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Electoral Campaigning 2.0 – The Case of 2010 Italian Regional Elections

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Electoral Campaigning 2.0 − The Case of Italian Regional Elections[1]

Giovanna Mascheroni and Alice Mattoni[2]

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[1] The work presented here is part of a larger work on Italian local and national elections conducted by XXX and continuing until spring 2013. The dataset will be embargoed until the end of the project, but the codebook and other information on the research project are available under request.

[2] The present paper has been discussed and written collaboratively and equally by the two authors. In compliance with the Italian academic habit, we acknowledge that author 1 has worked primarily on odds pages, that author 2 has worked primarily on even pages.

Abstract: The paper investigates the use of social media by the 53 candidates as governors at the last Italian regional elections in April 2010 and further explores the two hypotheses on the role of online technologies for political parties - that is the 'politics as usual' and the 'equalization' hypothesis – starting from two different points of view: first, regional elections; and, second, candidate's appropriation, negotiation or resistance to the convergence and participatory culture distinctive of the contemporary media ecology. The aim of this article is to address the following research questions: 1) which are the different degrees of appropriation of convergence and participatory culture amongst Italian candidates during 2010 regional elections according to political parties' dimension in terms of members, voters and resources? And 2) are different degrees of appropriation of convergence and participatory culture positively associated with political parties dimensions?

Keywords: online campaigning, web 2.0, social media, convergence culture, participation.

Introduction

The sites of news about political parties and candidates multiplied and fragmented with the growth of ICTs. Today, mediated political communication takes a number of forms, spreads through a variety of channels and meets dispersed audiences who are increasingly able to engage with political content and political actors online. Grassroots activists groups and political organizations have been the vanguard in the use of the web, giving rise to forms of "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2007, 2009) and "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) in

contemporary social movements. At the same time, many political parties and candidates have been employing websites and other online applications in order to establish an online presence and communicate with citizens in a direct way.[3] Communication to mobilize supporters and persuade voters is particularly important for political parties that live in an age of "permanent campaign" (Lilleker, Pack & Jackson, 2010, p. 107). This article seeks to add a contribution to literature on political parties and candidates' use of web 2.0 applications, analyzing how different types of social networking and content sharing sites were employed during 2010 Italian regional elections.

Scholars engaged in research concerning parties and candidates' websites in Italy stressed the fact that the inclusion of this online tool in the electoral and political communication was generally faint and passive (Bentivegna, 2006; Gibson, Newell & Ward, 2000; Newell, 2001; Vaccari, 2008). Although Italy continues to have a television-centric style of political information,[4] political uses of the web have increased since the exponential growth of social

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[3]   The use of the web by political actors especially in election campaigns has grown since the end of the Nineties in the US and then in Europe. For the role of the Internet in the US campaigns see, among others, Bimber and Davies (2003). The evolution of online political communication in the Italian context is well described in Bentivegna (2006). For the role of the web in recent Italian election campaigns see also Vaccari (2006, 2009).

[4]   A survey on Italians' news consumption practices in October 2009 (demos & pi, *XXIII Osservatorio sul Capitale Sociale degli Italiani. Gli italiani e l'informazione*, available at http://www.demos.it/a00355.php shows that 86.7% of the population gets news from tv daily; radio is the second most common news media (40.5%), followed by the internet (38.2%) whose use exceeds press readership (33.1 %). The percentage of those who keep up with the news online on a daily basis increases among people aged 15-24 (74.2%) and those aged 25-34

networking sites, and especially Facebook which passed from around 210.000 users at the beginning of 2008 to 16.858.000 users at the end of July 2010.[5] Due to this changing media environment, regional elections in March 2010 can be seen as a turn point with regard to the use of multiple sites of mediated political communication during the electoral campaign. Together with parties' and candidates' personal websites, indeed, social networking sites such as Facebook and content sharing sites like Flickr and YouTube gained terrain during this electoral round[6]. The very recent adoption of web 2.0 by Italian political actors characterizes it as a still under-explored field in Italian political communication research. This article, therefore, aims at presenting the first systematic explorative studies on the topic to understand how Italian candidate's use these relatively new online communication tools.

We also seek, however, to contribute to the growing body of literature on the candidate's use of the web during electoral campaigns. The use of social networking and content sharing sites by political parties and political candidates during national election campaigns has become a recurrent theme in recent studies of political communication (Kalnes, 2009; Lilleker, Pack & Jackson, 2010; Zittel, 2009). However, this literature highlights how the adoption of web 2.0 doesn't mean, per se, transformed communication patterns nor the shift towards more

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(62.4%). This doesn't mean, however, that young people are less exposed to tv news, in so far as news consumption seems to be rather cumulative and multimedia: 73.8 % of people aged 15-24 years old and 81.2% of those aged 25-34 access news on tv.

[5] Source: Facebook Ads elaborated by www.vincos.it.

[6] We did not consider Twitter because in 2010 it was not popular among Italian internet users: only 1.300.000 Italians had a Twitter profile at October 2010 (www.vincos.it)

participatory and more inclusive political communication: interactive tools do not necessarily enable bottom-up participation (Carpentier, 2011). So far, indeed, candidates' use of web 2.0 applications has been characterized by the persistent adherence to a top-down, one way communicative model, contrasting the very nature of these tools and resulting in a hybrid form of communication that has been labeled "web 1.5" (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Mascheroni & Minucci, 2010). More generally speaking, literature on political parties and the web during electoral campaigns revolves around two standing contrasting hypotheses related to: the "equalization hypothesis" (Margolis, Resnick & Wolfe, 1999) which wants the web as an intrinsically democratic technology that reduces the gaps in campaigning between minor and major parties and forces political actors to adopt a two-way flow and style of communication (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). On the other side, the "politics as usual" or "normalization" thesis (Margolis & Resnick, 2000) claims that major political parties are more likely to engage in a sophisticated use of web resources and minor political parties, on the contrary, are more likely to employ basic online tools in an unsophisticated manner. Moreover, this hypothesis implies that political actors resists changes and online campaigning remains largely a top-down, highly controlled and professionalized process (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Usually, these contrasting hypotheses have been tested considering specific online tools, like candidate's websites and national elections. The aim of this article, instead, is to explore further the two hypotheses on the role of online technologies for political parties starting from two different points of view.

