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Web sites for e-electioneering in Maharashtra and Gujarat, India

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# Web sites for e-electioneering in Maharashtra and Gujarat, India

E-electioneering  
in India

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this exploratory study is to look at how the Internet was used by political parties and candidates during the Indian parliamentary elections of 2009.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A total of 31 web sites belonging to political parties and their candidates in the Indian states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were examined for how they were used to mobilize volunteers and voters. An online questionnaire and in-depth interviews were administered to the web site coordinators/designers and politicians.

**Findings** – The study found that sites were not used to their maximum potential but instead, merely for publicity, online presence, and to explore the new medium. There was greater reliance by most candidates on traditional media such as rallies and face-to-face interaction. The reason may be due to the limited Internet penetration in India, which also means the Internet may have less influence on voters. Some candidates have shown the way to the potential use of the medium for fund raising and recruiting volunteers. But Indian politicians will likely continue to be cautious in using the Internet.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study was limited to the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat and did not consider the impact or the effectiveness of the Internet.

**Originality/value** – This is the first such study of the use of web sites for electioneering in India. It also documents the development in the use of the new medium for campaigning in 2009 as compared with the elections of 2004.

**Keywords** E-electioneering, Elections, Campaigning web sites, Election campaigning, Internet, Political parties, Electioneering, India

## 1. Introduction

India has been described often as the world's largest democracy, not just because it is home to the world's largest population but also because of the enormity of the electoral process in India and the high level of voter participation in all aspects of elections (Tekwani and Shetty, 2007). The general elections, held once over five years, are the biggest exercise in voting in India and in the world. During the 2009 general elections, the election process was held in five phases from 23 March to 16 May, a total of 55 days.

India consists of 28 States (provinces) and seven Union territories. It has a population of more than one billion of which 688 million were eligible to vote in 2004. More than 1,600 languages are spoken in India (Tekwani and Shetty, 2007).



In 2007, India had 42 million Internet users, which constituted 3.7 percent of the population, nearly doubling to 81 million in 2009, or 7 percent of the population of the country (Internet World Stats, 2010). As at November 2010, India had some 10.7 million broadband subscribers. Maharashtra (the state where the city of Mumbai is located) topped the list of Indian states with the highest number (1,847,013) of broadband subscribers, whereas Gujarat (the state where Ahmedabad the hometown of Gandhi is located) is at seventh, with a total of 656,041 broadband subscribers (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2011). These figures show the rapid growth in the number of Internet users in India and why Indian politicians should use the Internet to reach out to voters.

In a geographically large and diverse democratic country such as India, politicians use various media and techniques for electioneering. They include billboards, rallies, house visits, pamphlets, handbills, advertisements in newspapers and TV channels and masks etc. More recently, Indian political candidates have begun to use new media and technology for election campaigning. The general elections of 2004 in India saw the extensive use of new media mainly by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main opposition Indian National Congress (INC or simply, the Congress) and some of the political parties. Tekwani and Shetty (2007) said that “with this election, the big difference was to be the technological one. After all, this was the major election in the new-technology India, the India of booming economic growth and a rising educated middle class”.

There are several reasons for the use of the Internet, notwithstanding the fact that there is a digital divide in India with attendant consequences of increased disparities (Norris, 2000) between users and non-users. The Election Commission of India, an autonomous body responsible for conducting the elections, may have played a part. In 2004, the Commission put restrictions on election campaigning on television, newspapers and even cut-outs and billboards. Indian politicians therefore turned towards the new media such as the Internet and the mobile phone to reach voters.

Opinion leaders from both major parties displayed excitement about idea of using the Internet as a platform for political communication and especially, for election campaign (Advani, 2009; Munde, 2009). With prominent political figures such as L.K. Advani, the ruling-BJP candidate for the post of Prime Minister, and Gopinath Munde, the BJP candidate and former deputy chief minister of Maharashtra, promoting Internet use it was no wonder that political parties were present online. Such opinion leadership is critical in the diffusion of innovation through the social system (Rogers, 1995).

The present paper discusses how Indian political parties and politicians have adopted the Internet as the latest tool for election campaigns. This study attempts to study how the Indian political parties and candidates used web sites as a tool for their election campaigning during the Indian general elections in 2009.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Electioneering in India

Offline face-to-face visits had been the main means traditionally used by Indian politicians to reach out to voters during elections campaigns. Such “walking rallies” or *padayatras* and house-to-house visits are very time-consuming, costly and have limited

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reach. L.K. Advani, the presidential candidate in the 2009 Loksabha elections in India, said in his blog:

## E-electioneering in India

In the first general election (in 1952) even printing a rudimentary handbill was a novelty. From printing handbills in small printing presses that used movable types – which have almost disappeared now – to writing a blog on my own web site on the Internet, I too have come a long way in using technology for election communication (Advani, 2009).

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Pamphlets, billboards, posters and wall paintings were also popular media of politicians. Newspaper and electronic media had a wider reach but these media offered mostly only one-way communication. There was very limited scope for interactivity with voters in newspapers and TV channels. Compared with these, the Internet is a cheap medium (Hara and Jo, 2007) that provides unlimited reach and it has interactive features. However, it has limitations of computer literacy in most parts of India and has low penetration. For a country with a one billion population, there are only 45.3 million active Internet users, who had used the web at least once in the month in 2009 (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2009).

The significant advantage of the Internet is its capability to mobilize resources: specifically, fund raising and recruiting volunteers too. Internet electioneering gives advantage for improving the communication between politicians and electors. Besides its use in electioneering, communication scholars have studied this political communication tool from other aspects too such as its role in development of the national communications and information infrastructure (Kapor and Weitzner, 2010), analysis of informal political web texts (Malouf and Mullen, 2008) and so forth.

### *2.2 Internet for electioneering in the world*

It had been widely expected, at least since the mid-1990s, that the Internet would have a decisive influence on election campaigning (Anstead and Chadwick, 2008). The growth in the presence of political parties online especially during electoral campaigns has been rapid and global since its first appearance in the elections of the US Congress in 1994. Some candidates had hosted their web pages then though at that time these resembled online pamphlets or posters (Clavel, 2008).

