

PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED?

Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites

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ABSTRACT

In this study, it is theorized that party websites play a distinctive role in two regards: (i) they function as a *pluralistic civic forum* by facilitating the voice of oppositional challengers and increasing the visibility of minor and fringe parties, so that attentive citizens can learn more about the range of electoral choices; (ii) in addition, party websites function as a *channel for political participation* by facilitating interactive linkages between citizens and parties. The debate about the function of the Internet for pluralism and participation is laid out in Part I. The supply-and-demand research design, including content analysis of 134 websites (supply) and surveys of the public using party websites (demand), in the 15 European Union member states, drawn from the Spring 2000 Eurobarometer, is outlined in Part II. The evidence for patterns of party competition in European party websites is examined in Part III and in Part IV the use of party websites among West Europeans is analyzed. Compared with traditional mediated channels, substantial evidence is presented that party websites play a distinctive role in the process of political communications.

KEY WORDS ■ elections ■ Internet ■ parties ■ political communications

Introduction

Both participation and pluralism are widely regarded as core values in democracy. There is widespread agreement among varied democratic theorists, ranging from Jean Jacques Rousseau to James Madison, John Stuart Mill, Robert Dahl, Benjamin Barber, David Held and John Dryzak, that mass participation is essential to the lifeblood of representative democracy, although conceptions differ sharply over how much civic engagement is thought either necessary or desirable (see, for example, the discussion in Held 1987). On the one hand, theories of 'strong' democracy suggest that

citizen activism is intrinsically valuable. J. S. Mill argued that by actively participating in civic life, rather than allowing others to take decisions in their own interest, people learn and grow. In this view, involving the public can make better citizens, better policies and better governance. On the other hand, Schumpeterian democrats believe that the essential role of citizens should be relatively limited, confined principally to the periodic election of parliamentary representatives, along with the continuous scrutiny of government actions (Schumpeter, 1952). Nevertheless, even this minimalist view sees voting participation as one of the essential features of representative government, alongside many other institutional safeguards. Moreover, democratic theorists also share a broad consensus that pluralistic party competition is essential to representative government by providing citizens with a choice of candidates, leaders and policies, although once again there is dispute about how much party competition is believed to be necessary or desirable. If competition is excessively curtailed, so that some parties are legally banned from even standing for elected office, or limited in their ability to campaign and get their message across, then this is widely regarded as limiting how far elections can be regarded as free and fair, although at the same time there are often limits facing minor party challengers and independent candidates, such as the common use of electoral thresholds to discourage party fragmentation in parliament.

The central question considered in this article is how far party websites in countries around the world contribute towards expanding communication pluralism as well as opportunities for citizens to participate within parties, thereby strengthening representative party government, when compared with the role of alternative mass media. Three primary channels of communication link citizens and parties. Personal interactions within parties commonly include informal face-to-face political conversations with friends, party members and activists, as well as traditional campaign rallies and grassroots local party meetings. These activities remain important, especially in poorer societies and in mass-branch party organizations, but these channels have been increasingly supplemented in modern campaigns by the traditional mass media, including the printed press (newspapers and magazines) and electronic broadcasts (radio and television news). Within the past decade, the role of the mass media in connecting citizens and parties has now in turn been supplemented in post-industrial societies by the bundle of newer technologies associated with the Internet, exemplified by party and candidate websites. If party websites represent 'politics as usual', then they would function in a similar way to the traditional mass media.

Yet, in this study, I theorize that party websites play a distinctive role in two regards: (i) party websites function as a pluralistic civic forum by facilitating the voice of oppositional challengers and increasing the visibility of minor and fringe parties, so that attentive citizens can learn more about the range of electoral choices; (ii) in addition, party websites function as a channel for political participation by facilitating interactive linkages

between citizens and parties. It should be noted that this is not to claim that the existence of party websites necessarily alters the multiple other hurdles facing minor and fringe parties, such as removing the legal minimal vote thresholds required for election, providing equal financial or organizational resources, or altering minor party veto power in legislatures. Indeed, this theory does not even claim that party websites, by themselves, alter the chances of electoral success, still less the balance of power between major and minor players. But at the same time party websites are not merely replicating what Margolis and Resnick (2000) claim is 'politics as usual'. Compared with traditional mass-mediated channels, in this article I present substantial evidence that party websites play a distinctive role in the process of political communications. In Part I, I lay out the reasons behind these theoretical claims and the specific propositions that flow from this understanding. In Part II, I outline the supply-and-demand research design for testing these expectations, drawing upon content analysis of 134 websites and surveys of the electorate in the 15 European Union (EU) member states, from the Spring 2000 Eurobarometer. In Part III, I examine the patterns of party competition evident in European party websites, compared with what is known from secondary sources about party competition via the mass media. In Part IV, I analyze use of party websites in these same nations. In conclusion, I summarize the key findings and consider the consequences for party pluralism and democratic participation.