First, regional elections. Differently from national elections, regional elections are a paradigmatic case study in order to understand the transformative potential of web 2.0 tools in

the context of election campaigns, thanks to the electoral system and citizens' participation. Governors of Regions are elected directly by the electorate: given their accessibility, web 2.0 platforms represent a further means for disintermediation from national leadership and partisanship, thus reinforcing the trends towards personalization of political campaigns (Calise, 2000). Moreover, regional elections in Italy are usually characterized by lower citizens' involvement and voter turnout than national elections. We might expect that political candidates competing for the seat of regional governors fruitfully engage in experimenting participatory communication practices supported by web 2.0 tools in order to increase the usually low engagement of citizens at the local level. Local elections are, therefore, especially relevant for the goals of the present study.

Second, therefore, we focus on candidate's appropriation of the "convergence" and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), which is potentially enhanced by the use of so-called web 2.0 applications, rather than on the mere use of candidates' websites. Media studies on web 2.0 applications suggest that these tools have in common a strong commitment towards user generated content, social networking and information sharing (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008), hence enhancing the distribution of media contents across diverse media platforms and format as well as citizens' interactivity and, possibly, participation; therefore they are sometimes even labeled as 'participatory web' applications (Kavada, 2009). As concerns online campaigning, it is argued that web 2.0 applications potentially enhance citizens' interactivity and participation even more than traditional parties' websites, promoting a deeper dialogue between the candidate and her supporters or potential voters. For this reason, we

focused on candidate's appropriation, negotiation or resistance to the convergence and participatory culture distinctive of the contemporary media ecology when exploring further the "equalization hypotheses" and the "politics as usual". In other words, our main research questions are the following: 1) which are the different degrees of appropriation of convergence and participatory culture amongst Italian candidates during 2010 regional elections according to political parties' dimension in terms of members, voters and resources? And 2) are different degrees of appropriation of convergence and participatory culture positively associated with political parties dimensions? In order to answer these research questions, we developed a three-step research strategy that is also reflected in the structure of the article.

First, as explained in the methodological section, we operationalized the *appropriation of convergence and participatory culture* amongst political candidates focusing on five dimensions that will be further discussed in the methodological section. Due to the relevance of Facebook for Italian candidates at the regional elections[7], we also operationalized the *patterns of usage* that proved to be common amongst the regional candidates when employing the social networking site. The focus on Facebook, moreover, allowed us to refine the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture, enriching the data set with more in-depth qualitative analysis of how political candidates took advantage of the participatory potential of the famous social networking site.

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[7]   As anticipated Facebook was the most popular social network site in Italy at the time of our fieldwork, and the most widely used by politicians themselves.

Second, we looked at how political candidates distributed amongst the five dimensions above and then grouped them into five clusters in order to show the different degrees of appropriation of convergence and participatory culture to answer our first research question. We then analyzed political candidate's patterns of usage of Facebook. This in-depth analysis is consistent with one of the main objective of this article, which aims at showing whether employment of web 2.0 tools reflects a true incorporation of convergence and participatory culture (Burgess & Green, 2009; Jenkins, 2006) or simply responds to a "band wagon effect" (Ward & Gibson, 1998).

Third, we looked for general correlations between the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture and their minor/major dimension in order to eventually answer our second research question. We also considered to what extent the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture and their electoral results in the regional elections. Conclusions summarize the main results presented in the article, discuss further the notion of convergence and participatory culture with regard to trends in Italian political communication, and suggests additional lines of research into the use of web 2.0 for political campaigning.

Methods and Analytical Tools

The present study focuses on Italian regional elections on March 29th 2010, when citizens could vote for their new regional governor in 13 regions equally distributed in Northern, Central and Southern Italy. Our sample includes all the 53 regional candidates of the 13 regions. We developed, tested and then employed an *ad hoc* codebook which allowed us to collect both

quantitative and qualitative data with regard to online political communication of candidates in the regional elections. We monitored the candidates throughout the whole electoral campaign, from March 1st to March 29th 2010. The majority of the data, however, were collected on March 29th, the last day of the electoral campaign, when candidates' official websites and public Facebook profiles, groups and/or pages were also downloaded to be stored for further data collection and analysis. Apart from data on candidates' official websites, in this article, we employ a section of the original data set including information about the use of four web 2.0 platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube, which are the most popular in Italy. All these applications belong to the web 2.0 category. However, they are different under many respects. Generally speaking, we faced a twofold diversity of data sources: *inter-platform* and *intra-platform dissimilarity*.

Inter-platform dissimilarity is due to the fact that the four web applications taken into consideration differ under four classes of site features related to profile details, connectivity, content and more technical features (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). The four technological applications, therefore, have diverse technological affordances leading to different ranges of communicative and expressive practices, and different social affordances. Facebook is the multi-media social networking site *par excellence*. Twitter is a micro-blogging site, where updates have the length of SMS and users articulate lists of followings and followers. Flickr and YouTube, instead, revolve around content sharing, of photos the former and video the latter, although they were shaped as a social networking site by communities of users (Burgess & Green, 2009). The four platforms, therefore, provide a variety of data. According to the main

scope of the article, that is reconstructing online communication repertoires during Italian regional elections, we focused on data common to the four web platforms such as the number of updates or contents shared, and the number of friends/followers. We also focused more on the textual level, rather than engaging in a multimedia analysis including pictures, and audiovisuals.[8] *Intra-platform dissimilarity* refers to the possibility to create different types of profiles, as in the case of Facebook, where personal profiles, fan pages, and groups can be created, each allowing for specific types of interactions. This also leads to the proliferation of Facebook pages and hence contents related to a specific political candidate. We included in the sample web platforms profiles officially linked to the electoral campaign only.

