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Obama's Online Success and European Party Organizations

Adoption and Adaptation of US Online Practices in the Norwegian Labor Party

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Abstract

The article addresses the influence of US online campaign practices on West-European party organizations. The empirical case is the Norwegian Labor Party: To what extent did Labor adopt the online practices of the Obama campaign, and in what sense were the online strategy adapted to fit existing campaign and organizational structures? Based on the diffusion of technology and a hybridization perspective on campaign change, it is suggested that the literature on political parties and the Network Party model in particular is helpful to understand this process. The findings show that the Norwegian Labor Party was highly influenced by Obama's online campaign and the US online practices. However, the practices were adjusted to an existing campaign style and organizational structure. Moreover, an essential part of the online strategy was a thematic network structure that aimed to lower the threshold for participation and thereby engage and activate party members, as well as recruit new members. Hence, US campaign practices diffuse to Norwegian electoral politics, and the adopted US practices are implemented based on the ideals of the 'net

The increasing inclusion of the Internet and the new social media in election campaigning has received widespread attention, and especially so during the 2008 US primaries and presidential campaign. The apparent success of Barack Obama's online campaign created much speculation as to whether or not the success could be transferred and replicated in the political systems of Western Europe. This is also the backdrop for this article, and the approach is to discuss and study how party organizations are influenced by the US practices of the Obama online strategy, how adopted practices are adjusted to existing practices, and what consequences this might have for political parties. The empirical case is Norwegian electoral politics and the online practices of the Norwegian Labor Party: To what extent did the Labor Party adopt the US online practices of the Obama campaign, and in what sense were they adapted to fit existing campaign and organizational practices?

The diffusion of campaign practices from one campaign context to the next has been described by a "shopping model" (Farrell, 2002; Plasser, 2002). Political parties do not import a whole range of practices, but selectively shop electoral innovations from mostly the American market. However, due to institutional and cultural differences imported practices will be shaped and fuse with existing practices (Plasser, 2002; Karlsen 2010). The difference between the candidate centered US style and the party centered West-European style of campaigning is essential in this respect (Plasser, 2002). In the US the campaign organization is built by the individual candidate, almost from scratch (Herrnson 2008). In Western Europe the party organization is the campaign organization. Consequently, the entities that campaign in the US and Western Europe are quite different organizations. Chadwick (2007) argues that political parties are experiencing a process of hybridization based on the selective transplantation and adaptation of so called digital network repertoires once considered typical of social movements. However, his argument is based on the implementation of such practices by US campaign organizations, organizations that to some extent resemble social movements

more than they resemble West-European political parties. In Western Europe parties are relatively old and stable organizations, with existing members, established hierarchies and lines of communication (e.g. Lawson, 2010). Consequently, I will argue that the tools offered by the party literature help conceptualize the effect of new technology on political party organization and communication and expand Chadwick's (2007) hybridization perspective.

The Norwegian Labor Party is an interesting case as Internet penetration in Norway is very high, and the campaign environment differs from the US situation and resembles the ideal West European campaign style (cf. Plasser and Plasser, 2002). The political parties are strong and carry many of the characteristics of the traditional mass party (Heidar & Saglie, 2003). The Labor Party is the largest most resourceful party in Norway. Consequently, the party had the resources, both regarding personnel and financially, to invest heavily in their online presence before the 2009 election.

The article proceeds with an account of the diffusion of campaign practices and the hybridization perspective on campaign change, a discussion of political parties and online campaigning, and a section which discusses party models and online practices. In the empirical analysis the extent to which US practices were adopted by the Norwegian Labor Party and how these practices were adapted to the campaign environment and the existing party organization is scrutinized. In the final section of the paper I relate the findings to the framework sketched out initially.

Diffusion of Campaign Practices and Campaign Change

Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system (Rogers, 1995, p. 5). In this article we are interested in the diffusion of innovations between systems. Numerous studies have explored

the diffusion of policy innovations from one country to the next (e.g. Dobbin et al., 2007; Teigen, 2012, Weyland, 2005). Amongst other factors, these studies focus on how policies spread because countries copy policies that work elsewhere, and governments can learn from the success and failures of other. Moreover, the perceptions of success will impact the likelihood of adoption (Dobbin et al., 2007). As mentioned initially, in the literature on political campaigning, such processes are often referred to as a shopping model (Farrell 2002, cf. Schmidt-Beck 2007, p. 749). Parties in different countries do not import a wide range of overseas campaign practices, but selectively shop on mostly the American market.