The first candidate to legitimize the Internet as a political tool was the Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole in 1996 (Clavel, 2008). The use of the Internet for political campaigns started in earnest during the US presidential election in 2000 (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Davis, 2005). The use of new media in the 2004 US Presidential election was cited as “a turning point for political communication via the Internet” (Macnamara, 2007). During this election, presidential candidates used their own web sites, social networking sites as well as sites such as YouTube. Besides promoting their respective vision, the candidates used the Internet successfully to raise funds, respond to queries from voters, recruit supporters and volunteers and mobilize the voters (Jacobs, 2005).

Foreign and domestic media described the 2002 presidential election in South Korea as an Internet election. During this election, the Internet played a major role in raising money. Politicians succeed to pull the young voters to their web sites but failed to pull them to real voting booths (Hara and Jo, 2007).

The use of the Internet by the former Governor of Vermont Howard Dean during the 2004 presidential elections is often taken by many observers to mark the start of online election campaigning in the USA. Campaigns need to develop and nurture a strong

sense of community, in order to make active users feel part of a larger project, with which they identify and for which they are willing to cooperate with other people (Vaccari, 2008a, 2008b). Dean's online campaigning during 2004 elections was a good example of these dynamics (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005). He developed an online community that decentralized his party campaign structure. His campaign effectively eliminated the hierarchical structure and used the Internet to spread his message and appeal throughout the country. He started a group on the portal Meetup.com, which was an online social networking portal that allowed members to join groups of common interest. His campaign attracted 55,000 people to the Dean Meetup.com group, making it the largest group on the web site (Latimer, 2011). Dean's online campaign, however, had some limitations. With the Internet, Dean could attract white, affluent, liberal professionals who were online (Gownder, 2003) but he failed to reach members of the Hispanic and the African-American communities.

During the US presidential elections in 2008, three Democratic Party candidates – John Edwards, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama – moved a step further and used the Internet in a way that tapped its power in e-campaigning. Instead of merely communicating with the voters, the candidates also raised funds, mobilized voters and used social networking to recruit volunteers. All three candidates declared their candidacies online. Obama broke the fundraising records, mostly through online contributions. He used social networking online and offline as a core part of his outreach and mobilization of the voters during the campaign (Smith and Rainie, 2008).

Young Internet users turned in favour of the Democrats in general and Obama in particular, because of his online campaigning. Obama supporters were more active online users than the supporters of other politicians or political parties (Smith and Rainie, 2008).

Responsiveness to the Internet could be gauged from the fact that 46 percent of all Americans had used the Internet, e-mail or phone to get news about the campaigns, share their views, and mobilize others. About 35 percent of Americans had watched online videos related to the campaign, and 10 percent had used social networking sites to engage in political activity (Smith and Rainie, 2008).

These findings suggest that the Internet had proved itself as an important tool for political communication, useful for politicians as well as voters and helpful in attracting young voters. It was argued that in “just the 12th year of presidential politics online, there is no disputing the fact that the Internet has moved from the periphery to the center of national politics” (Smith and Rainie, 2008).

Experience from the presidential elections in the USA (2004) and South Korea (2002) suggest that the Internet provides ordinary citizens with resources and opportunities to expand their political participation in a democratic environment that the Internet played a major role in raising money and mobilization and drew the youths to the web sites (Hara and Jo, 2007). In the case of South Korea, a combination of the Internet and the SMS (short-message service) of the mobile phone probably played a part in swinging the election outcome in favour the “Internet-President” Roh Moo Hyun (Hong, 2005).

During the 2003 Finnish elections, the politicians did not use the Internet to its full potential. Instead, as with early use of the web in electioneering, politicians used it mainly for providing information and not for other online activities. These web sites were not updated regularly. The campaign sites lacked accessibility, navigability and

visibility too (Strandberg, 2009). The 2006 Italian elections also did not see much impressive use of web sites for campaigning. Though there was an improvement in the quality of web sites compared with before, Italian parties did not use these web sites up to their potential to mobilize and organize supporters. It was television that dominated the campaigns (Vaccari, 2008a). The 2009 British European Parliament Election observed overall low levels of interactivity on the Internet, but it also noted some evidence of the development of a Web 1.5 sphere offering more interaction, but within a controlled environment (Jackson and Lilleker, 2010).

The Internet's influence on politics has been positive insofar as many are using the Internet in unprecedented numbers to learn about the election and to interact with candidates, campaigns (Smith and Rainie, 2008). Active public participation and the presence of an informed electorate are key components of a robust democracy (Valelly, 1993). Information and participation are important for both the system and the citizen (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). At the system level, knowledge and action legitimize political outcomes, and create possibility for more effective and collective action. At the individual level, an informed and involved citizen is good at promoting his or her self-interest, more satisfied with the process of election and more integrated into the political system. There have been many attempts by various organizations over the years to engage and inform voters in order to encourage participation and knowledgeable voting (Steel *et al.*, 1998). It is argued that in many respects, web sites might be considered to be analogous to individuals or organizations as information sources (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). Communication scholars insist that the web sites should provide guidance and motivate the voters to act (Ladner and Nadig, 2008). Therefore, it will be interesting to study how Indian political parties and politicians use on their web sites to inform and engage the Indian electorate.

### *2.3 The use of the Internet in Indian general elections 2004*

A study on the use of informational and engagement features of the 100 web sites related to elections during general elections of 2004 in India, concluded that there was limited deployment of the informational and engagement features on the web sites. The informational features in this study included: sections on the information of elections, biography of candidates, election issues, speech, calendar, campaigning information, voting information etc. Engagement features were defined as: contact us, join us, register, donate discussion forum, etc. Researchers found out that the web sites were not used up to its potential. The study concluded that the impact of the Internet in the 2004 general elections was limited because the ruling BJP, which put a lot of effort in campaigning with new technology, lost the election. The BJP's own survey had indicated that most of the young voters, who are considered to be the new technology users, preferred the pro-technology BJP. The reason for limited use and impact of the Internet was the newness of the technology to the politicians as well as common public and also to the political culture of the India. Besides these, access, poverty, poor infrastructure and illiteracy also played a major role in the low impact of the Internet (Tekwani and Shetty, 2007).