If the study of political communication in candidates' websites has been standardized through the definition of relevant dimensions or functions of online campaigning (Gibson & Ward, 2000), political actors' use of social media poses new methodological challenges. In particular, a shared definition of the dimensions to analyze when studying how candidates use social networking sites profiles within campaigning strategies still needs to be developed. This article focuses on five exploratory dimensions in order to investigate candidate's appropriation of convergence and participatory culture that characterize web 2.0 applications. This was a necessary step in order to further explore the "equalization hypothesis" and the "politics as usual". More importantly, the five dimensions allow us to understand to what extent the two

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[8] Though we do not dismiss the importance of multimodality in the online environment, this type of investigation exceeded the scope of the research.

contrasting hypotheses mentioned above could be considered valid when looking at political candidate's appropriation of convergence and participatory culture.

In what follows we introduce the five dimensions that we employed to analyze how political candidates employed online communication tools during the electoral campaign. The first dimension refers to the *number* of online communication tools used during the electoral campaign, amongst which: personal website, profiles on Facebook, pages on Flickr, account on Twitter and channel on YouTube. The second dimension, named *intensity of use*, focused on the extent to which candidates actually used the online platforms in which they established a presence to support their electoral campaign. In other words, we considered the number of posts produced for each platform. This second dimension was important in order to refine the first dimension: having a profile on Facebook or an account on Twitter, indeed, does not necessary means an active and extensive use of these online communication tools. We then elaborated two dimensions that referred in particular to the actual convergence of media contents and platforms. The third dimension concerned the *domination* of online communication tools and it referred to how candidates combined the online communication tools they used. More precisely, we looked at the personal website being the dominant online communication tool; Facebook being the dominant online communication tool; or the lack of actual domination, when two or more online communication tools had an equal role in the online electoral campaign. The fourth dimension was the *integration* of online communication tools that provide information about the extent to which candidates made a coordinated and integrated use of different platforms, an aspect that characterizes the convergence and participatory culture of web 2.0 platforms. More specifically,

we looked at: platform integration, measured by the presence of at least one link connecting two different online communication tools;[9] content integration, which indicates the regular sharing of coherent texts, pictures, and/or videos about the candidate and/or the campaign amongst at least two different online communication tools; aesthetic integration, expressed by the presence of similar, when not identical, visual signifiers, like icons, colors, images, banners and backgrounds along the online communication tools. The fifth and last dimension was more focused on online participation. We indeed considered the *interactivity* of online communication tools, that refers to the presence of the opportunity for users to participate, respectively: in the creation of the campaign materials, like video or textual contents; in the development of the electoral program of the candidate, like proposing specific social, economic and/or cultural issues to be included in the electoral program; and in the political agenda-building of the political party at large, also through the facilitation of offline meetings and assemblies. After having created a data set with quantitative and qualitative observations about the five dimensions, we first analyzed how political candidates actually performed on each dimension and, in doing so, we then observed the emergence of specific patterns in the usage of online communication tools. We therefore manually constructed five groups of candidates that showed similar characteristics with regard to the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture.

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[9]   We decided that the presence of one link between two platform was sufficient to measure the minimal level of integration with regard to links amongst online tools. Our aim was, indeed, to identify broad typologies of web 2.0 use in order to distinguish among candidates reporting similar scores regarding their online presence. As explained above, our study was exploratory and the scale here adopted can to be further tested and developed in future studies.

As for patterns of usage of Facebook, we defined and assessed them through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data and articulated in a variety of dimensions: intensity of use, measured by the number of status updates during the month before elections; candidate's popularity, that is the number of friends; and quality of use, a more subtle dimension. Here we assume that quality of use implies appropriation of the norms, values, communicative genres and etiquette of the social network site. Therefore we try to assess quality on the basis of diverse indicators such as the source of the posts (whether original content produced for status updates, or rather duplication of blog entries and website contents, or links to newspaper articles and other external links); the tone and content of messages (whether they combine information, mobilization and engagement with informal status updates in a journal style; if they personalize each message so as to address specific targets of citizens, etc.); the degree of interaction with citizens; privacy settings and the kind of profile (whether a public or semi-public personal profile, an official page, or a supporters' group).

The appropriation of convergence and participatory culture during electoral campaigns

We considered five dimensions to investigate how candidates actually appropriated convergence and participatory culture. Considering how each candidates performed on each dimension, we then manually created five groups of candidates: the *absentee*, showing scarce, if any, appropriation of convergence and participatory culture characterizing the online tools under investigation; the *resistant*, showing very low appropriation; the *false innovative*, showing low appropriation; the *up-to-date*, medium appropriation; the *very innovative*, showing high

appropriation. As the figure below illustrates, the absentees and the very innovative are positioned at the two extremes of the continuum and represent the minority of the candidates.

The majority of the candidates is distributed between the three intermediate categories: the resistant (fourteen candidates), the false innovative (sixteen candidates), and the up-to-date (fourteen candidates). However, only 18 candidates out of 53 employ online communication tools in an up-to-date or very innovative manner (four candidates). In what follows we discuss the five categories and their main characteristics, providing some emblematic case studies that well represent the different online communication repertoires.

The absentee

We labeled as *absentee* the four candidates who did not employ any online communication tool during the electoral campaign and therefore did not appropriate convergence and participatory culture. This does not mean that they were completely invisible online, since information about the candidates were present in mainstream news websites, like local newspapers' online edition, and political websites near to the area of candidates. Candidates, however, exerted only a limited control over this online flow of information. In our sample, the absentee were all candidates of fringe parties belonging to the far right of the political spectrum.[10] All the candidates had a space within the official website of their political party at the regional level (a blog in three out of four

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[10] The political parties were Forza Nuova in Tuscany and Lombardy, Partito Nasional Veneto and Veneti Indipendensa in Veneto

cases). In these cases, therefore, political communication did not revolve around the individual candidate, but was rather centred on the collective identity linked to the political party.

The resistant

The fourteen *resistant* candidates showed a very low appropriation of convergence and participatory culture. They used of personal websites and/or more recent online communication tools, like Facebook, in a static manner and according to an electronic brochure style. Moreover, when candidates employed more than one on line communication tool, usually personal website and personal profile, the integration between the two was low, when not absent, as it was the intensity of use, characterized by a limited number of contents on the personal website and/or posts on Facebook. Finally, users' participation was not allowed by the structure of the personal website and/or not supported in the use of more interactive online communication tools, like Facebook.

