

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province (Jansen, 2008). Voter turnout is, of course, just one indicator of democratic malaise. Other indicators include the narrowing of political voice by an increasingly concentrated mass media and an overall decline of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Internationally, these concerns have prompted writers to examine the potential of new communications technologies to reinvigorate political life by expanding the public sphere, adding new voices, and providing alternative means of public deliberation and political participation. A argument common in recent decades has been that emerging media technologies, like the internet, can empower minorities and minor parties. This empowerment will bring alternative voices and oversight into the public sphere, enriching public opinion formation and ensuring greater competitiveness in formal political competitions. This “equalization thesis” (Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003) reflects a view that sees these technologies as inherently *open* and *accessible*, placing them in opposition to established media that are seen as subject to domination by established political actors and commercial interests.

This paper examines the potential role of digital media in the 2008 Albertan election. Are there any signs that this faith in alternative means of communication can enhance the democratic process in Alberta? Were opposition political parties able to use digital media effectively as campaign tools, to reach specific as well as mass audiences, to counter the historical dominance of the ruling Progressive Conservative Party, particularly their dominance of the mass media? Alberta is a worthwhile subject for three reasons. First, virtually all the literature on digital media and the equalization thesis focuses on the national level leaving out consideration of the democratic impact on sub-national jurisdictions. Second, the malaise of democracy is particularly acute in Alberta. Third, Alberta ranked second among the provinces in terms of personal connectivity in 2007 at 77%. (Statistics Canada, 2008). In sum, if digital media can empower citizens and enhance democracy then Alberta should be a good case study.

As part of its consideration of the above issues the paper first discusses the political history and context of Alberta, examining its status as a one-party state with reduced political competition, weak opposition parties, and a flagging representative democracy. Following this, the dominant claims of the literature on the relationship between digital media and democracy are reviewed. Following a brief overview of the research methodology, the final section details our research findings in terms of candidates, political parties, and the relationship between centralization and control, a relationship underscored by the Westminster parliamentary system and the continuing significance of television broadcasting in Alberta. Here we argue that it is better to compare Alberta to other Westminster democracies and jurisdictions in Canada. Thus the identification of systemic (national) and provincial factors facilitates frequent comparisons between the Alberta and federal 2008 elections. The paper concludes by discussing some possible explanations of Alberta’s use of digital media in the 2008 provincial election.

The Evolution of Albertan Democracy

While other provinces have been dominated by one party for long periods of time (Leduc and White, 1974), Alberta is distinct that, in over a century having no governing party has ever gone into opposition and returned to power. Explaining this peculiar tradition has proven to be a challenge. Most scholars agree on its manifestations – one party-dominance, a weak and fragmented opposition, an emphasis on non-partisanship and consensus politics – but the question remains: How did Alberta’s representative democracy become so weak and

ineffectual? Observers have posited a range of explanations for Albertan exceptionalism, including its economic structure, unique political institutions, and distinct political culture. Others concentrate on contemporary factors, such as the impact of neo-liberal economics.

The most famous explanation comes from political theorist C.B. Macpherson. In *Democracy in Alberta* he argued Alberta's "quasi-party system" resulted from two sources:

One was [a relatively] homogenous class composition, the other was their quasi-colonial status. The former seemed to make a party system unnecessary, the latter led to a positive aversion to party. The absence of any serious opposition of class interests within the province meant that alternate parties were not needed either to express or to moderate a perennial conflict of interests.
(1962:21)

This fostered a non-partisan political culture (Barrie, 2006) along with alienation from the ruling Liberal and Progressive Conservative Parties in Ottawa (Gibbins, 1979).

While a variety of scholars have taken exception to Macpherson's analysis arguing, for example, that Alberta's class structure and society was never as homogenous as Macpherson portrayed it (Finkel, 1980; Bell, 1993) others have modified it by emphasizing the role of staple commodities instead of class (Dacks, 1986). The reliance on particular commodities (first wheat and now petrochemicals) implied in Dack's analysis is that increased political competition only manifests when commodities shift or decline.

Other authors highlight the impact of Alberta's political culture on the democratic process, depicting it as "alienated, Conservative, and populist" (Stewart and Archer, 2000:13). Alberta's much debated populist tradition (Barrie 2006) has fostered a particular relationship between the people and the strong party leaders and premiers making Alberta politics leader and personality-focused. As a result it is argued that the majority of anti-government voters "wander without much hesitation from one party to another" (McCormick, 1980:95), weakening the capacity of opposition parties to build a political base of support over time.

In terms of more recent developments the dominance of neo-liberal policy over the last twenty years has reinforced the historical tendency of Alberta governments to favour the market over the state and reached a high water mark under the Klein administration (Brownsey, 2005:25; Sampert, 2005). This policy approach was less reflective of popular enthusiasm than to "an overall process of de-politicalization" (Soron, 2005:67). De-politicalization has been manifested in political apathy, disengagement and a growing feeling of cynicism and political impotence (Amyot, 2007:502), factors which demobilize existing voters and discourage participation by younger citizens all symptoms of the decline of political parties in general.

Digital Media and Democracy, a Positive Relationship?

If representative democracy in developed nations and, in particular, Alberta is troubled, are there means of reviving it? One recent focus has been on the role of new forms of communication in broadening public debate and increasing the visibility of opposition and minor parties. In Alberta historical precedent exists. Since the 1930s the ability of Premiers to dominate the province has been strongly associated with sophisticated media management.