Hence the diffusion of campaign practices can be related to the hybridization model of campaign change (Plasser 2002, Karlsen 2010).¹ Plasser (2002) argues that campaign change can be perceived as a process of hybridization in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices (cf. Pieterse, 1997).² In the same manner, different features of US online practices might apply to different campaign environments, and when applied, they are shaped in relation to existing campaign practices (Plasser, 2002; Karlsen 2010).³ As mentioned, Plasser (2002) distinguishes between a US and a West European style of campaigning. In the West-European model the party organization is the campaign organization, and the individual candidates are rather part of a greater party campaign organization, while the candidates build their own organizations in the US campaign. Moreover, the US style is capital-intensive, money-driven, consultancy-based, highly professionalized, highly individualized, and regionalized in focus, with considerable emphasis on voter-targeting and TV ads. The European Style on the other hand is party-centered, labor-intensive, publicly financed, managed by party staff, moderately professionalized, and highly centralized, with a nationwide focus and little use of micro-targeting strategies and TV ads (Plasser, 2002). Important in our context is the fact that

European political parties are permanent or at least enduring organizations with multiple functions and tasks than the more ad hoc US campaign organizations.

Political Parties and Online Campaigning

In the US campaign context the Internet has had the most influence concerning organizing, financing and mobilizing electorates. This was already obvious in Howard Dean's bid to become the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004 (Hindman, 2005, 2009; Chadwick 2007), which was widely considered – by scholars and commentators alike – as the final breakthrough of the Internet in electoral politics (see Gibson, 2004, p. 100). Hence, in ten years' time some US campaign organizations had moved beyond thinking of the website as an electronic brochure and viewed it as a type of electronic headquarters (Foot and Schneider, 2006: 10). The potential and importance of ICTs became even clearer during Obama's 2008 primary and presidential campaign (e.g. Vaccari, 2010; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011), and the online strategy has been described as a cornerstone of the campaign (Panagopoulos & Francia, 2009, p. 317). Obama's campaign manager, David Plouffe (2009, 378), sums up the use of technology:

Technology played a key role in our success ... We realized that a smart and large Internet presence was the best way to provide people with the opportunity and the tools to get involved in the campaign ... Established tactics like press interviews, TV ads, and mail pieces would of course be an important part of our arsenal. But we put a huge premium on direct digital communication, as well as on the power of human beings' talking to human beings, online, on the phone, and at the door.

Moreover, while the new media group (online communications, web-page development and maintenance, texting) normally report to the communications department in US campaign

organizations, the head of the new media department in the Obama campaign, Joe Rospars, reported directly to the campaign manager (Plouffe 2009, p. 36).

The Obama campaign used their social networking site, MyBarackObama (MyBO), as well as Facebook, to organize local volunteers on their own initiative (e.g. Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Consequently, a local organization of volunteers was often up and running before the Obama team was able to place a formal organization in the state. The Obama campaign was said to work out of 770 field offices and included 1.5 million active volunteers (Panagopoulos & Francia, 2009, p. 317). Moreover, the campaign used their mass rallies to collect e-mail addresses and a large proportion of the attendants signed up as volunteers or contributed financially to the campaign (Plouffe, 2009: 47-48). In addition to online discussions and communication, the social networking site was especially important for organizing offline activities like volunteer groups, meetings, phone calls and canvassing efforts (Plouffe, 2009; Harfoush, 2009).⁴ The online practices of the Obama campaign was perhaps not too innovative, but relied on practices which has developed over time and can now be considered fairly standardized US practices (cf. Hindman 2005, 2009, on the Dean campaign etc.).

The US experience concerning ICTs' influence on fundraising, organization and mobilization is to some extent less relevant in a West-European context. Studies of ICTs in electoral politics in Western Europe have focused on both intra-party use and the external use on the electoral arena (cf. Gibson, 2004; Gibson & Ward, 2009). The studies of the parties' use of the Internet on the electoral arena have mostly focused on the party websites. In general Gibson and Ward (2009, p. 93) argue that these studies have revealed two main tendencies: First, standardization towards information dissemination on the party websites and, second, conservatism when it comes to using the interactive possibilities offered by the new media. Moreover, Lilleker and Jackson (2011) offer some evidence that parties in the UK and Germany were influenced by the Obama campaign, and adopted some of the US online

practices, as the 2009 elections saw a greater focus on participatory online practices in both countries.