The most emblematic example of resistant online communication repertoire is the Democratic Party (PD) candidate in Calabria,[11] who employed only his personal website to develop his online campaign. The website, in this case, did not allow citizens' participation employing a one-to-many broadcasting model of communication. Another example is candidate

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[11] The name of the candidate was Agazio Loiero.

of Movimento io Sud in Puglia.[12] Her Facebook profile was highly underused, with a few posts during the last month of the electoral campaign, and her personal website was highly static and functioning as an "electronic brochure" (Kamarck, 2002) were to publish basic information about the candidate and her electoral program.

Other candidates belonging to this typology employed Facebook as their main online communication tool, either because the website had a marginal role in the construction of public political identity of the candidates or because it did not exist at all. At a first sight, the decision to rely more or solely on Facebook may seem up-to-date, since it is a recent online communication tool allowing interactions between users and the integration of different types of media. Looking at the actual use of Facebook, however, offers a different perspective. Also those candidates that focused their political communication on Facebook, and not on personal websites, did not seem to employ this online communication tool in an innovative way. Rather, they employed Facebook as a non interactive website where to post information on the campaign, like television speeches, and provide materials to be used during the electoral campaign, like billboards and leaflets. An emblematic example is the candidate of Partito per l'Alternativa Comunista in Puglia.[13] His Facebook group was used as a space where to render available the electoral program in the discussion section, the billboards in the photo section, and the campaign agenda and television speeches in the wall. The opportunity to combine multimedia communication was

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[12] Puglia is a Sourther region of Italy. Movimento io Sud is a small independent political party present in Southern Italian regions. The name of the candidate was Adriana Poli Bortone.

[13] Partito per l'Alternativa Comunista is a small radical left-wing political party. The name of the candidate is Michele Rizzi.

dismissed to publish basic political information about the candidate. Interactions between the candidate and potential voters were limited. For instance, the discussion section was not employed to foster discussions amongst the candidate and potential voters, but rather to publish longer documents about the candidates, that could not be published on the wall section. The event section and the video section were also barely used. Overall, the potentialities of Facebook groups were not exploited and the online tool seemed to be a substitute of the lacking candidate's personal website.

The false innovative

The sixteen *false innovative* candidates displayed a low appropriation of convergence and participatory culture. They used two or more online communication tools that proved to have a gregarious role with respect to the candidate's personal website, which could be either rich in contents and dynamic, or poor in contents and not fully interactive. False innovative candidates occupied several online communicative spaces, without actually using them in a continuous and sustained manner during the electoral campaign. They, indeed, seem to be linked to the so-called "bandwagon effect" (Ward & Gibson, 1998) according to which a political party establishes its presence online because its adversaries do the same. Candidates opened their profiles in different social networking and content sharing sites, something that represents a relative novelty in online political communication, but left these communicative spaces barely empty and not connected one to another. Thus, they only seemed innovative in that their engagement with recent online communication tools is only apparent.

A relevant example is the candidate of the centre-right coalition in Piemonte.[14] His personal website was rather dynamic and he also had a Facebook profile, a Flickr page and a channel on YouTube. The three online communication tools, however, were heavily underused and their integration with the website was also limited. Another example is the PDL candidate in Tuscany.[15] She had a personal website, and a personal profile on Facebook, Flickr and Twitter. Although Flickr was integrated into the website, all the 75 photographs had been posted on February 12 and February 17. The content sharing site, therefore, was used in a discontinuous manner and, in general, it was highly underused during the electoral campaign, since it was rather employed as a repository for photographs about the candidate. Moreover, the personal websites had a link to neither Facebook nor Twitter. The latter did not contain any tweet, but just a link to the personal website in the information section. The newest online communication tool, Twitter, was hence used as yet another online site where to promote the personal website of the candidate. Being disconnected one to another and/or characterized by a low intensity of use, social networking and content sharing sites were hence gregarious online communication tools.

The up-to-date

The online communication practices of the fourteen *up-to-date* candidates displayed medium appropriation of convergence and participatory culture. They had a balanced and integrated use of personal websites and other online tools, amongst which Facebook. Unlike the previous

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[14] Piemonte is a North-Western region of Italy. The name of the candidate is Roberto Cota.

[15] Tuscany is a Central region of Italy. The name of the candidate is Monica Faenzi.

categories, in this case each online communication tool played a complementary role and mobilized different types of languages and styles in candidates' electoral communication. At the same time, candidates paid attention to the integration of online communication tools, especially through the spread of similar contents across the diverse online platforms. Moreover, up-to-date candidates did not leave their social media profiles empty: they rather published contents related to the electoral campaign with a regular frequency.

A relevant example is the PDL candidate in Campania.[16] His personal website was dynamic and updated. Moreover, it integrated the contents posted on other online communication tools, like Twitter and YouTube. The personal website became a hub connecting different communicative spaces on the web that were linked one another through hyperlinks. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube were used intensively and continuously during the electoral campaign. Therefore, each online communication tool provided a comprehensive overview of the candidate's campaign and played an important communicative role independently. At the same time, however, the messages, being mainly updates on the campaign agenda or official communications by the candidate, were repeated and spread through different tools that reinforced one another in pursuing a redundancy of communication through different channels and languages. Another example was the PDL candidate in Lombardy.[17] He employed an integrated and coordinated mix of online communication tools that were intensively used during the campaign. Apart from YouTube, Twitter, Flickr and Facebook, the candidate also employed an ad hoc web radio, uploaded free ring tones for mobile phones, and gave the opportunity to write text messages to

[16] Campania is a Southern region of Italy. The name of the candidate is Stefano Caldoro.
[17] Lombardy is a Northern region of Italy. The name of the candidate is Roberto Formigoni.

the electoral staff. The effect was a pervasive online and offline presence of the candidate during the electoral campaign.

In both cases, a section of the website was devoted to active participation of citizens in the making of the electoral program. However, there was no explanation on how citizens' contributions would had been included. The call for citizens' participation in the drafting of the electoral program or in the setting of the political agenda was common amongst those candidates adopting an up-to-date online communication repertoire. However, the potentialities of the web were not fully exploited and the process of citizens' participation and inclusion in the electoral campaign and political agenda-building through online tools remained opaque and unclear. The up-to-date candidates, in brief, appropriated more the convergent potentials of contemporary online communication tools, rather than their participatory potentials.