## **3. Research questions**

From the above review, the following questions were proposed:



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- R1. How did the political parties and candidates use the Internet for their election campaign?
- R2. What were the contents and features used?
- R3. How voter friendly were the web sites?
- R4. Was the Internet used to mobilize voters?
- R5. Was the Internet used up to its potential?

#### 4. Research method

Because of the size of India, elections have to be organized in different time slots. The study period was April 1 to May 18, 2009 because April 2 was the date of issue of notification for the election to all the 26 constituencies in Gujarat and 10 of the total 48 constituencies in Maharashtra.

After nominations closed in the two states, a list of all the candidates (available at: [www.eci.nic.in](http://www.eci.nic.in)) was studied (Election Commission of India, 2009a, b, c). A Google search was carried out to find out if these candidates had a web site. Because Google can take as long as a few weeks to index a site, the researchers returned a few times following the close of nomination to search. In addition, prominent newspapers in Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat, and online editions of major newspapers of the state of Maharashtra were scanned for news stories mentioning web sites by candidates. Other sources such as media organizations, journalists, and knowledgeable persons with whom the team members had contacts were also used to gather the data. The exercise yielded URLs of web sites of seven political parties and 24 candidates contesting in the two states.

(There was one site of a registered unrecognized political party in Gujarat called Maha Gujarat Janata Party (MJP); [www.mahagujaratjantaparty.com](http://www.mahagujaratjantaparty.com)). This site was not included in the study as registered unrecognized parties were not considered for the study. The site remained static throughout the study period: it remained updated before, during the elections and after the election process. The web pages contained just the names of some MJP candidates contesting the elections but many of the features and links of this site did not work.)

The list of 45 web site features was prepared after the initial study of the web sites. These features were categorized under seven labels as follows:

- (1) *Information about the web site*: This refers to the aspects such as language of the content on web site, fonts for download, copyright, name of the web-master, site map etc.
- (2) *Informing voters*: This include the features providing information to the voters about the candidate, political party, election process, current issues, constituency profile, list of candidates, manifesto of the party etc.
- (3) *Engaging voters*: This includes the features used to engage the voters and promote interaction between voters and politicians. For example: discussion forum, donate, join us, feedback, links to various social networking sites etc.
- (4) *Appealing to voters*: This section tries to find out whether the politicians appeal to the voters to give their votes, donate funds to the party, and invite people to join the party or volunteer for the party.

- (5) *Services to voters*: This section checks what service features web sites provides to the electorate such as: search the web site, FAQ, option to search voters list, contact us, service to find out where to vote etc.
- (6) *Media coverage and releases*: This includes the press releases posted on web sites and video clips of news coverage broadcast on news channels or clippings of news appeared in news papers, photo gallery etc.
- (7) *Transparency*: This section looks and checks whether the politicians declared their assets on their web site, or published the letters they received from voters.

The coding frame for the study was adapted from that developed and tested for both conceptual and operational validity by Foot and Schneider in their study of candidate sites in the US elections in 2002 (Dougherty and Foot, 2007). Kluver *et al.* (2007) too used this method of coding in their study on “The Internet and National Elections: A comparative study of web campaigning” which covered 22 countries. This coding frame involved measures for presence or absence of certain features or information on the web sites (Dougherty and Foot, 2007). In this study, coders were instructed to mark “1” for the presence of the feature and “0” for the absence of the feature. The list of features and their operational definitions is attached in the Appendix.

To obtain a more rounded picture, the team also interviewed the campaign strategists and web designers of the web sites. A total of five interviews were conducted. Finally, a questionnaire with 14 open-ended questions was e-mailed to the political parties and candidates on their e-mail addresses on their web sites. However, only two responded.

## 5. Data collection

The data collection was carried out twice during the election period and concluded on May 18, 2009, two days after counting of votes began. The two data collections were to check if the politicians added new features or made any changes to their web sites during the election time. The initial observations of some of these sites were recorded on April 1. Subsequently, data were recorded twice on the basis of selected variables thus:

- Initial observation of some web sites: 1 April.
- Political parties: on 8 to 10 April and on 26 April.
- Candidates: on 24 to 26 April and on 30 April.

## 6. Data and analysis

The seven web sites of political parties and 24 web sites of candidates contesting from Maharashtra and Gujarat were found and are shown in Table I.

BJP and INC were the two major parties having their presence in most parts of India including the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. BJP had the “Hindutva” (a religion) agenda whereas INC adopted a secular stance (Chopra, 2006). When Maharashtra and Gujarat went to polls along with other states for election to form the National or Central government in 2009, Gujarat was ruled by the BJP, and Maharashtra by a coalition led by the Congress. Gujarat politics was dominated by the BJP, having INC’s presence at second stage. Maharashtra saw the presence of



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Sr No.	State	Party	URL
1	Gujarat	BJP	<a href="http://www.bjpguj.org/">www.bjpguj.org/</a>
2	Gujarat	INC	<a href="http://www.gujaratcongress.org/loksabhaelec2009.php">www.gujaratcongress.org/loksabhaelec2009.php</a>
3	Maharashtra	SS	<a href="http://www.shivsena.org/">www.shivsena.org/</a>
4	Maharashtra	BJP	<a href="http://www.bjpgmaharashtra.org/">www.bjpgmaharashtra.org/</a>
5	Maharashtra Mumbai	SP	<a href="http://www.spmumbai.org/">www.spmumbai.org/</a>
6	Maharashtra	NCP	<a href="http://www.nationalistcongressparty.com/sp.htm">www.nationalistcongressparty.com/sp.htm</a>
7	Maharashtra	INC	<a href="http://www.maharashtrapcc.org/">www.maharashtrapcc.org/</a>

**Table I.** Web sites of political parties included in study  
**Key:** BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; INC = Indian National Congress; SS = Shiv Sena; SP = Samajwadi Party; NCP = Nationalist Congress Party; PGP = People's Guardian Party; IND = Independent Candidate

both BJP and INC. Shivsena, a pro-Hindu ally of BJP, which originated in Maharashtra, had a strong presence in the state but not elsewhere. Another party, Samajwadi Party (translated in English, Socialist Party) has strong presence in northern state of Uttar Pradesh and some pockets of support in Mumbai, the capital of the state of Maharashtra. Maharashtra has witnessed emergence of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), which was formed by a sizeable number of leaders of the Indian Nationalist Congress in the state. The NCP is part of the coalitions both at the state level and also at the centre.