William Aberhart and Ernest Manning of the Social Credit Party (1935-1971) adeptly used radio broadcasts to enhance their political status. The rise of the Progressive Conservative Party is strongly associated with Peter Lougheed (1971-1985) and Ralph Klein's (1992-2006) mastery of television.

Given historical precedent, the rise of a new media could reshape Alberta's political map. By association with its open, low cost, and plastic nature, technologies like the internet are seen as able to facilitate more direct discussion and participation in politics as an expanded and inclusive public sphere. These characteristics are seen as promoting participation through challenging the monopoly of traditional elites (Hindman, 2009:6). In electoral politics the rise of the internet was seen as presenting the opportunity to "alter campaigning [with] large numbers of ordinary citizens visiting campaign Web sites, engaging in online discussions, using this unmediated information as a basis for political decision-making" (Hindman, 2009:16). With reference to political competition, this has become known as the "equalization thesis" which focuses on an increased ability of small political parties to exploit the comparatively low cost nature of the medium and innovate quickly due to their more streamlined structures (Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003). The equalization thesis holds that higher visibility for alternative political voices will increase the level of political discourse, provide enhanced voter choice, and counter-balance the ability of entrenched political interests to purchase media attention either directly through paid advertising, indirectly via media management professionals, or due to incumbency.

Enthusiasm on the impact of technology on democracy been tempered by more circumspect analyses of the democratic uses of technologies. Barber and Strangelove warn of the influence of the market undermining the promise of "a new communicative egalitarianism" (1999: 579; 2005:20). Others take this view further articulating what has become known as the "normalization thesis" which argues that those possessing financial and human capital are more likely to dominate emerging media by leveraging their existing privileged position at the expense of emerging voices (Resnick, 1999:63).

These two approaches suffer from excessive emphasis on determinism, technological and socio-economic. Arguing against this determinism Anstead and Chadwick state that the "relationship between technology and political institutions is best perceived as dialectical. Technologies can reshape institutions, but institutions will mediate eventual outcomes" (2009:58). According to these perspectives one would expect variances in the impact of digital media on election campaigning in different representative democracies due to different institutional factors. This highlights both the need for comparative research, and an emphasis on identifying local differences that shape technology adoption, and its subsequent impact on political processes. In this way universal deterministic factors can be isolated from significant case-specific factors.

While scholars tend to have their own lists of factors which shape the use of digit media by political parties during elections three factors in particular are identified in this paper: political-systemic, organizational and financial, and media environment. While distinct factors they are not mutually exclusive. The political system, for example, can regulate campaign spending which in turn has an impact on financial resources and how they are used. The political system is particularly salient in terms of key constitutional factors which determine the "rules of the game" or logic behind different political strategies and tactics (Hofferbert, 1974). Parliamentary systems descended from the United Kingdom are said to foster greater party cohesion and

discipline which favor the development of centralized administrative structures of coordination, integration and control including digital media while “Presidential, candidate-centered, federal systems are more likely to be responsive to interactive online technologies” (Ward and Gibson, 2009:35).

Organizational and financial resources speak principally to capacity: the presence of financial resources, skills, structural capacity, and technical infrastructure. While the equalization thesis asserts that minor parties can project a sophisticated web presence with the fewer resources, the counterargument is that resources still matter in shaping internet use (Ward and Gibson, 2009). Financial resources available to a candidate or party are themselves subject to a number of influences including legislated spending caps. For example, in Canada federal candidates are more restricted than parties by campaign spending limits (Anstead and Chadwick, 2009), which results in “a funneling of resources to party organization rather than campaign organizations, and the strengthening of party internet activities rather than candidate online communication” (Davis, *et al.*, 2008:264). Alberta, on the other hand, has one of the most permissive legal environments for political donations in Canada including the provinces with no prescribed limit in terms of campaign spending in Alberta (Blake, 2006) raising questions about the impact of this *laissez faire* approach on the competitive ability of opposition and minor parties.

Considering media effects there has been a tendency to study digital (“new”) media separately from “old” media. This has led to a tendency to measure potential impacts of new media only in terms of comparative market share, in its ability to compete with old media. Increasingly, however, there is a recognition of the need to consider the impact of new media in terms of the enduring role in established media in campaign strategies and the way that new media interacts with conventional media engagement tactics in political campaigns (Small, 2008b). In addition, scholars of political communication are increasingly cognizant of the interdependent nature of different communications channels leading to the notion of a dynamic “media ecosystem” (Hiler, 2002). The rise of bloggers and alternative journalism, for example, has created a complex set of interdependencies between new media and old media including television broadcasting, radio, print, and the internet. These interdependencies have considerable implications for the production of media content (what Hiler describes as “mutually parasitic”), the timing of news stories (accelerated news cycles) and the complex and cascading nature of intermedia agenda setting.

Methods and Data

The data presented in this study is drawn from a variety of methods. This approach aims to achieve a breadth of coverage (focusing on a range of internet sub-media and channelsⁱⁱ) and comparison on specific areas of interest where data is available. The overarching approach was developed for the 2004 Australian election and has subsequently been adapted for application in recent Australian, Canadian and New Zealand elections.

Five research methods were employed for each of the elections studied:

1. Analysis of political party websites for explicit content (including layout, interactivity and genre characteristics);

2. Content analysis of individual candidates' use of digital media (n=112), identifying and quantifying the use and functionality of websites (campaign sites, party "mini-sites", third party content hosting), accessibility of candidates using electronic mail, and the use of, and number of social ties associated with, social networking services;
3. Survey of candidates examining (n=60): Computer literacy, use of different communications channels, candidate perceptions of the value of different communications channels, use of information and communications technologies in administrative and support functions in the campaign, and assistance provided by the candidates' political party for different campaigning techniques/channels;
4. Semi-structured interviews with party officials from major and key minor parties (n=8), focusing on the parties' communications strategies, and the selection and use of different channels in the election campaign, and;
5. Open source data collection, where available (reported below).