Party Models and Online Practices

The literature on web-campaigning and the parties' use of new technology has arguably been too far removed from the literature on political parties (see e.g. Gibson & Ward, 2009).

However, some scholars have discussed parties and ICTs in relation to ideal party models.⁵

Margetts (2006) has suggested the cyber party model. Her main point is that ICTs could enhance parties at the grass-roots by offering a looser definition of membership. Løfgren and Smith (2003) argues that ICTs enable both a model where parties' use the technology solely for marketing purposes, as well as a model where grass-roots are mobilized through the new media.

In a more recent contribution, Chadwick (2007, p. 284) argues, based on the US context, that the Internet, which creates an environment of rapid institutional adoption and experimentation, encourages organizational hybrids. For example, regarding political parties this implies that parties are experiencing a process of hybridization based on the selective transplantation and adaptation of digital network repertoires once considered typical of social movements. Chadwick (2007) illustrates his argument with examples from US politics and especially Howard Dean's 2004 primary campaign. The point is that Dean's campaign utilized digital repertoires like using the net for mobilization and coordination developed particularly by the anti-globalization movement in the 1990s (Chadwick 2007, p. 286). Chadwick's argument is fruitful as it highlights the organizational change of adopting new online practices. However, as discussed above, the primary candidate's campaign organizations are not political parties in the West European sense, as they are built almost from scratch not too long before the primaries as ad hoc organizations with the single aim of

getting the candidate elected (Herrnson, 2008). Consequently, primary campaign organizations' use of new technology might tell us little of the organizational impact on established West-European political parties.

The network party model might be more useful in this regard (Heidar & Saglie, 2003),⁶ and expand Chadwick's hybridization model. The point of departure for the network party model is not how technology affects party organizations, but an aim to develop a model – an analytical tool – that incorporates some new tendencies concerning parties' structure and functioning. The network party is dominated by the parliamentary-based leadership but values its mass membership as a source of ideas and leader recruitment, and aims to increase inclusiveness by lowering the barriers between members and non members.⁷ Furthermore, the new technology enables networks that cross existing geographical membership branches, rendering a thematic network structure possible. Empirically Heidar and Saglie (2003) found based on studies of Norwegian political parties that many of the structures and practices of the mass party remain, but that network structures have emerged as an alternative or a supplement. In the network party model, online practices could be used for marketing the political leadership as well as used to organize, activate and recruit the party grass roots (cf. Løfgren & Smith, 2003).

So in conclusion, before we turn to the empirical analysis, many of the campaign innovations used by the Obama campaign are likely to be adopted in Europe. The hybridization perspective of campaign change, Chadwick's organizational hybrid model, and the network party model, offer tools for anticipating to some extent what is likely to expect in Western Europe. Due to differences in the campaign environment, and the different structure of West European political parties, political parties are likely to adopt some aspects of the US practices and adapt them to their own campaign environment and to the existing party organization. In the next section I explore to what extent the US practices were adopted by the

Norwegian Labor Party and how the campaign practices were adapted to campaign environment and the party organization.

US Influence: Norwegian Labor's Online Strategies

The Norwegian case is characterized by a parliamentary system, a multiparty system with strong parties, and a party-centered campaign style (cf. Plasser, 2002). Norwegian political parties are democratic mass organizations. Power is legitimized bottom up in hierarchic structures by representative elections. Hence the parties carry many of the characteristics of the mass party (Heidar & Saglie, 2003).⁸ The election is contested in 19 constituencies which have from 17 (Oslo) to 4 (Aust-Agder) mandates.

The Labor Party has been the largest party in Norway since the late 1920s.⁹ The state funding of parties is allocated according to the parties' share of the popular vote, so the Labor Party is also the most resourceful party. It obtained 35.4 percent of the popular vote and 37.9 of the MPs at the 2009 election. They formed the so-called red-green government in a coalition with the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party in 2005, and the three parties managed to maintain their majority in parliament (the Storting) after the 2009 election, and the Labor Party Leader Jens Stoltenberg could continue as Prime Minister.