Of the 24 candidates, four were from Gujarat and 20 from Maharashtra (See Table II). Six each were contesting for BJP and INC, four were contesting for NCP, two for Shivsena, one each for BSP and PGP and four candidates were contesting independently. Of the 24, only three candidates were female. Of the 24, 13 were from metro cities such as Mumbai (7), Pune (4), Nashik (1), and Vadodara (1); three were from smaller cities. The remaining eight were from rural areas such as Beed, Sangli, Shirur, Maval, Ratnagiri-Sindhudurga, Raigad and Navasari.

## 7. Analyses of web sites of political parties

The study covered a total of five web sites of political parties in Maharashtra and two from Gujarat. The five parties in Maharashtra were Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee, BJP Maharashtra, Nationalist Congress Party Maharashtra Pradesh, Samajwadi Party Mumbai and Shiv Sena. Except for Shiv Sena, which was recognized as a state political party in Maharashtra, all the other parties were state units of the national political parties of India. In Gujarat state, Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee (GPCC) and Bharatiya Janata Party Gujarat (BJP Gujarat) state units have their sites. Data about the sites were collected over two periods to allow for updates; in most cases, however, the contents were not changed substantially.

### 7.1 Top-level domain names

None of the political parties had an Indian country-code top-level domain (ccTLD) name that ended with .IN. The Indian ccTLD space was liberalized from 2004. Until then, only about 7,000 sites were registered (Mohan, 2005). Perhaps the political parties found it easier to register their respective web sites at a TLD, and so most chose the easier path of using .org. Nevertheless, by 2006, there were calls by government

Sr No	Candidate	Constituency	Political party	URL
<i>Gujarat</i>				
1	L.K. Advani	Gandhinagar	BJP	<a href="http://lkadvani.in">http://lkadvani.in</a>
2	Mallika Sarabhai	Gandhinagar	IND	<a href="http://www.mallikasarabhai.in">www.mallikasarabhai.in</a>
3	C.R. Patil	Navsari	BJP	<a href="http://crpatil.com/">http://crpatil.com/</a>
4	Satyajit Gayakwad	Vadodara	INC	<a href="http://satyajitgaekwad.com">http://satyajitgaekwad.com</a>
<i>Maharashtra</i>				
5	Gopinath Munde	Beed	BJP	<a href="http://www.gopinathmunde.com">www.gopinathmunde.com</a>
6	Anil Shirole	Pune	BJP	<a href="http://www.anilshirole.com/">www.anilshirole.com/</a>
7	Ram Naik	Mumbai North	BJP	<a href="http://www.ramnaik.com/">www.ramnaik.com/</a>
8	Kirit Somaiya	Mumbai North East	BJP	<a href="http://www.kiritsomaiya.com/">www.kiritsomaiya.com/</a>
9	D S Kulkarni	Pune	BSP	<a href="http://dskforpune.com/">http://dskforpune.com/</a>
10	Milind Murli Deora	Mumbai South	INC	<a href="http://www.milinddeora.com/">www.milinddeora.com/</a>
11	Priya Sunil Dutt	Mumbai North Central	INC	<a href="http://www.priyadutt.org/">www.priyadutt.org/</a>
12	Gurudas Kamat	Mumbai North West	INC	<a href="http://www.gurudaskamat.org/">www.gurudaskamat.org/</a>
13	Pratik Prakashbapu Patil	Sangli	INC	<a href="http://www.pratikpatil.com">www.pratikpatil.com</a>
14	Suresh Shamrao Kalmadi	Pune	INC	<a href="http://www.sureshkalmadi.org">www.sureshkalmadi.org</a>
15	Dr.Sanjeev Ganesh Naik	Thane	NCP	<a href="http://www.sanjeevgnaik.com/">www.sanjeevgnaik.com/</a>
16	Vilas Lande	Shirur	NCP	<a href="http://www.vilaslande.com">www.vilaslande.com</a>
17	Azam Pansare	Maval	NCP	<a href="http://www.azampansare.com">www.azampansare.com</a>
18	Samir Bhujbal	Nashik	NCP	<a href="http://www.samirbhujbal.com">www.samirbhujbal.com</a>
19	Adhalrao Shivaji Dattatray	Shirur	SS	<a href="http://www.shivajirao.com">www.shivajirao.com</a>
20	Suresh Prabhakar Prabhu	Ratnagiri – Sindhudurg	SS	<a href="http://www.sureshprabhu.in/">www.sureshprabhu.in/</a>
21	Arun R.Kejriwal (advocate)	26 Mumbai north	IND	<a href="http://arunkejriwal.com">http://arunkejriwal.com</a>
22	Meera Sanyal	Mumbai south	IND	<a href="http://www.meerahsanyal.in">www.meerahsanyal.in</a>
23	Pravin Madhukar Thakur (advocate)	Raigad	IND	<a href="http://pravinmthakur.com/">http://pravinmthakur.com/</a>
24	Arun Bhatia	Pune	PGP	<a href="http://www.arunbhatiaelect.com/">www.arunbhatiaelect.com/</a>

**Table II.**  
Web sites of candidates  
included in study

officials to register with the .IN name to identify themselves with India (Afilias, 2006). Such a decision regarding the naming of the domain name would require a high-level decision maker within an organization. That all the political parties, without exception, maintained a TLD instead of a ccTLD suggests quite strongly that the thought given to web sites would probably have been relegated to more junior staff, who would not be aware of the political nuances of the level of a domain name. That the Nationalist Congress Party even used a .com instead of a .org illustrates the ignorance, oversight or neglect (See Table III).

