If You Build a Political Web Site, Will They Come?
The Internet and Political Activism in Britain

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the capacity of the Internet for strengthening political activism. The first part summarizes debates about these issues in the previous literature. This study starts from the premise that political activism is a multidimensional phenomenon and that we need to understand how different channels of participation relate to the social and political characteristics of the online population. We predict that certain dimensions of activism will probably be strengthened by the rise of the knowledge society, particularly cause-oriented forms of political participation, reflecting the prior social and political characteristics of the online population. By contrast, we expect the Internet to have far less impact upon conventional channels of political participation, exemplified by election campaigns. The second part summarizes the sources of data and the key measures of political activism used in this study, drawing upon the British Social Attitudes Survey from 2003. The third part examines the evidence for the relationship between use of the Internet and patterns of civic engagement in the British context. The conclusion summarizes the results and considers their broader implications.

Keywords: online behavior; political activism; political campaigns; voting behavior

INTRODUCTION

The rise of knowledge societies represents one of the most profound transformations that have occurred in recent decades. This phenomenon, characterized by the widespread diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) across society, promises to have major consequences by expanding access to education and training, broadening channels of expression and social networks, as well as revolutionizing the na-
ture of work and the economy. The primary impact of this development has been evident in affluent nations such as the United States, Sweden, and Britain, but the Internet has also been widely regarded as an important instrument for social change in poorer countries with relatively high levels of ICTs, such as Malaysia and Brazil (U.N., 2002; Franda, 2002). The core issue for this study concerns the social and political consequences of the rise of knowledge societies, in particular the capacity of the Internet for strengthening civic engagement.

To consider these issues, the first part summarizes debates about the impact of the Internet on civic engagement. This study assumes that political activism is a multidimensional phenomenon. The impact of the Internet on each of these dimensions, in turn, is assumed to be heavily dependent upon the social and political characteristics of Internet users. Given this framework, the study predicts that the primary impact of using the Internet will be upon facilitating cause-oriented forms of political activism, thereby strengthening social movements, voluntary associations, and interest groups, more than upon conventional channels of political participation, exemplified by election campaigns. To test these propositions in the British context, the second part summarizes the sources of data and the key measures of political activism used in this study, drawing upon the British Social Attitudes Survey of 2003. The third part examines the evidence for the relationship between use of the Internet and indicators of civic engagement. The conclusion in the final part summarizes the empirical results and considers their broader implications.

THEORIES OF THE IMPACT OF KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES ON DEMOCRACY

Multiple theories exist about how the growth of knowledge societies could potentially influence political participation and civic engagement in contemporary democracies. Three main perspectives can be identified in the previous literature.

The Internet as a Virtual Agora

The most positive view is held by cyber-optimists, who emphasize the Panglossian possibilities of the Internet for the involvement of ordinary citizens in direct, deliberative, or “strong” democracy. Digital technologies are thought to hold promise as a mechanism facilitating alternative channels of civic engagement, exemplified by political chat-rooms, remote electronic voting in elections, referenda, and plebiscites, and the mobilization of virtual communities, thereby revitalizing levels of mass participation in public affairs (Barber, 1998; Budge, 1996, Rash, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Schwartz, 1996). This view was popular as the Internet initially rapidly expanded in the United States during the mid-1990s, and this perspective continues to be expressed by enthusiasts today (Gilder 2000). For example, Hauben and Hauben (1997) argue that by bringing people together, the Internet can help rebuild a sense of community and trust (see also Wellman & Giulia, 1999). Empirical backing for this view has come from analysis of the Pew Internet and Ameri-
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