Data

The data encompass in-depth interviews with key informants. In addition I use information retrieved from the Labor Party website. First, the Party Secretaries in all the seven parties in parliament were interviewed after the elections of 2009, 2005 and 2001.¹⁰ The party secretaries were singled out as they are central to the campaign strategy in all the seven parties. I use this data in the general account of Norwegian web campaigning.

Second, I rely on in-depth interviews with the Head of Information at the Labor Party during the campaign, Sindre Fossum-Beyer, and the Assistant Party Secretary Odd Erik

Stende. Both interviews were semi-structured as they followed a predefined interview protocol, but the protocols were not identical as I wanted somewhat different information from the interviews. The Head of Information was selected for his central role in developing Labor's Internet presence, as he was responsible for the online strategies. Consequently the interview with him dealt with the different aspects of the party's online practices and the influence of Obama's campaign concerning these practices. The interview lasted about one hour and fifteen minutes. The Assistant Party Secretary was selected as he is central to most aspects of campaigning as well as organizational matters. The interview dealt with the campaign in general and the role of the Internet in relation to other aspects of campaign and organizational work, and lasted about 45 minutes. I use this data to identify the contact zones and the adoption of US practices as well as their adjustment to the needs of the Norwegian Labor Party.

The following analysis is divided into three parts. I first give an introduction to the general state of Norwegian web campaigning. Second, I give a short outline of the Labor Party's 2009 online presence. This outline is followed by the main part where I investigate the influence of Obama's campaign on the Labor campaign strategy, and study the manner in which the practices are adjusted to fit existing practices.

Norwegian Parties and the Internet

Based on the interviews with key people in Norwegian parties from 2001, 2005 and 2009, it is evident that Gibson and Ward's formulation of a relatively conservative form of adoption fits the Norwegian parties' use of the Internet. While all parties have been online since the latter half of the 1990s, the general impression was that they were online, because they did not dare not to be. As the Internet gradually grew more influential and became a part of people's daily media diet, the parties saw more advantages to being online. So, in the 2005

campaign all significant parties had integrated an online presence as a natural part of their campaign strategy, but were still uncertain of the effects (cf. Karlsen 2009). However, while the Labor Party used much resources on their online campaign, they did not stand out as particularly keen. The interviews with the party secretaries in relation to the 2009 campaign revealed newfound enthusiasm for the use of the Internet. The introduction of the social media was perceived as an essential new communication channel in all parties, and to get their candidates online was an important aspect of the party strategy for most (cf. Kalnes 2009). While the 2005 websites to a great extent had the national campaign message as the focus of the websites (Karlsen, 2009), in 2009 the party websites had a greater focus on participation, echoing the buzzword of the Obama campaign.

It is clear, both based on the interviews and close observations of the online practices, that in 2009 the Labor party developed a more ambitious online strategy than before, and to some extent more ambitious than the other parties. Moreover, the obvious similarities between Labor's online practices before the 2009 campaign and the Obama campaign actuated further investigations into this relationship. The US influences and the adaptations of the adopted practices is the topic in what follows.

Labor's Online Presence in 2009

The Internet and the social media have had their final breakthrough in this campaign, both concerning reaching out to voters directly and organizing campaign activities.

The above quote is from the Labor Party's Website¹¹ as they summarized the 2009 campaign. The point of departure for their online presence was the party website which was redesigned prior to the campaign and, according to the Head of Information, was more campaign-oriented than during previous elections. Every time the site was entered a pop-up would appear with

the picture of Prime Minister and Party Leader Jens Stoltenberg asking for your contribution to the Labor Campaign in the form of leaving your e-mail address. This is a first indication of an increasing focus on getting people involved in the campaign.

Figure 1 about here

Moreover, the party and the party candidates utilized blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Flickr, and perhaps the most innovative platform in a Norwegian context: MittArbeiderparti (MyLaborParty). The resemblance to MyBO is of course striking, and in many ways the platform is similar to the US counterpart. MyLaborParty is based on the external platform Origo. The goal was to offer members and sympathizers a possibility to get involved when it suited them. Anybody could participate in different areas based on interest and/or place of residence.

In addition to the presence on these platforms, the Labor Party carried out an integrative campaign initiative called ‘What is important for you?’ Voters were asked to make online campaign posters stating their own important issues for the election. This campaign integrated both online and offline channels – the posters would later appear in online videos and as traditional billboards – and was according to the Labor Party a success.