The very innovative

The four *very innovative* candidates fully embraced convergence and participatory culture. The candidates employed Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr in an extensive manner, spreading contents that reinforced each other through the repetition of the same messages across different online communication tools, which were highly integrated. Link between the website and the other tools were indeed present and reciprocal. Therefore, integration was related not only to the circulation of contents across different platforms, but also to the creation of a whole online

environment made up by different though coherent channels, able to provide a continuous multi-media narratives of off-line campaigning activities.

The most distinctive feature of the very innovative candidates was the enhancement of citizens' political participation during the campaign. This also meant the creation of two-way communication flows going from the candidates to citizens and back again or three-way communication flows creating a defined public discourse involving citizens and political candidates on specific electoral campaign issues (Ferber, Foltz & Pugliese, 2007, as cited in Lilleker, Pack & Jackson, 2010). In particular, three levels of participation were supported that we exemplify through three out of four candidates that belong to the very innovative category.

First, citizens could participate in the creation of online information. The example here is the Lega Nord candidate in Veneto.[18] His personal website was constructed as a social network in itself, while both posts in the Facebook fan page and in Twitter were mainly due to user generated contents about the campaign, such as videos on campaign events. This is an example of online campaigning in which the candidate and his supporters co-participated in the creation of information related to the electoral campaign.

Second, citizens could participate in the development of the electoral program. The case of PD candidate in Tuscany is emblematic.[19] Apart from the candidate's personal website, there was another website mimicking a social media platform hosted citizens' written contributions on

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[18] Veneto is a North-Eastern region of Italy. The name of the candidate is Luca Zaia.
[19] The name of the candidate is Enrico Rossi.

ideas revolving around the slogan "the Tuscany that I want" and organized according to predefined issues matching the main points of the electoral program. Each comment could receive votes from other users, to establish the most popular desires and hopes. The website was accompanied by a Facebook page having the same function.

Third, citizens could participate in the definition of the political agenda and engage in offline political activities. This was the case of the centre-left coalition in Puglia.[20] Political participation of citizens was enhanced through a website, named "La Fabbrica di Nichi", which functioned as a hub for the creation of local groups of citizens interested in fostering grassroots political projects at the local level. The website contained updates on the activities of local groups that soon crossed the regional and national boundaries.

Although oriented towards the enhancement and support of political participation, the two examples rested on different ideas of active citizenship during electoral campaigns. The website of the PD candidate in Tuscany was more centralized and promoted a form of controlled political participation, where citizens could express their desires, needs and hopes according to rather rigid participatory patterns. The website of the center-left coalition in Puglia, instead, seemed to be a long-term and national project involving citizens who organized themselves on a local basis with a certain degree of autonomy. Moreover, the online website promoted and supported offline political participation which was linked to the campaign, but soon went beyond it. These groups are still active in hundreds of Italian cities, organizing local activities, so that the short time

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[20] The name of the candidate is Nichi Vendola.

frame of the electoral campaign was expanded in a long-term experiment of political participation. The candidate of the center-left coalition in Puglia, more than other candidates in Italy, seemed to employ online political tools in a framework of 'permanent campaign' in which political communication is diluted in daily rhizomatous interactions of local groups that amplify political messages through face-to-face meetings and computer-mediated communication.[21] He was also the only candidate to maintain these online communication channels and a constant interaction with his supporters once elected.

Online communication repertoires and patterns of usage in Facebook

Since Facebook was the most popular online tool among candidates at the last regional elections, its in depth analysis can provide a contextualization of the five categories of candidates within different patterns of usage that reflect political actors' attitudes towards, and incorporation of web 2.0. Different patterns of usage were characterized by at times striking disparities in the intensity, quality of use, and, last but not least, in the candidate's popularity.

Concerning the number of posts, it varies from no status updates (as the case of the PDL's candidate in Emilia Romagna,[22] and the PDL's candidate in Marche[23]) to 285 (those appeared on

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[21] This could be also due to the fact that the candidate expressed is willingness to be one of the competitors in the forthcoming primaries of the national centre-left coalition.

[22] Emilia Romagna is a Central region of Italy. The name of the candidate is Anna Maria Bernini.

[23] Marche is a Central region of Italy. The name of the candidate is Erminio Marinelli.

the centre-left candidate in Lazio,[24] profile) with a mean of 72 posts. The second and third more active candidates were PD candidate in Tuscany with 263 posts and the candidate of the center-left coalition in Puglia with 261 status updates, both belonging to the very innovative group of candidates outlined in the section above. If we look at the mean number of posts per coalition, we find that centre-left candidates have posted on average over 4 messages per day, more than the double of centre-right candidates, and four times as much as candidates from minor parties (but the standard deviation is very high, indicating a significant variety among single candidates).

Posting no or very few status updates in the weeks before elections is a signal of a scarce investment in Facebook as a place for political communication as in resistant and false innovative communication repertoires. This attitude is often reinforced by the very content of the messages. Paradigmatic in this respect is the profile the candidate for the centre-right coalition in Piemonte, who writes his third and last post on March 17th stating: "last energies for this campaign's grand finale: few FB, much work". This raises questions over the meaning of maintaining a profile or page in social networking sites if it is not used for communicating with citizens, especially during election campaigns. Since the exponential growth of Italian Facebook users in Autumn 2008, however, political actors started opening their profile, to the point that being on Facebook became the norm. When the main reason for being in social web platforms is the presence of all your adversaries, or the fear of fake profiles, social networking sites and their

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[24] Lazio is a Central region in Italy/. The name of the candidate is Emma Bonino.

norms are not truly incorporated within one candidate's political communication. This seems to be the case with candidates in our sample who posted no or sporadic entries on their wall.