Given the number of methods employed, the research has sacrificed sample size in some cases. Further interviews would be useful to develop the texture of responses and provide greater levels of thick description.

Findings

The electoral contexts

The Alberta election was held on March 3, 2008 after the introduction of two new political actors in Alberta: the installation of the new Premier Ed Stelmach (December 14, 2006) who replaced Ralph Klein, and the formation of the Wildrose Alliance Party (January 19, 2008) as a new conservative challenger to the government.

The federal election, which we use as a basis of comparison to Alberta, was held on October 14, 2008 following claims by the Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper that the opposition had made parliament dysfunctional. While also possibly timed to take advantage of the poor standing of the Leader of the Liberal Party (Laghi, 2007), this election led to another Conservative minority government.

Within Alberta opposition parties face a daunting task. The ruling Progressive Conservative Party, for example, have a distinct resource advantage over its opponents. They are able to spend almost four times the total amount of its nearest rival. Individually, incumbent Progressive Conservative candidates spent, on average, seven times that of the highest spending rival in their riding.ⁱⁱⁱ These resource differences should not be surprising. At the party level entrenched incumbent governments receive disproportionate political donations from major stakeholders. At the candidate level there is a strong association between political experience (commonly represented by incumbency) and donations (Coletto, 2009). Given the strong majority held by the Progressive Conservatives, the lack of spending caps allows this multiplier effect to manifest strongly.

Digital media: levelling the playing field

Given the huge resource gap discussed above Alberta is a suitable environment in which to test the equalization thesis. This, however, is not a straight forward proposition. Elections are notoriously complex events involving a wide range of individual and institutional actors and audiences, temporal and situational considerations, and technologies and techniques (Johnston, *et al.*, 1992:12). To reflect this complexity rather than arbitrarily pick a particular “gold standard” digital media campaigning toolset such as websites this section will present data demonstrating the comparative use of a wide range of digital media channels by both candidates and parties. Here we compare the performance of selected opposition parties (those parties with elected members of the Legislative Assembly at the start of 2008) with corresponding party performance at the 2008 national election and with the Progressive Conservatives.

Turning first to candidates, Table 1 provides an overview of the use of four common campaigning channels: individual personal campaign websites, candidate-specific subsections of party websites (“mini-sites”), electronic mail, and social networking services (SNSs)^{iv}. This table shows that there is no significant difference in the level of adoption of party mini-sites, email and SNSs by candidates either within Alberta, or between Alberta and the national election. One area of difference, however, is the use of personal campaign websites by candidates. Here the incumbent party demonstrates an advantage at both the national and provincial levels. These findings are significant in a number of ways. First, they indicate an increasing number of these digital channels (mini-sites, email, and – for Alberta’s Progressive Conservatives only – template candidate websites) are being provided by the party. This shows not only that parties are important in increasing the visibility of their candidates online, but also that significant resource differences between parties have only a minor impact on this service provision to candidates. Second, the resource inequality between candidates of different parties at both the national and provincial level does impact, but does not impact on the adoption of “free” services useful such as social networking sites for self promotion. Finally, examining the two smallest parties in this analysis we see that newness is not a significant factor, with the Wildrose Alliance demonstrating similar levels of digital media use as the NDP.

The adoption of different channels identified in Table 1 only speaks to one aspect of equalization, that is, access. There is however, as an example, a significant difference between a “brochureware” website, that is, a website with limited content and infrequent updates and one that is feature-rich. To develop the analysis further the next table provides insight into the extent to which different party candidates are able to utilize the channels they have adopted. Table 2, for example, indicates that candidate websites in Alberta were, overall, generally less feature-rich than their national compatriots, particularly in the more technically complex areas including embedding video material and implementing “take action” elements such as making an online donation, becoming a party member, or volunteering. Again, the Wildrose Alliance significantly lags behind other parties in the implementation of feature rich-websites, however, for the more entrenched parties there does not appear to be a performance gap in website functionality. This indicates a “two step” incumbency advantage that favors both the party in government, but also established parties who have incumbent members (and therefore are able to invest in, and sustain online channels over time).

Table 1: Candidates' use of digital media, by party and type

	n*	%			
		Personal website	Party "mini-site"**	Email	SNS profile***
Canada Incumbent	44	95.45	100.00	95.45	63.64
Canada Opposition	44	75.00	100.00	88.64	75.00
Canada Minor (NDP)	44	54.55	100.00	95.45	63.64
Canada All	217 (210)	36.94	98.10	89.40	62.67
Alberta Incumbent	22	100.00	100.00	100.00	68.18
Alberta Opposition	22	77.27	100.00	90.91	59.09
Alberta Minor (NDP)	22	27.27	81.82	81.82	54.55
Alberta Minor (WRA)	17	29.41	100.00	88.24	41.18
Alberta All	112 (109)	54.00	81.65	91.07	52.68

* bracketed figure excludes independent candidates; ** excludes independents; *** one or more per candidate.

If websites present a mixed picture, so do social networking services (SNSs). Overall, at both the national and provincial level, the majority candidates who use SNSs employ only one service, with a minority employing two and a very small group employing multiple services.