According to the Labor Party ¹² they had 308 682 visitors to their website (213 203 absolutely unique users). Keep in mind that Norway is a relatively small country with about 3.5 million voters constituting the electorate. Moreover, there were 90 214 visitors to the above-described initiative “What is important for you?”, and 17 000 campaign posters were made based on that initiative. Fifty campaign videos were posted by the party on their Youtube channel and shown in total 61 000 times. Their ads on Google were shown 13 million times and clicked on 57 000 times. Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg’s Facebook

profile increased its followers by 8912 to about 43 000 followers. The party sent out 290 000 e-mails to 25 000 recipients and 100 000 text messages to members and the party organization. In addition, almost 70 bloggers were organized under the Labor Party 'umbrella or heading: 'Red Blogger'.

During the campaign the Labor Party had, according to the informants, six to seven people who were responsible for getting material out on social media networking sites and newsgroups, for making online videos, and for streaming events online.

Adoption and Adaptation of the Obama Online Practices

The Labor 2009 Internet strategy was highly influenced by the Obama campaign. According to the Head of Information, around 2005-2006 they knew that much was going to happen and that they would have to do a great deal concerning online campaign practices before the 2009 election, but they did not know what. Hence, according to the party informants the Obama campaign was a major influence in this regard. The answer from the Head of Information to my opening question about how to characterize Labor's use of the Internet and the new social media in the recent parliamentary campaign reveal some of the influence: 'Much can be ascribed to before and after Obama'.

The group that developed the Labor Party Campaign Strategy visited the US and met several people who were central to the Obama campaign. Consequently, there are physical contact zones between the Obama campaign organization and the Norwegian Labor Party. The visiting group had meetings with Blue State Digital, a company co-founded by Joe Rospars who was the head of Obama's New Media Department, and talked to amongst others Stephen Gear who was responsible for E-mail Strategy in the Obama campaign. What they were told by the people who had been involved with the Obama campaign, was that online campaigning was not about technology, and not to even think about using US companies on

their Norwegian campaign. They rather said that it was about a mentality and a philosophy: think less technology and more organization. The Labor Party adopted this approach as the main philosophy in their Internet-related work.¹³ The Head of Information was eager to emphasize this point:

We have learned that this is really not about technology; it is about classic organizational work. It is about implementation in all organizational levels, in different policy areas, and about integration in the overall mentality.

The party did not want to engage in strategy thinking with PR people about the Internet, because in their view PR people are preoccupied with online marketing and do not understand the party's organizational needs. What the party needed was, according to the informants, an approach to new technology that integrated most aspects of party work, from campaign communication and marketing to day-to-day organizational work. The Labor team refers to this basic philosophy and mentality – think organization not technology – as the main reason for their success. In addition, according to the Head of Information, the philosophy was always to consider how to integrate the Internet and social media in most parts of their daily work and the organization as a whole.

The essential influence from the Obama campaign in regards to MyLaborParty was according to the Head of Information, to create the possibility for volunteers to organize themselves, to create campaign events, and to invite more people to join in the campaign. One of the main ideas behind MyLaborParty is to increase grass-roots involvement in the party organization as such, and the most used aspect of MyLaborParty was the section that provided the grass-roots activists with arguments about the Labor policy on different issues, which they could use in their canvassing and other campaigning efforts. Although they were influenced

by how Obama used the technology, the Norwegian Labor adjusted it to use mostly within an existing party organization, to engage and integrate existing members in the campaign.

The Labor party integrated the US practices in accordance with their ambition for a more thematically structured party organization which is also highlighted in the network party model. Although membership figures decrease, the party believes that people are still interested in politics, but to get them involved it is necessary to offer easier opportunities for participation as well as organizational units that correspond to their interests. According to the party strategist:

If you are really interested in the Middle East and you join the Labor Party, the chance for one of the first meetings in your local party branch being about the situation in the Middle East is pretty slim. We can use the Internet to organize members based on policy interests not just based on their place of residence.

The similarities between these words and the thematic network structure of the ‘network party’ are evident. The party wants to use the new technology to address what they perceive as a problem with the geographically based organization of the party.