Another indicator that distinguishes politicians in their use of Facebook is the number of friends, which assesses the popularity of each candidate. The mean number of friends is 6002 per candidate. But, again, we can register here huge differences among single candidates, with the candidate of Movimento io Sud in Puglia who has only 156 friends, and, at the opposite side of the spectrum, the candidate of the center-left coalition in the same region who boasts 72.832 fans on March 29th. Except the candidates of the center-left coalition in Puglia and Lazio, the most popular candidates on Facebook have been classified as false innovative, suggesting that the number of friends may mirror also candidate's popularity offline.

Success on the social network site, however, is also influenced by the intensity of use and by how the candidate performs his online identity through the construction of the profile and communicative acts. As regards the profile, the choice of a semi-private or public personal profile, of an official page or of a group of supporters tells us something about both the familiarity with social network sites and the political experience of the candidate. Of the 48 candidates who chose to be present on Facebook, one in six have a personal (public) profile and one in four have a personal profile set as partially private; half (52%) have a fan page, for supporters to sign up to; and the remaining one in six have a group in support of their candidacy. Personal profiles, be it public or partially private, are more common among candidates from minor parties, especially those at their first political experience, such as candidates for the

"Movimento a 5 stelle":[25] having opened a profile in Facebook well before their candidacy and drawing on few campaign resources, the so-called "grillini" campaigned on their already existing profiles, except from the candidate in Veneto, who created an ad hoc supporting group at the beginning of March. The choice of an official fan page is more appropriate and consistent with Facebook users' expectations: among candidates to the last regional elections, it has been made especially by well established political actors such as party leaders (e.g. Nichi Vendola), or those who created a new profile immediately before or during the campaign. Overall, 67% and 73 % of those having a personal or a personal semi-private profile respectively belong to minor parties; among those having a fan page, centre-right candidates dominate (44%), while centre-left seem to be more distribute in the 4 types of groups analyzed, though the majority has a fan page (28% for this type of profile).

In the context of varied communication repertoires generally based on more than one platform, one way to analyze candidates' profiles is to classify them by the main source of the posts, and the genres of communication employed. As far as the source is concerned, though this classification is analytical in nature and most profiles are hybrid in that they combine original content, internal and external links, 65% of the profiles examined can be classified as hosting for the most part original content; 19% of profiles can be distinguishing for publishing non original content that has already appeared on candidates or party websites (internal links); and the remaining 17% are those candidates who update predominantly links to news items (external links). Both centre-right candidates and candidates from minor parties are well represented

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[25] The political movement originated by Grillo's Meetup.

among those who post predominantly external links and content originated in other internal sources, but candidates outside the two main coalitions are also well represented among those who post original content online (being 13 of the 27 profile of this type); centre-left candidates mainly produce original content (8 candidates), and marginally post external or internal links (1 and 2 profiles respectively). The correlation between the source of the posts and the communication repertoire adopted is also not significant.

More significant is the relation between the main source of posts and intensity of use. Due to the high deviation in the average number of posts registered, we can group candidates in two main groups: those who have posted a number of entries below the mean, and those who are higher. In both groups, the majority of profiles are comprised of original content, though some differences emerge. Among low users, 62% of profiles have original content, 17% refer to internal links, and 21% refer to external links. The 69% of heavy users' profiles host user generated *ad hoc* content, only 8% are made of mainly external pieces of information, while a significant 23% posts material from integrated tools (candidates' or parties' websites, YouTube channel etc.). If producing original content for status updates signals incorporation of the dominant communication practices of social networking, and meets the expectation of audiences, the practice of linking internal items, instead, suggests a coherent and integrated communication campaign across different platforms. This hypothesis is confirmed when looking at the profiles of the second type: of the 8 candidates posting primarily content from an internal source, all have a website (the internal source), all have a fan page, and five are high visible candidates competing in strategic regions and belonging to the two main coalitions, and whose campaigns

were highly professional.[26] The practice of linking primarily news items and other external material does not indicate, per se, low investment in the platform as a place for communicating with and engaging citizens, nor a less experienced candidate. But if we look closer at the 7 candidates included in this group, we find the candidate of the center-right coalition in Piemonte, who barely values the platform, as his last post explicitly states, and clearly frames his presence in Facebook within a "bandwagon effect" frame.

Besides revealing how Facebook is incorporated in candidates' campaign strategies, and how candidates adhere to the norms and practices of the social network site, the primary source of messages is clearly related to the content, the genre of communication and the relation with the audience. Qualitative analysis of Facebook profiles, then, is required in order to better understand the relationship between patterns of usage of this specific social network site and candidates' overall communication repertoire. At a first glance, the difference among diverse communication repertoires in the use of Facebook is far from clear cut: candidates belonging to different categories tend to conform and overlap in their use of Facebook so that each communication repertoire is not homogeneous in this respect. Candidates are rather positioned along a continuum from a poor and awkward use of Facebook to sophisticated and skilled uses of the platform. This continuity signals a sort of "genre effect" (Foot & Schneider, 2006), that is the

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[26] They are Emma Bonino (centre-left, Lazio), Luca Zaia (centre-right, Veneto), Mercedes Bresso (centre-left, Piemonte), Roberto Formigoni (centre-right, Lombardia), Stefano Caldoro (centre-right, Campania). Mercedes Bresso represents an interesting example: while the communication on her Facebook profile is strongly integrated with website updates and professionally managed, she personally updated her Twitter statuses

emergence of increasing regularities in patterns of Facebook use, which are generated by the response to users' expectations, on the one hand, and the common professional culture of the producers, on the other.

