Chapter VIII

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.

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 nature 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.