As mentioned, the Labor Party also adopted the Obama campaigns’ focus on lowering the threshold for participation in the campaign, and the ambition was to lower the threshold at all levels. Not just the grass roots, but they wanted to get candidates and leaders online as well. Consequently, more than trying to be sophisticated online, the party emphasized getting as many as possible to start using the online possibilities. Hence, all candidates made their own profile on MyLaborParty, and were also encouraged by the central party organization to use other platforms like Facebook. The Head of Information put it this way:

The most important thing at this point in time is to get as many as possible to get to know the new possibilities, or at least learn what they are: you don't learn to swim if you're not close to water.

Consequently, the party was not eager to convert as many candidates as possible into bloggers, but rather introduce as many as possible to the new media. This applies to the whole organization, and the target is to create change:

To achieve change we need to make sure that candidates and other members are online and understand how to use the new media.

The Labor Party also emphasized the interplay between online and offline campaigning. The online channels were used to motivate members to campaign and go canvassing, and important in this regard is what seems to be an increasing prominence of canvassing in Norwegian campaigning.¹⁴ The Oslo branch of the Labor Party carried out a canvassing effort aimed at households that represented potential voters, sociologically and demographically speaking.

In this canvassing campaign the party used a computer program which contained demographic data on a household level and was used to identify residential areas with a high percentage of potential Labor voters.¹⁵ However, according to the Head of Information in the Labor Party, the most important aspect of the canvassing initiative was to get their own people out campaigning. The social media, both MyLaborParty and different Facebook groups as well as e-mail and text messaging, was used to advertise and organize the canvassing efforts. The social media was also used to say thank you for the effort so far, and to motivate people to contribute further. However, according to the party campaign strategists

the online tools were not the most important factors regarding organizing the canvassing effort.

This resonates well with the informants' general assessment of the online practices for campaigning and organizational aspects. The Assistant Party Secretary reflected on the importance of the online tools for the mobilization of the party activists:

I do not know how important our online effort was for the tens of thousands who were out there doing a job for the party in the campaign. They had a mission, and that was for us to win the election. I believe we would have done a good job mobilizing the organization without online tools, but probably not to the same extent.

One aspect of online campaigning that does not transfer well from the US to West-European campaigns is fundraising. In Norway and in Western Europe in general, fundraising has (as mentioned) traditionally been less relevant than in the US. When I asked the Labor strategist about parts of the Obama campaign that did not fit with their campaign he said:

The fundraising part is totally different. However, we did raise 300 000 NOK, small change really. We cannot highlight this aspect. During the campaign fundraising dominated Obama's online presence; it will never dominate our website in the same manner.

The phrase "we cannot highlight" refers to how fundraising is not a part of the Norwegian political culture, and that most people would have reacted negatively if the party had used the online practices of the Obama campaign in this regard, consequently this practice was to some extent rejected. The Labor strategist rather emphasized how Obama used the online tools to

lower the threshold for participation. How people could go online and just a couple of hours later know how they could contribute to the campaign:

That is what we have tried to achieve, and that is what we want to continue developing, that part of it.

Online Campaign Practices, hybridization, and the Network Party

Studies on transnational diffusion of policy show that the perceived level of success influences the likelihood of adoption (Dobbin et al., 2007). Although the Obama campaign utilized what some may refer to as standard US online practices, the success of the Obama campaign, and the massive focus on the use of social media and other online practices most likely increased the likelihood of parties in other systems importing the practices. This study, like a study of the German 2009 campaign (Schweitzer, 2011), suggest that this indeed is the case.

The empirical data established a physical contact zone as the Labor team met with the people responsible for Obama's campaign. Although also influenced by the actual campaign practices, most importantly, the Labor Party adopted the Obama campaign philosophy of thinking less about technology and more about organization. In other words, technology should not be the focus per se; rather the organizational challenges, and the manner in which technology can be used to meet these challenges, must be the focus of attention.

According to the hybridization perspective of campaign change imported practices will be adapted to fit existing campaign practices and the campaign environment. The Norwegian Labor Party's use of technology at the 2009 election is a case in point of how such a process can take place. Although the Labor Party adopted some of the ideas behind and the

practices from the Obama campaign, the ideas and practices had to be adjusted to be useful for a large member based political party.