The more internally cohesive group is represented by the resistants, whose use of profiles or official groups is rather poor: the content consists mainly of messages posted by the party's local offices, or by supporters tagging the candidate in events and pictures. Candidates' own status updates are notifications of campaigning events, and especially candidate's participation to talk shows; or external links to news items on the candidate. False innovatives broaden the source and tone of the contents uploaded on the profile: they combine ad hoc content with links to their websites and to media sources; the need to inform citizens on campaign events with posts dealing with policy, political and campaign issues (Patterson, 1980), with informal comments typical of a privatised use of Facebook. The diverse contents, however, seem juxtaposed, rather than being incorporated in a coherent and meaningful frame: especially informal, personal status updates sound inappropriate and out of tune. Up-to-dates and very innovatives, instead, display a complete mastery of the language and communicative practices on social network sites, combined with a careful and strategic planning of online campaigning: their profiles are paradigmatic of a less casual, highly professionalized employment of Facebook. Internal links to the campaign website are matched with candidates' comments that anticipate the content while addressing specific target of the electorate (as with policy issues explicitly addressed to young people, or the elder, or women, etc.). Similarly *ad hoc* content that informs on specific policy issues in the candidate's program is always adapted to its main target. Rather than simply

communicating the campaign calendar, the events are communicated through a multimedia storytelling that combines a written journal with pictures and videos, all giving a sense of the candidate's perspective and personal involvement in the campaign. The posts directly aimed at mobilizing and engaging voters, which are recurrent throughout the monitoring period, tend to increase in the days immediately before elections, when mobilization is integrated with both more political and policy-related content, as well as with more personalized, informal status updates. Profiles like the ones described here are also characterized by the great emphasis placed on user generated content and citizens' participation: not only users' comments receive answers, but user generated campaign material, such as supporters' videos, are shared and receive public appreciation on the wall. Engaging and mobilizing citizens is better fulfilled when the communication flow is interactive, rather than being one-way and top-down as political communication tends to be. Greater adherence to the platform norms, values and etiquette, that is the incorporation of the emerging convergence and participatory culture, indeed means that the content is co-produced by the politician and its networked audiences: besides requiring a transformed model of political communication, empirically this means that candidate's updates are commented and shared in the word of mouth typical of social network sites, and that the candidate herself engages in this activity of produsage.

Successful profiles, therefore, are those that engage their readers through a continuity in the communication flow, and through a combination of a varied register and tone of the communication. These candidates are able to perform a political identity online which suits the dos and don'ts of Facebook; they are not necessarily the most popular, though popularity is a

good indicator of a successful and interactive communication; but are definitely 'heavy' users and very familiar with the social and technological affordances of the platform. Their communication repertoire is up-to-date or very innovative. Their messages include what can be defined as a 'phatic' communication, whose primary purpose is to reinforce the tie with friends and ties rather than informing on the life of the candidate and his campaign events, as in the case of the Movimento 5 Stelle candidate in Piemonte:[27]

ok, 1600 mails sent, 8000 forwards on FB, 200 sms… now enjoying my breakfast after a working night, leaving for the polling station at 11.15, bike ride under the sun… what's better than this? I'll find 4 tv journalists waiting for me… can someone explain them that Davide Bono voting is not an event!! (Davide Bono, March 28th)

The tone is often emphatic and emotive, especially in the messages to thank supporters and voters, like in the case the centre-left coalition candidate in Puglia:[28]

I'm thinking about your thoughts, what we have built together, about all the faces that populated this everlasting, tough yet wonderful campaign. I am thinking of the hope we created. (Nichi Vendola, March 28th)

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[27] The name of the candidate is Davide Bono.

[28] The name of the candidate is Nichi Vendola.

Other profiles also include examples of conative communication, when the message addresses and mobilizes the audience. Emblematic is the message by the centre-left coalition candidate in Lazio:[29]

Now more than before we ask you to disseminate Emma's programme, persuade your friends and keep up with the news. To do so, suggest Emma's fan page to all your friends. We are 15.562, lets' stick in and join 1000 more by tonight! (Emma Bonino Governatrice del Lazio, March 28th)

As the few examples above show, successful communication in Facebook implies both pre-existing well-defined political communication strategies and the appropriation of the dominant and normative Facebook usage patterns, which tend to challenge and contrast traditional political communication models. Shaping and adapting Facebook to the functions of online political communication (Gibson & Ward, 2000) is then a continual, fragile process. At the same time, the analysis contrasts the idea that online communication is a low cost, or cost-free place for campaigning: sophisticated web 2.0 strategy involves considerable investment, requiring professionalized staff. Those who benefit more of web 2.0 tools, therefore, are candidates who can boast a deeper digital literacy, and can count on more skilled use of the technologies, more professionalized staff, more resources. In this sense, professionalization is an adaptation to changes in both the political and the media environment (Negrine, 2007).

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[29] The name of the candidate is Emma Bonino.

Changing communication, changing politics?

The analysis presented in the above section sheds light on how - and to what extent - political candidates appropriate emerging convergence and participatory cultures sustained by the consistent and integrated use of web 1.0 and web 2.0 online applications. Analyzing how political candidates used these online tools, moreover, could cast light on the promotion of citizens' participation in institutional political activities, a distinctive task in which political parties usually engage, also through the use of the web (Gibson & Ward, 2000). In this final section we enter the third step of our investigation: we starts from the five categories of political candidates outlined above to explore general correlation between the appropriation of convergence and participatory cultures and specific dimensions of candidate's political parties.

The appropriation of convergence and participatory culture varied according to political parties' dimension in terms of members, voters and resources (from minor to major political parties). If we take into consideration the single online tools, and Facebook in particular, the 'equalisation hypothesis' works. All regional candidates, except 5, had an official Facebook personal profile, group or fan page. Social networking and content sharing sites require limited technical skills and demand low-level investments in terms of resources. A few minutes are sufficient to open and begin to use a personal profile or a fan page on Facebook. These tools, therefore, can be easily managed and employed also by candidates belonging to minor political parties and civic lists, usually having far less resources to be employed during electoral campaigns.

As the table below highlights, however, when shifting the perspective from the adoption of single online tools to the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture, the "politics-as-usual hypothesis" comes into play.

The majority of minor parties or civic lists' candidates, indeed, ranged from absentee to false innovative. On the contrary, major political parties and coalition candidates tended to range from false innovative to very innovative. Major political parties and coalitions have greater material and symbolic resources that lead to more sophisticated uses of the web. Especially in the case of coalition campaigning, moreover, candidates also have the need to develop coordinated communication campaigns so as to convey a stable, univocal and strong public image. The emergence of new online tools, like social networking and content sharing sites, does not seem to represent a turn in the electoral communication options for minor political parties. As it occurred at the dawn of web campaigning with the development of complex candidates' websites, the development of sophisticated online communication repertoires still depend on material resources and professional skills that only major political parties can dispose of (Margolis & Resnick, 2000).