The features that were not present on any of the party web sites included in the study are tabulated in Table IV.

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Sr No.	Contents	BJP (MH)	BJP (GJ)	INC (MH)	INC (GJ)	NCP (MH)	SP (MH)	SS (MH)
1	English language	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	Copyright	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
3	Webmaster	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
4	Visitors' counter	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
5	History of the party	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
6	Manifesto	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
7	List of candidates	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
8	Campaign schedule	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
9	Organizational structure	0	1	1	1	1	1	0
10	Office bearers	0	1	1	1	1	1	0
11	Link to the web site of National Party	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
12	Party achievements	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
13	Info about last elections	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
14	Feedback, comments, suggestions	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
15	Audio/video features	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
16	Facebook	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
17	Orkut	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
18	Twitter	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
19	Blog	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
20	RSS feed	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
21	Opinion poll	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
22	Appeal to vote	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
23	Invitation to join	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
24	Volunteer	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
25	What is new?	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
26	Voter list	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
27	Address	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
28	Phone number	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
29	Fax number	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
30	E-mail to contact	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
31	Media coverage (Print)	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
32	Media coverage (Electronic)	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
33	Press releases	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
34	Photo gallery	0	1	1	1	0	0	0

**Table III.**Features of the web sites  
of political parties of  
Maharashtra and Gujarat**Notes:** Contents are correct as of 26 April, 2009; Key: 0 = Absent; 1 = Present**Table IV.**Nonexistent features of  
party web sites

Hindi language	Discussion forum	Constituency profile
Marathi language	Appeal for funds	Informing electorate about other important issues
Gujarati language	Search facility	Alliance partners
Indian language fonts for downloads	FAQ	Where to vote
Indication of last update of the web site	Contact details	Declaration of assets
Site map	Mobile number	Letters from users

### 7.2 Updates

None of the parties updated their sites daily. Especially with modern software programmes, it is technologically easy to update the contents in real time. The main cost is in hiring a person to do so. The tardy updates suggest that the parties have not allocated resources to the web sites because they do not believe in the importance and value of the updates of the sites.

### 7.3 Comparison between web sites of Maharashtra and Gujarat

The sites of the Gujarat state units of the INC and BJP are more updated than those of their units in Maharashtra. The sites of INC Gujarat and BJP Gujarat had more than 21 features. None of the sites of the parties of Maharashtra had more than 14 features. The INC and BJP state units in Maharashtra were less updated sites than their Gujarat counterparts (See Table V).

The better contents and updates in BJP Gujarat could be attributed to the experience of the state BJP in the elections of 2004. The unit under the leadership of the Chief Minister Narendra Modi had used new media including the Internet extensively during the 2007 elections in Gujarat (Yadav, 2009). BJP strategists paid special attention to e-campaigning in 2009. INC lagged behind in the use of Internet during the elections and appeared to have attempted to play catch up with the BJP during the 2009 elections.

The BJP's Gujarat web site was the most updated and well-maintained web site. In sharp contrast, the BJP's Maharashtra web site was totally neglected. There was nothing on the site except the party's name and logo. The neglect is ironic as the BJP is generally more net savvy than INC. In the 2004 elections, the BJP used new media extensively. But after the poor performance when the BJP was toppled from power, all talk about high-tech campaigning was put aside. Later, however, the party realized that the poor performance then was because of reasons other than the use of e-campaigning. And so the BJP again started developing its IT network in India, with Gujarat developing it more rapidly than other state units.

## 8. Language used on web site

Maharashtra state's dominant local dialect is Marathi while Gujarat's is Gujarati. There are an estimated 72 million Marathi-speaking people (6.99 percent of total population) and 46 million Gujarati-speaking people (4.48 percent of total population) in India, together outnumbering the estimated 90 million who understand English (10.66 percent of total population) (Census of India, 2001). Campaign strategists

Party	Total features out of 45
BJP (GJ)	23
INC (GUJ)	22
INC (MH)	14
SP (MH)	14
NCP (MH)	12
SS (MH)	11
BJP (MH)	0

**Table V.**  
Total features available  
on web sites of political  
parties

INTR  
21,4

446

therefore rely heavily on the local language for handbills, posters, billboards, and advertisements etc. Hence, logically they should write contents of the sites in local languages to reach the largest number of voters.

Out of the seven sites studied, the BJP Maharashtra site did not have any content except the party's name and the party's symbol (Table VI). Of the remaining six sites, five had content in English at the time of the first data collection while the Shiv Sena site had Marathi content, providing a Marathi font for downloading. Shiv Sena champions the cause of Marathi pride and language so its use of Marathi on its site is understandable. None of the other sites had Marathi content except the Nationalist Congress Party's Maharashtra unit; but all it had in Marathi was a brief paragraph.

There are various problems a web designer faces while designing a site in non-English Indian languages fonts. It would appear that before the campaigning began, the Shiv Sena site was not at all updated. So while there was Marathi content, the content was outdated. There was not even a reference to the elections 2009. Oddly enough, however, a little more than a week after the first data collection date, the Shiv Sena site underwent a redesign on April 8, dropping its Marathi font download and almost all Marathi content. The contents of the site were then in English. So the Shiv Sena site did not have Marathi content on their site when the data was collected at the second date.

None of the sites of parties in Gujarat had content in Gujarati language.