The fund-raising part, which is an essential part of US online campaigning, was as could be expected based on previous research (cf. Anstead 2008) mostly rejected as it did not fit existing campaign practices and political culture. The emphasis on lowering the threshold for participation was divided into two parts, first engaging existing members and activists in the campaign through online tools, and second, getting the candidates for parliament and leaders online.¹⁶ For the central headquarters in European political parties, getting the hundreds or sometimes thousands of candidates running for election involved in online campaigning is just as important as mobilizing activists.

According to the party informants, the most important thing they learned from the Obama campaign was the focus on organization and not technology. They emphasized that in electoral politics dealing with the Internet is not about technology but about traditional organizational work. However, as discussed initially, in organizational terms West European Parties like the Norwegian Labor differ from the US campaign organizations. Consequently, the adopted emphasis on organization was translated into implementation of online strategies in all levels of party organizational work. This entailed integrating the technology in the manner the party operates as a whole: in all levels, policy areas and in the overall mentality of the organization.

The tools offered by the party literature and the party models help us conceptualize the effect of new technology on parties and the party organization. The imported practices and perspectives are not just used for campaigning purposes, like outward online communication and campaign organization, but also integrated in the party organization as such. Consequently, they used the technology to market the political leadership, but equally important was the way they used technology to organize, activate and recruit the grass roots.

As discussed, this is how we expect the “network party” to utilize the Internet (Løfgren & Smith, 2003). Essential in the network party model is also change towards a more thematic network structure, and we have seen that the Labor Party values the online practices when it comes to developing such thematic network structures. They believe that today’s citizens have to be offered something more exciting than local branch meetings which typically discuss municipal politics, or may not discuss politics at all but stick to organizational matters. Hence, thematic network structures are believed to increase participation not only during campaigns, but in party politics as such. Moreover, this study also shows that the central party considers members essential for carrying out campaigning at the grass-root level. The online strategy during the 2009 campaign was mostly about engaging existing members and party sympathizers, but the aim in the long run was, as we have seen, also to engage and recruit new members and activists. Labor’s strategies for increased recruitment include making it less of a burden and more attractive to join the party through a thematic network structure, and to give new recruits instant possibilities for participation.

To be able to develop more intimate relationships between individuals who already have an affinity with the party is considered an essential aspect of the Internet for campaigning purposes (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011, 144). In this manner, the internet and social media are indeed creating new opportunities for political organizations to diversify their repertoires (cf. Chadwick, 2007). The import of US presidential campaign online practices, expanded the repertoires of the Norwegian Labor Party, not only in regards to campaign practices, but also in relation to party organizational challenges. And by integrating such online practices in the organization, it will arguably be easier to reap the benefits of online possibilities in future election campaigns. In this manner, the 2009 campaign can be perceived as another (or perhaps first) step in a process of developing a new campaign infrastructure. European parties are still large member based parties that in times of elections must transform

their organizations into well-functioning campaign “machines”. The adoption and adaptation of US online practices help political parties to carry out this transformation.

The importance of members for grass-roots campaign contribution could be added as a third reason, in addition to policy input and leader recruitment, for the network party to value a large member base. Especially as grass-roots participation seems an increasingly essential part of both US and West-European campaigning. Campaign periods can be used by the parties to recruit members on a more permanent basis – members that in time might become useful for political parties, not just as a campaign resource, but for policy input and leadership recruitment as well. However, although the Internet is useful for lowering the initial barriers to participation, to what extent Internet tools are good at building longer term party activism is another matter. People mobilized online might easily turn into passive members who drop out fairly quickly. Moreover, Internet campaigns might meet resistance from long term members who constitute the backbone of parties (cf. Pedersen & Saglie 2005). These are essential topics for future research.

In Norway, like the US, the Internet and ICTs have not really changed the fundamentals of campaign organization and strategy (Foot & Schneider 2006). For example, the strategy of Obama’s New Media Department was according to themselves, to make old techniques, like call centers, more efficient (Thomas 2009). The Chris Hughes, leader of the Social Networking part of the New Media Department, stated that ‘When computer applications really take off, they make something people have always done and make it easier for them to do it. And maybe bigger.’¹⁷ The director of Obama’s New Media Department, Joe Rospars elaborated: ‘We didn’t invent the idea of our supporters calling one another. We just made it a lot easier.’¹⁸ In a similar manner, the imported US practices are adjusted to fit and expand existing aspects of campaigning in Norway. Almost ironically, it seems that the

success of the Obama campaign's use of digital technology, also lead Labor to put greater emphasis on an older US campaign practice, canvassing.