Theoretical Framework

Debates about the political impact of the Internet have already experienced several waves. The earliest perspective, expressed by enthusiasts such as Nicholas Negroponte (1995) and Michael Dertouzos (1997), believed that virtual democracy promised new opportunities for empowerment in a digital world. Schwartz (1996) emphasized the potential for a virtual community. Rheingold (1993) argued that bulletin board systems were democratizing technologies used to exchange ideas, mobilize the public and strengthen social capital. Grossman (1995) anticipated the opportunities for shrinking the distance between governed and government using the new information and communication technologies. Budge (1996) thought that the web would facilitate direct democracy. Many believed that the creation of effective, well-designed and innovative websites would allow political organizations to meet strategic objectives; for example, by increasing the efficiency of public service delivery for local authorities, reinforcing support for political parties, widening the readership for newspapers, facilitating mobilization by transnational policy networks and improving the transparency and accountability of government departments. The strongest claims in the first wave, common in the early 1990s, suggested that political participation via the Internet represented a distinctive type of civic engagement that

sharply differed from traditional activities. In this view, the popularity of the Internet would gradually draw more people into the democratic process, a process believed to be particularly important for groups currently disengaged from public affairs, such as the younger generation. Therefore, first-wave advocates claimed that the Internet could provide new forms of horizontal and vertical communication, which had the capacity: (i) to broaden the range of pluralistic voices heard in the public sphere and (ii) to facilitate new forms of interactivity and deliberation, thereby (iii) widening the pool of political participants.

Yet by the end of the 1990s a second wave of more skeptical voices had raised growing doubts about these claims, based largely on evidence about the role of the Internet in American elections. True, in the United States multiple parties and candidates had established an online presence, with a plethora of dot.orgs springing up in the 1996, 1998 and 2000 races (Davis, 1999; Kamarck and Nye, 1999). Nevertheless, campaign websites by mainstream candidates for the US House or Senate tended to be 'all singing, all dancing' affairs, full of multimedia gizmos and gadgets like streaming videos, easily available and searchable in real-time, but essentially similar in function to traditional forms of communication such as published leaflets, position papers, press releases and television commercials. Few American candidate websites offered opportunities for unmediated public debate or two-way interactive horizontal discussion among supporters and critics, still less between candidates and citizens. In many studies based on analysis of US surveys it was found that the Internet usually functioned to further activate and inform those American citizens who were already engaged in politics, thereby mainly preaching to the converted and strengthening existing social inequalities in political participation (Bimber, 1998; Corrado, 2000; Davis, 1999; Davis and Owen, 1998; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Kamarck and Nye, 1999). Margolis and Resnick (2000: 54) articulate the strongest case that, far from any new medium of communication, the Internet reflects 'politics as usual': 'Far from remaking American politics, the development of cyberspace, and particularly of the WWW, seems more likely to reinforce the status quo.' In this view, there is no technological 'magic bullet' to fix humdrum civic ills. If so, party websites, like traditional election rallies, partisan newspaper editorials and local branch meetings, can be expected to rally the faithful, mobilize supporters and crystallize wavering voters. This is an important function, but one that fails to ripple out to reach the apathetic, uninterested or disaffected, including half the American electorate that fails to cast a ballot.

Yet in most previous research it has been the role of the Internet in US elections that has been studied, and it is not clear how far we can generalize from this particular context to 'routine' uses of party websites outside of electoral campaigns, as well as to their development in many other nations. In particular, European countries that have a long tradition of mass-branch party organizations may develop party websites that differ sharply

from their American cousins. As Lipset (1996) has argued, there are many reasons why the institutional structures, historical legacies and political culture of the United States are distinctive in comparison with other Western democracies. To highlight just one example, the remarkably low voting turnout characteristic of American elections, combined with strong activism within voluntary organizations and civic associations, produces patterns of political participation that are atypical of similar post-industrial societies (Norris, 2002). A growing body of research on party websites is being conducted in other countries (Coleman et al., 1999; Gibson and Ward, 1998, 2000; Margolis et al., 1999), but little of this adopts a comparative cross-national design covering a wide range of established democracies, and most research has focused on the structure and contents of party websites, rather than on the use of these websites by the electorate. For all these reasons, we need to examine the contents of party websites (on the supply side) and how the online public responds to these websites (on the demand side).

Rather than claiming that 'everything will change' as the rise of the Internet will facilitate direct democracy, as many of the first-wave theorists predicted, or that there is 'politics as usual', as the second-wave reaction claims, in this study I theorize that in post-industrial societies, compared with the traditional channels of mass communications, the development of party websites will generate more egalitarian patterns of party competition and more opportunities for citizen participation in party politics.