The web designers or coordinators of the sites did not appear to give much importance to some basic technical information about the site such as mention of copyright, webmaster, visitors' counter, date of last updating of site, and site map, etc. (Table VII). None of the seven web sites of political parties in Maharashtra and Gujarat had the date of the last update of the web site and a site map. The date of last updating helps users to relate the importance of the information to current scenario. A site map helps users to easily locate the needed information on that site. At the time of first data

**Table VI.**  
Party sites and language  
content

Party	Period 1	Period 2
BJP Gujarat	English	No change
BJP Maharashtra	No content	No change
INC Gujarat	English	No change
INC Maharashtra	English	No change
SP	English/Hindi	No change
NCP	English	English/Marathi
Shivsena	Marathi	English

**Table VII.**  
Information about the  
web site

Sr No.	Information	Total out of 7
1	Copyright	4
2	Webmaster	3
3	Visitors' counter	1
4	Indication of last update of the web site	0
5	Site map	0

collection four sites out of seven had given links to the webmaster. At the time of second data collection this number got reduced to three as Shiv Sena removed it during its conversion from Marathi to English. Details of the webmaster (e-mail, phone or fax) are necessary because a visitor can write to him/her in case a part of the site does not function. Four sites had given the indication of the copyright. The remaining sites did not mention who owns the copyright probably because the parties would not mind anybody using their content free.

## 9. Informing, engaging and appealing to voters

Table III and Table IV show that there was no serious effort by the politicians to inform voters about matters that would promote voter turnout. The sites neglected links to the web sites of national parent political parties, engagement features such as discussion forum, feedback, comments, suggestions and complaints and links to the social networking sites such as Facebook and Orkut. There was little if any information on aspects such as parent party, alliance partners, about the history of the party, the manifesto, the list of candidates, constituency profile would have helped voters in making their political choices. Overall, the sites were not used to appeal to for votes, for funds or to join the party.

### 9.1 *Services to voters*

The sites did not offer basic features such as “What Is New” indicating updates in content, search facility, contacts and answers to FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions). Except Samajwadi Party Mumbai, no political party had the voter list on their site. The use of such features could have attracted the voters to the web site, if not to the polling booth.

### 9.2 *Media coverage and press releases*

Only one site realized the potential usefulness of features such as photo gallery or information for media. The BJP Gujarat site put a photo gallery at the front of its home page and also used audio-video features extensively. Users are attracted towards photos and videos more than text. The BJP Gujarat site was designed in such a way that there was a prominent place for photos and videos. This was done especially to attract the visitors (Yadav, 2009). Other sites too used the feature of photo gallery but not in a way BJP Gujarat site has used.

### 9.3 *Transparency*

No political party was transparent about declaring the assets of its candidates even though it was a simple thing to do. The web designers were required only to give the hyperlink to [http://eci.nic.in/CurrentElections/ge2009/Affidavits\\_fs.htm](http://eci.nic.in/CurrentElections/ge2009/Affidavits_fs.htm) where the affidavits of these candidates were published.

## 10. Analysis of web sites of candidates

Out of 24 candidates in these two states who had put up web sites, five were independent and 19 were contesting on behalf of their parties. Only four candidates were from Gujarat and 20 were from Maharashtra. Out of the four Gujarat candidates two were from BJP, one from INC and one was contesting independently. Out of the 20



candidates from Maharashtra the classification was: BJP – 4, INC – 5, BSP – 1, NCP – 4, Shiv Sena – 2, and Independents – 4.

### *10.1 Most updated web sites*

The sites of L.K. Advani (BJP), Arun Bhatia (Independent and retired IAS officer), Suresh Kalamadi (INC), and Dr Mallika Sarabhai were the most updated sites in Gujarat and Maharashtra. Out of the 42 features listed by the research team, L.K. Advani site had 29, Bhatia site had 26, and the Kalamadi site had 24 features. The web site of Dr Mallika Sarabhai had her constituency profile and was most interactive with the voters.

### *10.2 Language of the web site*

These candidates had not given importance to regional language content while putting up their sites. Only two sites had non-English versions: that of Dr Mallika Sarabhai, which had a Gujarati version and that of L.K. Advani, which had a Hindi version. Only four sites from Maharashtra had content in Marathi. Sameer Bhujabal who contested from Nashik on behalf of NCP had put his site only in Marathi language. But it had very limited features such as voter's list, contact us section and photo gallery. No site had regional fonts for downloading by users.

### *10.3 Information about the web site*

These sites did not bother to give information about the site such as site analytics, site map, or visitors counter. Out of 24 sites, 18 carried a copyright notice and 15 mentioned the webmaster.

### *10.4 Informing voters*

Out of all the sites that had information about the candidates, 22 provided the candidate's background and demographic profile, 13 listed the achievements of the candidates, and 12 had an election manifesto. Only seven candidates gave additional information about some important current issues. Of the remaining 19 sites, only seven provided information about their respective parties and links to the party web site. Most candidates did not furnish their campaign schedule, constituency profile or information about their alliance partners. Except for limited information about the candidates, there was no attempt to educate the electorate on existent issues. As such information is important in the voting decision, it may be concluded that the sites of most candidates had not provided adequate information to their users.

### *10.5 Engaging voters*

Out of the 24 sites, 12 allowed users to submit their feedback, comments, suggestions or complaints; 15 sites had audio-video features and 10 sites had links to the candidate's blog. Except these three sections, other interactive features such as discussion forums, Facebook, Orkut, Twitter, RSS feed and opinion poll are not available on most of the sites. Blogs appeared to be more popular than social networking sites, such as Orkut and Facebook.

### *10.6 Appealing to voters*

Out of 24, only nine candidates appealed directly to the voters for their votes and three invited visitors to join them. Only six candidates use their sites to invite volunteers. It

appears that most candidates had not realized the power of the Internet to raise financial and manpower help for the campaigns.