As we have seen, the Labor party considered their online strategies in the 2009 campaign a success. Still, the informants did not hide the fact that the party had a long way to go. After all, concerning the lowered threshold, 25 000 e-mail recipients are not a lot considering the number only constitute half their existing members. The strategy did not match the success of the Obama campaign. This is partly because the Labor Party had to adapt the strategy to fit the existing member organization with existing (offline) lines of communication, and partly because the kind of movement the Obama campaign created is not really about online practices. What Gibson and Ward (2009) label a relatively conservative form of adoption is a valid characterization of utilization of campaign practices.

This study shows that in the Norwegian Labor Party adopted US online practices are adapted based on the ideals of the network party. In this sense technology, and the influence of US online practices, to some extent increases processes already in motion – like the thematic structure discussed above. Such processes will not take on the same pattern of adoption and adaptation in all West European party organizations. However, the literature on political parties and party models help us conceptualize and understand the adoption and the consequent adaptation of US online campaign practices in a West-European context.

Notes

¹ Campaign change and the influence of technology have most commonly been studied from a modernization perspective. New innovations in media technology enjoy a prominent position as a factor for change (e.g., Blumler & Kavanagh 1999; Farrell & Webb 2000; Norris 2000; see Schmidt-Beck 2007 for an overview).

² In general the influence of new technology is constrained by countervailing forces that restrain and shape the effects (e.g. Heilbrunner 1967; Pool 1983; Neuman, 1991)

³ See Hallin and Mancini (2004a) for a similar perspective on the globalization of political communication.

⁴ According to Nielsen (2009) the use of Social Networking Sites in the primary campaign also encountered some severe problems.

⁵ See Krouwel (2006) for an overview of party models.

⁶ The Network party is based on Koole's (1994) "modern cadre party" model.

⁷ See Heidar and Saglie (2003, 221-22) for the seven characteristics of the 'Network Party'.

⁸ See Heidar (2005) for an account of Norwegian Parties and the Norwegian Party system.

⁹ The Labor Party (Ap) has traditionally been the dominant party, and constitutes the left on the left-right axis with the Socialist Left Party (SV). The Progress Party and the Conservatives constitute the right. The Liberal Party (V), The Centre Party (the agrarian party) (Sp) and the Christian Democratic Party (KrF) are the three so-called center parties.

¹⁰ The 2005 interviews were carried out by the author; the 2001 interviews were carried out by XX and the author.

¹¹ [http://arbeiderpartiet.no/Presse/Pressemeldinger/Bakgrunnsinformasjon-om-Arbeiderpartiets-kampanje/\(language\)/nor-NO](http://arbeiderpartiet.no/Presse/Pressemeldinger/Bakgrunnsinformasjon-om-Arbeiderpartiets-kampanje/(language)/nor-NO)

¹² This information was provided by the informants but was also available at the Labor Party Website:

[http://arbeiderpartiet.no/Presse/Pressemeldinger/Bakgrunnsinformasjon-om-Arbeiderpartiets-kampanje/\(language\)/nor-NO](http://arbeiderpartiet.no/Presse/Pressemeldinger/Bakgrunnsinformasjon-om-Arbeiderpartiets-kampanje/(language)/nor-NO)

¹³ The Labor Party team was also approached by US companies trying to sell their programs and applications for use on the Norwegian campaign, but declined.

¹⁴ Although the Labor Party to some extent has traditionally utilized canvassing, it is not a traditional ideal of Norwegian political campaigning as it is in the US. Indeed, studies from the 1950s showed how Conservatives in the Stavanger area shunned this type of "Americanized campaigning" (Valen & Katz 1964). However, other types of grass roots campaigning are ideals in Norway as well.

¹⁵ In the US database technology and what it offers concerning voter targeting is a valued asset (Howard 2006). The use of individual level data is prohibited in Norway and database technology cannot be used for targeting purposes in the same manner (Karlsen, 2011b).

¹⁶ The Labor candidates utilized Facebook and Twitter to a great extent (Karlsen 2011b), and the apparent success of this strategy emphasize the difference between a Norwegian party centered campaign and the US candidate centered campaign.

¹⁷ Quoted in Thomas (2009:108)

¹⁸ Quoted in Thomas (2009:108)

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Figure 1 The Labor Party Website and MyLaborParty