This indicates that candidates see these services as ends in themselves rather than seeing the range of SNSs available as a variety of "walled gardens" containing different sets of potential electors to be mobilized. The former view was held by the Alberta Progressive Conservatives:

Apparently Barack Obama is using it [Facebook] to some effect which doesn't surprise me. So we did a little bit of that. I don't know if it really took off but the fact that we were there said something about us. It was a symbol. (Elliott, 2009)

Table 2: Candidates' website features, by party

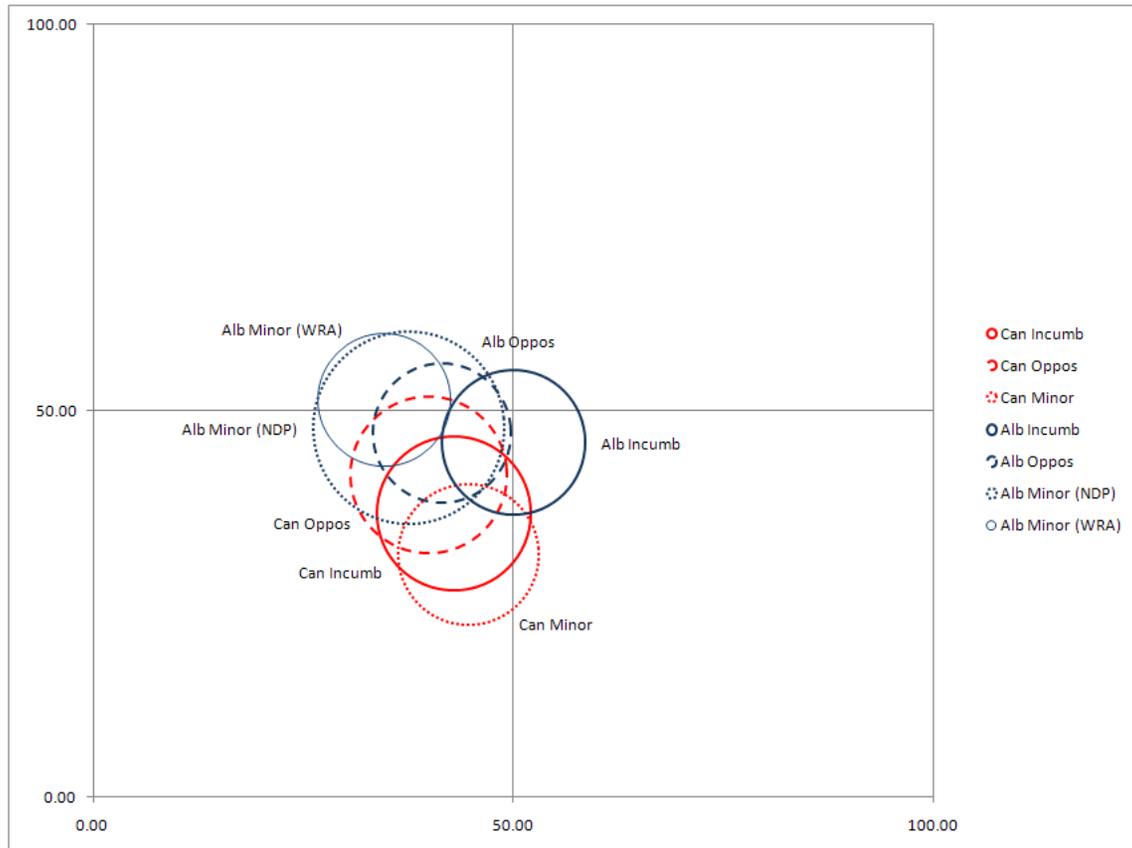
	<i>n</i>	Take Action*	Mailing List	% Feedback form	Survey/Polling	Embedded Video
Canada Incumbent	42	100.00	54.76	42.86	4.76	38.10
Canada Opposition	33	84.85	9.09	9.09	0.00	33.33
Canada Minor (NDP)	24	91.67	16.67	20.83	0.00	45.83
Canada All	80	89.52	25.81	24.19	1.61	33.87
Alberta Incumbent	22	72.73	4.55	36.36	0.00	9.09
Alberta Opposition	17	82.35	11.76	5.88	0.00	11.76
Alberta Minor (NDP)	6	66.67	33.33	50.00	16.67	16.67
Alberta Minor (WRA)	5	11.76	0	5.88	5.88	5.88
Alberta All	60	66.67	10.00	25.00	5.00	11.67

* Generic category for active supporter solicitation (financial donation, party membership, volunteer).

Given the complex adoption picture presented above, assessing the impact of digital media on the competitiveness of candidates in Alberta requires an assessment of the overall position of candidates in the 2008 election including not only the level of adoption of different digital channels, but also the extent to which they were employed by candidates. Figure 1, therefore, represents an analytical construct that positions candidates' (clustered by party) against these two axes. The x-axis shows the number of different online channels or "points of presence" employed, on average, by candidates. The y-axis shows the average level of "investment" by candidates in each point of presence, for example, the amount of website content and functionality, the number of "friends" recruited. The circle represents the average standard deviation for these figures. Figure 1 allows the visibility of party candidates to be positioned against each other, while not favoring any specific channel as the soul indicator of digital media use.

Figure 1 provides clear evidence for the equalization thesis. Overall, the candidates cluster together tightly. For example, while the incumbent Alberta Progressive Conservatives' display, on average, a slightly higher number of points of presence online (their overall visibility is slightly higher), their competitors are marginally less visible overall. The Wildrose Alliance tends to be the least visible of these four parties, but its position on the y-axis illustrates a higher, on average, level of use of the number of channels it does employ. In short, the use of digital media in Alberta by candidates shows a competitive level of performance that is not significantly effected by different resources.