### *10.7 Services to voters*

Only five candidates provided voters' list on their sites. Though it was possible just to provide hyperlinks ([http://eci.nic.in/CurrentElections/ge2009/Affidavits\\_fs.htm](http://eci.nic.in/CurrentElections/ge2009/Affidavits_fs.htm)) to the site of ECI where voter list is available, the politicians have ignored it or did not realize it. Very few sites had a search facility and FAQ on their site. Two candidates provided an online facility where people will get information about the constituency, polling booth, voter number etc. Voters' list and the information about where to vote would have proved beneficial for the voters but only five offered this feature. Only 16 candidates gave an e-mail address on their site through which they could be contacted.

### *10.8 Media coverage and press releases*

Of the candidates, 15 gave information about coverage of themselves in the print media. Few of the candidates gave similar information of their coverage in the electronic media. A photo gallery feature was popular among politicians with 20 sites including it.

### *10.9 Transparency*

Only three candidates declared their assets on their sites. Only one site published the feedback sent by users. This would mean that transparency of the sites is low.

The above data show that the sites of candidates were more updated and carried more features than sites of the political parties.

### *10.10 Election results*

The then-ruling BJP was the major national party of India and it had used the Internet extensively for its campaigning. The sites of prominent BJP leaders were the most sophisticated and updated. Yet, it did not help them win more seats and in fact it fell from power during these elections. Kirit Somaiyya and Ram Naik, prominent candidates of BJP, and independents Arun Bhatia and Meera Sanyal had the most updated sites; yet they were among the election casualties. The use of the Internet therefore did not ensure electoral victory. The sites could at best be another campaign tool. This supports the view that the Internet alone cannot change the existing forces, but may amplify them. It is possible that something in real politics is modified by those amplified forces. Thus, the single factor of the Internet can hardly create a new political order (Hara and Jo, 2007).

### *10.11 Information, mobilization, integration/networking and participation*

The various web site features used in elections may be described as follows: Information, Mobilization, Integration/Networking and Participation (Schweitzer, 2005). The information function was most used by the parties and candidates. Still, the information they provided was inadequate to inform and educate the voters about the candidates, elections process and different issues in the elections.

Of all the features, the mobilizing function was used least; many sites just did not have a mobilizing function. A few candidates – Mallika Sarabhai, L.K. Advani and

Arun Bhatia – did use them. These three used their sites to recruit volunteers. Sarabhai and Bhatia also used their sites to raise campaign funds. Up to a few days before polling, Sarabhai said she had raised Rs 2.1 million (almost US\$50,000); Bhatia said he had raised Rs 3 million (almost US\$70,000). In effect, the web sites more than paid for themselves. Bhatia's web site also had a separate section titled citizen resources that had features such as: Let's talk, Let's Vlog, Voting Information, and Questions. Advani, who was also the presidential candidate from BJP, used his web site to recruit volunteers, and had used interactive features to mobilize the voters. The web sites of these three candidates had links to social networking sites. Only two party sites and seven candidates' sites gave links to their parent party. Overall, though some of the sites have used the integration/networking function, it was not up to its potential.

In contrast to these three sites, most others functioned as a one-way communication tool. They provided minimal participation function. There were discussion forums on a few sites but they were limited to the visitors. There was no interaction between the candidates or parties and the visitors of the sites. This finding supports Vaccari's (2008a) studies of various western democracies that although political parties have adopted ICTs faster than any previous communication tool, they had not yet fully developed their dialogic and participatory potential.

#### *10.12 Limitations of the study and future scope for research*

This study was limited to the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat and did not cover all the states of the country. Impact or the effectiveness of the Internet is not studied in this research. Analysis of the Google analytics of the sites needs to be done. Interactivity of the sites can be studied separately and in detail.

#### *10.13 Implications of the study*

Although the public Internet has been available in India since 1995, this study has shown that politicians have not learnt to use the power of web effectively. This is in contrast to the situation in countries such as the USA, Korea and Australia. This study will be useful to the political parties and candidates in the future to incorporate essential details for interactivity, updates and use of local language etc.

### **11. Conclusion**

In the run-up to the 1997 and 2001 General Elections in UK some commentators suggested that the Internet would play an important campaigning role. On both occasions these optimists had to admit with hindsight that they were wrong, that the Internet was at best a secondary communication tool (Jackson, 2007). In Maharashtra and Gujarat the situation has been similar. Despite being proven as a supportive medium, the Internet did not significantly displace conventional media for electioneering. The reasons are manifold: first, there is the limited penetration of the Internet. As at 30 June 2010, India had the fourth largest number of Internet users in the world with the 81 million users, but this constitutes only 6.9 percent of the Indian population (Internet World Stats, 2010). Comparative newness of the medium, illiteracy, illiteracy about the medium among the people, ignorance of the importance and potential of the medium, limited usage, low penetration, limited reach in context of Indian voters etc. are other reasons.

It can be concluded that the Internet has not been used to its maximum potential by Indian politicians. Many of the party sites were also not that adequately updated and well featured. The sites of these politicians are not very interactive. Not many politicians used their sites to disseminate news and photographs to the potential audience like print and electronic media. Many sites were not updated and even when they were there was no regularity in the updates. Several sites remained unchanged before, during and after the elections. With few exceptions most sites do not provide enough content for creating awareness among the people. Few politicians used their sites for electioneering. Even among these, the web sites were not voter-friendly. Of course there were attempts by some candidates to provide services to voters such as the facility to search the voters list and find out the polling place and booth. Except for Gujarat BJP and INC, no political party has effectively exploited the capabilities of the Internet for e-campaigning. Most candidates and parties created their sites merely to create an online presence. Of all the parties, the Gujarat BJP and INC have used the Internet well but were not sure whether they would be able to get more voters from their web presence (Yadav, 2009; Patel, 2009): the BJP fell from power while the INC came to power.

As more Indians go online, how will the Internet be used for electioneering in the future? A related question is whether India is at an early stage in the continuum of global use of the Internet for political communication or whether India will follow its own unique path. On the one hand, there is little doubt that Indian politicians and political parties will be cautious in the near future because the web sites that used the Internet most appropriately also saw the candidates lose. At least superficially and in the near term there are limited returns for investing in the Internet as an election campaign tool. This is in line with research on Internet use in the 1997 and 2001 UK general elections.