As for the candidates' electoral performance, most of the research on online campaigns have pointed out the limited impact of websites in campaigning as compared to broadcasting (Davis et al., 2009): being pull technologies, websites are able to attract relative small audiences that choose to use online resources, therefore intersecting mainly already engaged citizens. Television, in short, still is and will be in the near feature the most important medium of political

communication during electoral campaigns (Johnson, 2011), web 2.0 tools have become additional means to reach voters, and perhaps also voters who would not intentionally visit a candidate's website.

The potentials of social media in this respect have not been empirically supported yet. As the table above shows, however, the case of Italian regional elections suggests that social media use can be considered as a further indicator of the efficacy of political campaigns: the 13 elected governors have been mainly selected among up-to-date and innovative candidates.

Conclusions

This article has investigated the use of websites and web 2.0 tools by candidates during 2010 regional elections in Italy. The usually low involvement of citizens in regional elections in comparison to national ones, contributes to render our case study particularly suitable for the investigation of online tools that sustain participatory interactions between the electorate and political candidates. Overall, however, we found that only a minority of political candidates fully appropriated the convergence and participatory culture of web 2.0 tools: a missed opportunity for regional elections, in which the Italian citizens seems to be disengaged from the electoral competition. We showed that starting from the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture, instead than focusing on the use of one online tool at a time, allows to explore the "equalization" and "politics as usual" hypotheses from a different the perspective. While the equalization hypothesis seems to prevail when considering the presence and use of one social networking site, like Facebook, the "politics as usual" hypotheses is actually at work if we consider the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture. Amongst the up-to-date and very innovative the majority of candidates belongs to major political parties. On the contrary, amongst the absentee, resistant and false-innovative the majority of candidates belongs to minor political parties.

Overall, this study also helps understand candidates' underlying communication strategies and their degree of appropriation of convergence and participatory. Web 2.0 and the changing media environment are associated with the rise of a more participatory media culture and a

blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption, top-down and bottom-up flows of communication (Jenkins, 2006). Other scholars already pointed out that political parties may not have an interest in fully adopting the participatory potential of the web 2.0 (Lilleker, Pack & Jackson, 2010). This article, however, shows that in the case of 2010 Italian regional elections, candidates' online campaigning was characterized by a generalized display of a *rhetoric of participation*, which communication practices tend to contradict. This rhetoric of participation conforms to users expectations and gives rise to a more or less stable genre of online political communication, which generates, however, contradictory outcomes. Indeed, as the integration of social media into more conservative communication repertoires such as the resistant and the false innovative clearly shows, adoption of web 2.0 does not mean, per se, transformed communication patterns nor the shift towards more grassroots participation in institutional politics. Citizens' engagement in the co-production of content and meaning is limited, and fully developed only by those two candidates classified as very innovative. Also in these cases, citizens' participation seems to be more oriented towards participation in the creation of contents for social networking and content sharing sites, then towards participation in decision-making processes related to the electoral campaign and/or the electoral program of political candidates.

Similarly to what happens to other online communication tools, such as internet forums, web design has an impact on the implementation of citizens' democratic practices (Wright & Street, 2007). In this case, structural conditions such as the predetermined technological structures of web 2.0 platforms in general and the predetermined participatory paths of candidates' online tools in particular, functioned as obstacles to the actual implantation of citizens' "full

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participation" even at the level of content creation, that most often resulted in "partial participation" (Patenam, 1970), since citizens could add contents in a highly structured and controlled communicative environment that they could not transform. More often, however, there is already a gap between participation as virtually enabled by the communication tools adopted, and effective opportunities for the citizen to have their say. With a very few exceptions, therefore, the use of web 2.0 by Italian political candidates still results in a sort of "web 1.5" (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). In keeping control over the communication flow, which remains unidirectional and top-down, political actors are able to manage their public image and to disseminate highly controlled content in all the platforms employed. The integration of social network and content sharing sites into their online campaigning strategies serves the need to offer an "high-tech" image (Bentivegna, 2006) and to sustain a rhetoric of participation that represent online the diverse idea(s) innovative political communication and grassroots political participation in institutional politics without put them fully into practice.

Considering the existence of different levels of appropriation of convergence and participatory culture that contextualize the use of specific online communication tools into a broader and relational context, this article constitutes a preliminary contribution towards a distinction between the *practice of participation* vs. *rhetoric of participation* through the use of web 2.0 platforms during electoral campaigns. Further research in this direction would benefit from analyzing to what extent the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture, according to which candidates employ the interactivity potential of web 2.0 platforms to go beyond the rhetoric of participation, is then actually able to involve citizens in the development

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of public debates during electoral campaigns. Further research, therefore, is needed in order to understand if there is a general correlation between the five online communication repertoires, but especially the up-to-date and innovative ones, and the creation of interactions between candidates and citizens, but also amongst citizens who support a given candidate. While this article assessed how web 2.0 tools were used in Italian electoral campaigns, further research is needed to understand if the presence of web 2.0 tools in Italian politics actually changed the processes of political discussions and interactions in electoral times.

Finally, from a methodological point of view, the present article is a preliminary and exploratory step towards the study of complex patterns in candidates' interactions with online communication tools during electoral campaigns. Future studies on the appropriation of convergence and participatory culture among political candidates, could help assess, improve and redefine the exploratory set of dimensions here adopted to identify different categories of candidates with regard to the use of web 2.0 online platforms. In particular, quantitative studies on the topic could further develop the five dimensions we used in this explorative study so as to obtain an appropriation index able to measure to what extent political candidates – but also political actors more in general – embrace convergence and participatory culture in their political communication strategies.

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Table 1 – Groups of candidates and dimensions of political parties or coalitions

	Absentee	Resistant	False Innovative	Up-to-date	Very Innovative
Minor Party/ Civic List	4	8	6	2	1
Major Party / Coalition	-	6	11	12	3

Table 2 – Groups of candidates and electoral results

	Absentee	Resistant	False Innovative	Up-to-date	Very Innovative
Elected governors	-	1	3	6	3
Non elected governors	4	13	14	8	1

Fig. 1 – Distribution of candidates per appropriation of convergence and participatory culture