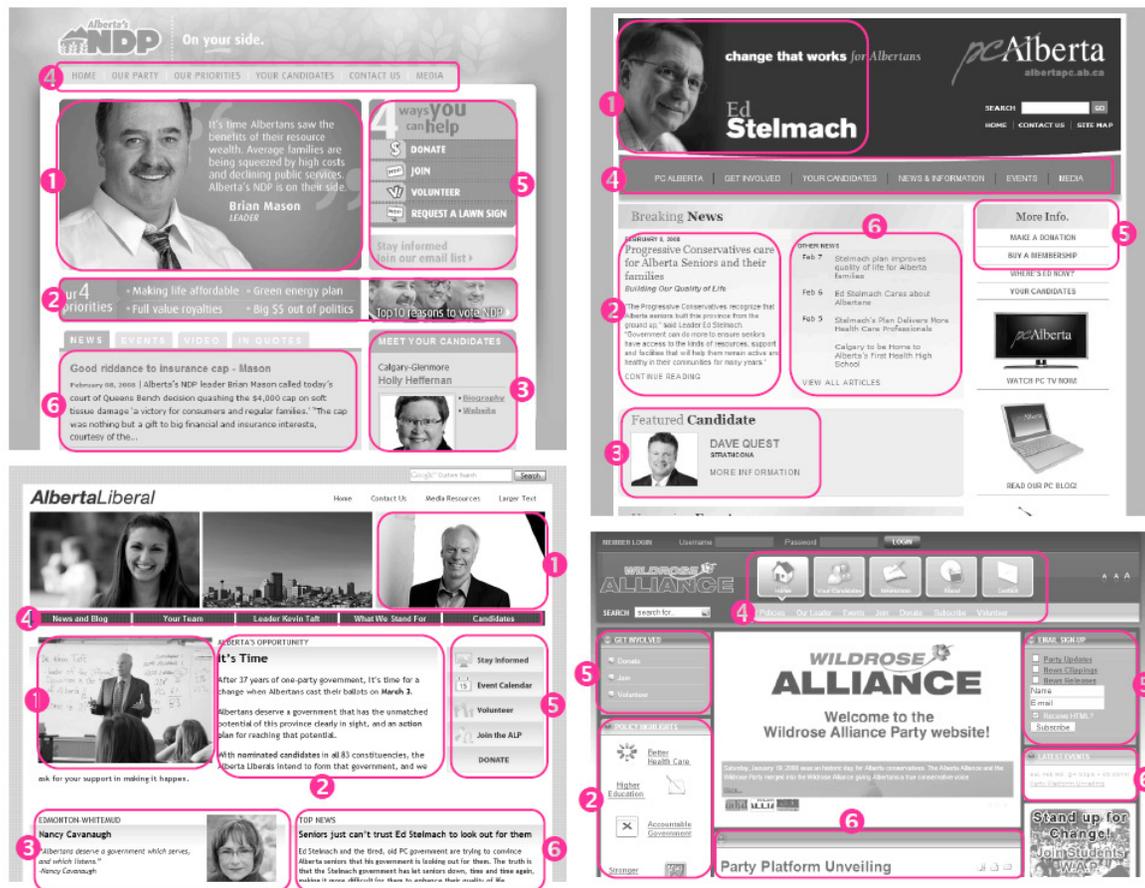
Leaving aside the question of whether local candidates matter in modern political campaigns (see Carty and Eagles, 2006), the next question is, is this equalization indemonstrable when comparing centralized party campaigns? In examining this question we focus on 1) the competitiveness of party websites, 2) the adoption and use of rich media, and 3) internal party views on their capacity to develop online campaigns.

Figure 1: Relative aggregate position of candidates' online "points of presence", by party

Party websites have been recognized as an increasingly important element in the media strategy of modern political parties in Canada (Small, 2008b). They provide a centralized repository for campaign information that are frequently indexed by search engines and therefore discoverable, providing key gateways for a variety of users (party supporters and activists, potential supporters, journalists). These websites have become increasingly integrated into “push” media strategies such as texting journalists and bloggers (to a lesser extent) with instant responses to stories of the day.

In the wider Canadian environment, Small (2008a) has previously observed that minor parties benefit from digital media, when considering the ability to provide professional and feature-rich websites comparable with established and well resourced major parties. In the Albertan context this also appears to be the case, as illustrated in Figure 2. This figure illustrates the main page^v of the four parties sampled, demonstrating that the parties were generally able to field websites that were: 1) comparatively feature rich (including payment gateways and subscription database tools), 2) contained considerable amounts of static content (policy background, candidate descriptions) and dynamic content (media releases and similar news updates), and 3) displayed contemporary design elements (graphic design, use of elements to layout pages and some use of dynamic content presentation by the NDP).

Figure 2: Key party websites, common genre elements*



Of these the Wildrose Alliance fielded the simplest website. Based on the open-source Joomla! content management system, the party's implementation remained basic, particularly around the integration of payment gateways. However, the four sites are notable in their adherence to a very similar set of stylistic, functional, and content types, as predicted by Foot, *et al.* (2007) who argue for the existence of a universal "genre effect" independent of the particularities of geographical and political differences. These are indicated in Figure 2 as numbered genre elements, with only the Wildrose Alliance demonstrating a variation in its approach to the development of its website, in particular, no emphasis on leader branding and candidate feature frame.