On the other hand, there is no mistaking that the Internet is being increasingly used as a campaign tool. Its use has increased both quantitatively and qualitatively since the 2004 elections. During the 2004 general elections, there were seven candidate web sites and 26 party web site on the Indian web sphere (Tekwani and Shetty, 2007). During the general elections of 2009, there were seven party web sites and 24 candidate web sites just from two Indian states only (Maharashtra and Gujarat). The use of informative and engagement features on campaigning web site also has seen increase in general elections of 2009. Many new features such as constituency profile, online registration of voters, blogs etc. were also added to the campaigning web sites. Given the different political, economic and social context, it is very likely that the use of the Internet for electioneering in India will take its own unique course.

While the Internet may not have helped politicians to gain votes, some candidates have shown way how the net can be an effective tool to raise a team of volunteers and to garner campaign funds through appeals on the sites. Manpower and money are the essential requirements of the effective election campaigning. Both necessities can be achieved with the help of online campaigning. At the moment online donations have some technical and legal issues in fund raising in India but these can be worked out in the near future (Mallya, 2009). That the sites that raised funds more than paid for the sites themselves is likely to make this an attractive feature in the next elections.

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Sr No.	Features	
	Info about the web site	Information related to the structure and design of the web site
1	Language of contents	Language of the content of the web site. The purpose is to check whether or not it provides contents in regional language, in addition to English
1.1	English	
1.2	Hindi	Language spoken and understood by 337 million people across India
1.3	Marathi	Local language of Maharashtra, a state of Indian Union
1.4	Gujarati	Local language of Gujarat, a state of Indian Union
2	Fonts for Downloads	Contents of web sites in Indian languages other than English cannot often read the text because the fonts are not in Unicode. The hosts are therefore required to provide on their home pages a feature called "Font for Download". On clicking this button, the visitor can download and save the font in its "Fonts" section of Control Panel in their system. Visitors can hereafter read the contents of the web site in that language. Attempt is made to record if this effort has been made by the host for the benefit of the visitors who may prefer to read the contents only in their language, and not in English which may be difficult for some to read and understand the contents
2.1	English	
2.2	Hindi	
2.3	Marathi	
2.4	Gujarati	
3	Site analytics	Statistical details like number of visitors, where they enter, where they leave and how long they stay at each page
4	Last update of the web site	This provides an idea about how fresh are the contents of the web site
5	Copyright	Details of the copyright, giving an indication if the contents can be used freely
6	Webmaster	Details of the person responsible for designing, developing, marketing, or maintaining a web site. His/her contact details like e-mail are useful if the hosts do not respond to complaints and suggestions from visitors
7	Visitors' counter	A tool placed at the home page which tracks the number of visitors to the web site
8	Site map	It is a page of section that provides structure of a web site to enable a visitor to quickly locate contents of their interest
	Informing voters	Data in this section relate to contents the political parties or candidates have put up at their web sites for the information to the voters and other visitors
9	History of the party	History of the political party or the candidate
10	Manifesto	Manifesto of the party or the candidate who hosted the web site

*(continued)*

**Table AI.**  
Web site features and  
their descriptions

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Sr No.	Features	
11	List of candidates	List of the candidates fielded by party
12	Campaign schedule	Schedule of the election campaign of the party or the candidate
13	Organizational structure	An organizational structure of the party
14	Office bearers	Office bearers of the party
15	Link to the web site of National Party	Data on links given to web sites of the national parties
16	Party achievements	Achievements of the party like the work done or promises fulfilled in the recent past
17	Constituency profile	Profile of the constituencies which includes details about: geography, area, voters etc.
18	Awareness of important issues	This variable is here to check if these web sites provide any information to the voters about current topical important issues, besides the current elections
19	Alliance partners	This is to find out if the web site provides information about alliances and seat adjustments and links to their web sites
20	Info about last elections (Loksabha or Assembly)	Info about the last elections party contested. This information includes list of constituencies they contested from, winning candidates, votes they have got etc.
	Engaging voters	Data on features provided to visitors to interact with the political party through the web site
21	Feedback, comments, suggestions, complaints	A feature that provides facility to the users to give their feedback, suggestions or ask about any complaints
22	Discussion forum	A discussion forum where users also can post their comments and views on various issues
23	Audio/video features	Any audio or video clips put on the web site
24	Facebook	Link to Facebook, a social networking site which is popular among the youth
25	Orkut	Link to the Orkut, another social networking web site
26	Twitter	
27	Blog	Link to the blogs promoted by the party
28	RSS Feed	
29	Opinion poll	Online opinion polls organized by the web site
	Appealing to voters	Features to appeal to the voters for votes and funds
30	Appeal to vote	Any section or feature which directly appeals to the users to vote for the party
31	Appeal to donate funds	Appeal to donate funds
32	Invitation to join	Invitation to users to join the party
33	Volunteer	Invitation to join as a volunteer for campaigning
	Services to the people	Services these web sites provide to users
34	What is new?	Indication with blinks to suggest that new contents have been added to the section
35	Search	Facility to search the web site or web
36	FAQ	Frequently asked questions by visitors
37	Voter list	List of voters
38	Contact us	Contact details of the party/site host
38.1	Address	
38.2	Phone number	
38.3	Fax number	

Table AI.

(continued)

Sr No.	Features	
38.4	Mobile	
38.5	E-mail	
39	Where to vote	Data on where voters cast their votes. This includes information about date of polling, constituency, area, polling booth etc.
	Media coverage and releases	Content for media such as press releases and photos etc. and the media coverage the party has received so far
40	Media coverage (print)	News appeared mainly in newspapers and other print media
41	Media coverage (electronic)	News appeared in electronic media
42	Press releases	Press releases for media
43	Photo gallery	Photo gallery
	Transparency	Are political parties and candidates transparent about their information?
44	Declaration of assets	Declaration of the assets of the candidates
45	Letters from users	To check if the web site carries letters from visitors even if these are critical of the party

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