All of the above points to a greater degree of equalization than resources alone would indicate is likely. However, one qualification worth noting is the ability of minor parties to protect their online assets. On election day 2008 both the Wildrose Alliance and Liberal Party reported denial-of-service attacks on their websites, reducing public access during the day (CanWest MediaWorks, 2008). While these types of anti-democratic practices occur in conventional media, for example, the destruction of lawn signs and defacement of outdoor advertising, (CBC News, 2008) the centralized nature of these systems make them vulnerable to an effective attack. While these attacks can be mitigated, this comes at a higher cost (Tanase, 2003).

Additionally, it is important to examine the argument that smaller parties are able to take greater advantage of digital media because of their flexibility and responsiveness to emerging technologies. An emerging area of online campaigning, the use of online video, allows this question to be examined. Increased network speeds and lower cost production has facilitate increasing use of video by parties and candidates as campaign tools. These can sometimes take the form of made-for-internet videos that adopt the more informal conventions of user generated content websites such as YouTube with their lower production values, informal dress and speech, and emphasis on current events. Sometimes they serve to communicate messages such as long speeches that conventional media rarely cover. At times these videos are simply “re-purposed” television advertising.

Table 3 illustrates the comparative use of online video by parties. Overall, given the similar length of the campaigns, Albertan parties produced considerably fewer videos than their federal counterparts. The national and provincial comparison is interesting in that there were similar patterns in use, with the Conservative parties hosting few videos online, while the Liberals favored and spent time in anticipation of the election shooting video (Archer, 2008). In the Albertan context Table 3 also demonstrates the leader-oriented focus of the Progressive Conservative campaign, and the emphasis on publishing a smaller number of higher quality videos online all of which were made-for-television in style and presentation. Of particular note, is that while some of these genre decisions were tactical, some were forced by resource limitations. With limited numbers of volunteers, the Wildrose Alliance were simply unable to edit available video for online publication to the extent desired, reducing their publications to a smaller number of long-format videos (Hinman, 2009). The Liberal reliance on their youth wing volunteers shaped their views on the value of SNSs (strongly advocating the use of Facebook for the Leader) and mobile telephony (strongly discouraging its use as “cheesy”; Archer, 2008).

Moving from external observation to campaign director’s reflections about their campaigns it is possible to identify that the general pattern of performance identified above existed across the campaigns. Overall, campaign directors of all of the parties identified areas which they would have liked to develop had more resources and time been available. All talked about the use of new technology to service particular needs, be that access to emerging younger constituents (Progressive Conservatives, Liberals), overcome resource limitations (the other parties), or as “win-win” strategies. In regards to the latter, the Liberal Party, for example, saw digital media as a way in which the party could connect with potential voters as well as providing much needed insight into performance with YouTube viewership statistics proving valuable (Archer, 2008).

Within the mix of channels variations also emerged unrelated to the normalization thesis or genre isomorphism. For example, both the Progressive Conservatives and the NDP worked to integrate technology into the leader tour (interestingly choosing very different SNSs) seeing the tour as the primary media and activity focus of the campaign (Houston, 2008; Elliott, 2009). On the other hand the campaigns took very different views on the value of mobile telephony in campaigning. Overall, however, each campaign reported a range of successes, failures and areas for future development.

Table 3: Party video genre conventions, by party

	<i>n</i>	Or			%			
		Leader focus	Candidate focus	Leader and candidate	TV Ad style	Location	Event	Response
Canada Incumbent	25	40	4	0	68	0	0	16
Canada Opposition	126	52.38	2.38	7.14	34.92	34.92	48.41	3.96
Canada Minor (NDP)	96	75	3.12	13.54	13.54	4.16	81.25	1.04
Alberta Incumbent	9	100	0	0	100	0	0	11.11
Alberta Opposition	24	41.67	58.33	4.17	12.5	0	20.83	0
Alberta Minor (NDP)	4	50	0	0	50	0	0	0
Alberta Minor (WRA)	20	95.24	0	0	14.29	0	80.95	0

The inescapable outcome of the 2008 Alberta election was the victory of the Progressive Conservatives, with an increased number of seats in the Legislative Assembly. Thus, regardless of the competitive nature of the online electoral race, it is difficult to conclude that digital media significantly led to the increased competitiveness of the Albertan electoral system.

A range of factors explored in the remainder of the paper contribute to this somewhat contradictory finding of apparent online equalization but gain of seats for the Alberta Progressive Conservatives.

Barriers to entry, revisited

The equalization thesis posits that minor parties benefit from digital media in two ways. First, the predominance of “free” and low cost online publishing tools expand the reach of their messages. Second, smaller organizations are more flexible and able to adopt technology quickly, providing a competitive advantage. Both of these claims must be explored.

In absolute terms the opposition parties all produced competitive online campaign materials at lower financial cost than the incumbent. Each allocated no more than ten percent of their campaign budgets to digital media. The Liberals and NDP maintained one dedicated campaign staff member to their online campaigns (Archer, 2008; Houston, 2008), while the Wildrose Alliance managed all of their online communications through volunteers and party officials leading, at times to administrative problems as some systems were not well developed prior to the election (Hinman, 2009). However, in relative terms this led to the parties committing a higher proportion of their budget into digital media, as illustrated in Table 4. While this may indicate greater efficiency on the part of the minor parties, the Progressive Conservatives largely used their budget to purchase online advertising (something the other parties did to a far smaller degree, or not at all) allowing them to drive traffic to their website. Thus, the Progressive Conservatives benefited from the lower costs for publication in equal measure to their competitors, were able to allocate a lower proportion of their budget into the online space, and generate greater amounts of online traffic through advertising.

Table 4: Estimated expenditure on digital media, by party

	Digital media budget estimate, percentage	CA\$ (2008)		Percentage of Progressive Conservatives' expenditure
		Budget	Expenditure on digital media	
Alberta Incumbent	3.5	3,006,667.57	105,233.40	100
Alberta Opposition	5*	649,952.08	32,497.60	30.88
Alberta Minor (NDP)	10	816,056.15	81,605.62	77.54
Alberta Minor (WRA)	5**	417,005.59	20,850.28	19.81
	10***	417,005.59	41,700.56	39.62

* "a small percentage" (Archer, 2008), ** lower estimate, *** upper estimate (Hindman, 2008)

Similarly, the envisaged agility of the minor parties was not demonstrated in the Alberta campaign. While some internal "technical" issues prevented the incumbents using mailing lists and mobile telephony to their full advantage (Elliott, 2009), internal organizational problems were also relevant to the opposition parties who relied considerably on volunteer expertise (Archer, 2008; Houston, 2008). This dependency can be seen in a number of examples. The Wildrose Alliance had its website throttled by their hosts when demand spiked (Hinman, 2009), lowering the profile of the party when it received its most public exposure (as a result of the Leaders' debate on television). The reliance on volunteers focuses attention on some channels over others (such as the use of "folk" knowledge about audiences' media preferences, for example, youth), possibly without strong justification, and volunteers are often suited more to discrete tasks, rather than critical or ongoing activities. In this area the more limited development of online systems to recruit, but importantly also manage, volunteers presented a problem for the smaller parties.

Analysis and Conclusion

Regardless of the extent to which the use of digital media has equalized the visibility of Alberta parties online, it is clear that being equal online is not enough. The ruling Alberta Progressive Conservatives won again. What this points to is a major flaw by advocates of the equalization thesis, that is, a tendency to view digital media separately from conventional media imagining digital media alone able to offset inequalities of financial and human capital. However, once conventional media is acknowledged we can see that it remains as the preferred means of communicating to voters by both parties and candidates. For example, viewed through the comparative allocation of funding by parties one can see an enduring preference for conventional media either in terms of paid advertising or unpaid news coverage. This is also true of candidates, who reported a tendency to value conventional media channels over digital. This preference has a number of resource allocation implications. First, it is unsurprising candidates and parties continue to invest most of their resources into conventional media channels. Second, and importantly for understanding the adoption of digital media, candidates tend to see a greater level of performance gap in their use of conventional media when compared with digital media.

This can be examined by means of candidate survey data that asked candidates to assess the value of a number of conventional versus digital media channels on a 1-4 likert scale, and also rank the level of use of these channels on a similar scale. What is important, however, is that Albertan candidates continue to report a higher performance gap for conventional media than for digital media, as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Comparative underutilisation of channels, by class

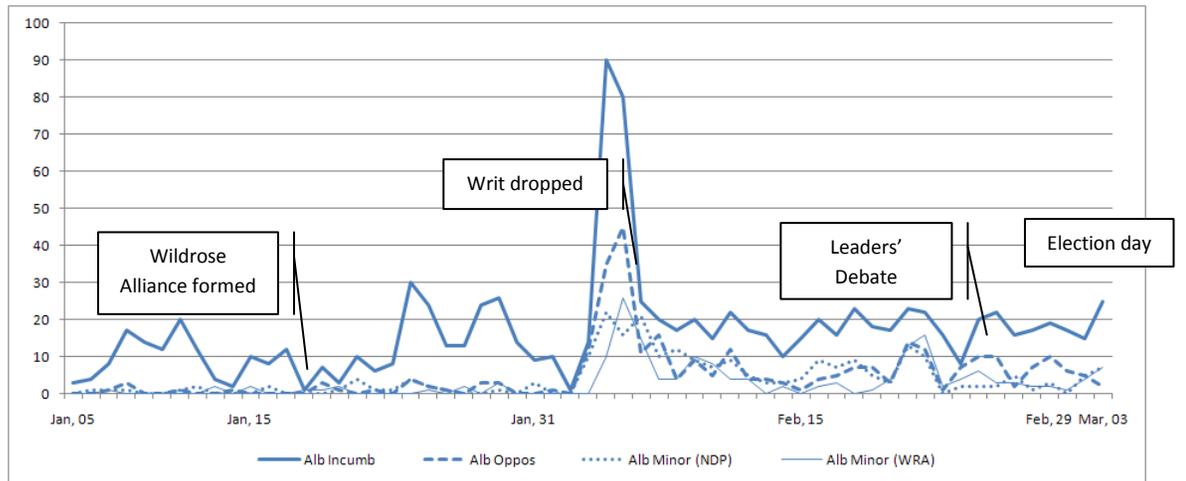
	<i>n</i>	Average underutilisation digital media	Average underutilisation, conventional media
Canadian national election candidates	38	-1.20	-0.98
Albertan election candidates	22	-0.60	-0.83

What this indicates is that, even if resources were available, the majority of Albertan candidates would be putting these resources towards conventional media (particularly paid advertising) over digital channels as candidates tend to match the performance level of competitors within their riding.

While digital media may allow minor parties to outcompete entrenched ones (even if this means a greater percentage of resource allocation to the online space), it is not clear this leads to a definitive competitive advantage. While digital media provide for the potential for “game changing” innovation, these types developments such as micro payments, volunteer organization, viral advertising remain the exception rather than the rule in Alberta. Incumbent parties have a number of benefits in maintaining the status quo: Strong access to media through social connections with journalists, financial relations with commercial media (advertising, shared economic interests), and higher visibility in news beats (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). This leads to the replication of dominant media voices online (newspapers, television) and the agenda setting effect of conventional commercial media on new media voices.

While this research did not examine the relative coverage of the incumbent over opposition parties, we must recognize the tendency for online media to reflect existing disparities of media coverage (Hindman, 2009:125). This tendency can be examined by looking at the level of attention paid to political leaders through blogs. Blogs, in this context, serve a useful indicator of the extent to which minor parties and alternative voices get visibility through digital media. Under the equalization hypothesis, we would hope to see an equivalent level of attention provided to alternative political leaders reflecting the inherent assumption that there is public demand for this type of wider political dialogue that the open nature of the internet can fulfill. To examine this question, we collected data on the number of times per day each of the four Alberta party leaders were mentioned in blogs in the lead up to, and during the campaign period. This coverage is illustrated in Figure 3. What this shows is that, while opposition party leaders get higher levels of attention during the campaign period, the incumbent remains dominant, with more than twice the level of exposure in these alternative online media.

Figure 3: Blog mentions of party leaders' names during the campaign period (Compiled from technorati data.)



The tendency for established leaders to be disproportionately represented in blogs can be caused by a range of factors, including normalization by parties. Koop and Jansen (2009:159-60, 164), for example, have noted the colonization of blogs by party activists in Canada. In our research on the 2008 national election, we identified that this is indeed the case, with message management through blogs part of the established strategy of incumbent parties (Poorooshasb, 2008). In the case of Alberta, however, this appears to be less significant with Figure 3, reflecting a tendency in the province for blog discussions to track coverage of issues in the mainstream media. If one takes stock in the equalization thesis this is counterintuitive, that is, discussion in the blogosphere would be expected to penetrate and shape coverage of issues in the mainstream media. In sum, Alberta political campaigns remain dominated by conventional commercial media and not emerging and alternative voices online, like bloggers. Dominant media frames and agendas are reproduced online, rather than subverted. That oppositional parties take pride in their competitive online performance is natural, but their overall low level of resource allocation towards digital media shows where they considered the major media voices are located. Paul Hinman, then leader of the Wildrose Alliance Party, put it this way: “We knew we didn’t have the money to campaign on TV and all those other areas ... So we were really counting on our website as being our backbone of our campaign” (2008). The Liberals, it is clear, thought along similar lines:

The [Liberal Party] realized early on that they didn’t have as much money as the [Progressive Conservatives] ... We knew that we had to be creative with our financial resources and try and come up with some creative and innovative techniques that would try and balance the playing field a little bit. What they wanted to do was put [advertisements] on TV but nowhere near the saturation [advertisements] we wanted to run. We could use new media campaign techniques to get ahead of the other guy. (Archer, 2008)

As it turned out the Liberals were not able to get ahead of the other guy. While it is true that the opposition parties, with the partial exception of the Wildrose Alliance could express themselves competitively online and were not greatly disadvantaged in the digital realm by the disproportionate resources of the incumbent, this was never where the action was. Nor was

there any indication that digital media facilitated competitiveness in the electoral system or that online campaigning broadened the public sphere and led to greater participation. In fact, the opposite is true, the Progressive Conservatives won by a larger margin than they had in the previous election, with voter turnout declining again to a record low of 40.6%.

Measuring the outcome in Alberta against the normative expectations of the equalization thesis gives pause for thought. In this case, the use of new communication technologies did not alter the pattern of decades of politics discussed previously and the inbuilt advantages of the ruling party: its financial resources, its consequent ability to dominate conventional media, and ability to largely frame the media representation of the election to its advantage. Online campaigning, it appears, remains a minor player in Alberta compared to more traditional forms of campaigning. It is not the normalization of the Internet that should be feared so much as the normalization of the mass media.

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- Mr Paul Hinman, Candidate and [then] Leader, Wildrose Alliance Party Association, April 30, 2008.
- Ms Sandra Houston, Campaign Director, Alberta New Democratic Party, April 17, 2008.

National Campaign

- Mr Doug Finley, National Campaign Director, Director of Political Operations, Conservative Party of Canada, October 29, 2008.
- Mr. Nammi Poorooshab, Online Campaign Director, New Democratic Party. October 30, 2008.a

Endnotes

- ⁱ The authors would like to thank Associate Professor James W. Endersby for his helpful input into this paper, Athabasca University for the Academic Research Fund grant, and Ms Lamia Fahmi, who provided considerable assistance with French language translation, the content analysis of French language materials, and logistical support. The development of the paper was considerably assisted by the reviewers' comments.
- ⁱⁱ A sub-media, in this context, is a communications technology defined by a specific technical standard. Thus, within the arena of internet communication electronic mail and world wide web content are sub-media, whereas blogs, webpages, and social networking services are not. These latter examines represent different genre conventions, channels, and/or online communities. However, it is recognized that this classification is increasingly ambiguous as different sub-media become integrated into the web environment and the distinctions between types of online interaction are more usefully defined in terms of their social meaning. The paper uses "channel" as a meta-descriptor.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Source: Compiled from Elections Alberta data (2009a).
- ^{iv} The social networking services surveyed for the Alberta study were: Bebo, Facebook, Flickr, Friendster, Hi5, Linked In, Myspace, Nexopia, Orkut, Skyrock, Twitter, Xing and YouTube. Four services were not included in the national study because they were not employed in Alberta: Xing, Nexopia, Skyrock and Friendster.
- ^v Commonly the "front page" of the party websites, however the Progressive Conservatives employed a "splash page" at their base URL.