In particular, parties have many ways that they can seek to communicate their message through paid and free media. Yet in countries where paid political commercials can be purchased during campaigns (see IDEA, 2001) it costs far less for parties to establish a professional and effective website than it does to advertise through the traditional mass media, given the expense of poster, newspaper, radio and television advertising. In the United States, for example, taken as exemplifying a system where there are effectively no serious limits on the amount that can be spent on political advertising on television, there are substantial spending gaps between the major and minor party candidates (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 1995; Kaid and Johnston, 2001; Thurber et al., 2000). The difference in the relative costs of different media means that fringe and minor parties with fewer financial and organizational resources should be able to mount an effective fully-functioning website containing similar information to that provided by the major parties far more easily than minor and fringe parties could afford the equivalent costs of commercial advertising. Of course, this difference between mediums should not be exaggerated, since effective website designs can also be purchased commercially, but at the same time the costs of developing, hosting, launching and maintaining a basic but fully-functioning website is relatively modest, and if necessary this can be achieved by a few volunteers with the necessary technical know-how.

In countries where there is a system of free time allocation of television

and radio broadcasting for parties, or a mixed system with some free allocation combined with paid commercials, the regulation is also likely to favor major over minor parties, reinforcing the status quo. In particular, the time allocation and the number of free broadcasts is usually based on the strength of parties, measured either by the proportion of votes or seats that the party received in the previous election (as in Ireland), and/or the proportion of parliamentary candidates contesting the election (as in Britain) (Electoral Commission, 2001; IDEA, 2001). In either case, the Internet is likely to provide a more hospitable environment for competition by minor and fringe parties because, unlike free party broadcasts, there is no central authority regulating, allocating and limiting political websites.

Moreover, we assume that the primary functions of party websites will reflect many of the same objectives as party communications conveyed through the traditional mass media. In other words, parties aim to inform, persuade and mobilize support, whether through leadership speeches, election leaflets, press releases, paid TV advertisements, unpaid party political broadcasts or party websites, in order to maximize their electoral advantage. We also assume that the direction of party messages will tend to reflect traditional hierarchical Weberian power structures. Most party communications will therefore tend to be 'top-down', flowing from the party leadership and elected representatives towards the grassroots and the electorate. Nevertheless, the characteristics of each medium will create certain distinctive opportunities and constraints; for example, speeches may be most effective at highlighting detailed policy launches while television broadcasts may be stronger at conveying visual cues. In the same way, the interactivity possible through the Internet will present some distinctive advantages for parties, facilitating informal channels of feedback (similar to more systematic opinion polls and focus groups), mobilizing resources like volunteer services and financial donations and promoting internal discussion and debate about policy proposals. A tradition of internal party democracy in mass-branch organizations will also strengthen these tendencies. For all these reasons, we expect that although the primary function of party websites will remain 'top-down', nevertheless some 'bottom-up' forms of communication will also be evident through party websites. Moreover, we expect that far more opportunities for political expression by citizens, members and activists will exist via these websites than through the traditional mass media.

Lastly, we assume that there are multiple opportunities for entertainment and information on the World Wide Web and patterns of selection will therefore be important in determining use. Therefore people who use party websites are unlikely to be a representative cross-section of the electorate; instead, they will be similar in many ways to those who are most attracted to other common forms of political information and communication. In other words, like those who pay most attention to politics in newspapers and television news, or who pay attention to party broadcasts or election

leaflets, party website users are likely to be drawn from the more politically interested, knowledgeable and engaged, as well as from partisan supporters. This pattern has been found in many studies based on analysis of the US electorate (Bimber, 1998; Corrado, 2000; Davis, 1999; Davis and Owen, 1998; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Norris, 1999). If this pattern is evident in a wider range of established democracies, this suggests that party websites will function to reach the attentive public and party activists more than the apathetic and disengaged.

On this basis, we can examine evidence for four specific propositions, namely:

- (1) We expect to find few substantive differences in the contents of party websites among major, minor and fringe parties, so that there are more egalitarian patterns of party competition through this form of communications than via the traditional mass media.
- (2) We assume that party websites will reflect the 'top-down' function of providing information more than the 'bottom-up' function of interactive communications.
- (3) Nevertheless, we predict that party websites will offer many opportunities for 'bottom-up' communications, providing greater interactivity than the traditional mass media.
- (4) Lastly, we anticipate that the opportunities for communication via party websites will attract the politically active more than the apathetic.

Research Design

To examine these issues we need a multi-method research design combining content analysis of a wide range of party websites (the supply) with survey evidence about users of these websites in the same nations (the demand). The comparative framework in this study focuses on the 15 member states of the EU to maximize the 'most similar' design (Dogan and Pelassy, 1984). All are relatively affluent post-industrial economies with a long tradition of democracy, yet at the same time there are considerable variations in the political cultures and institutions of these states (see Lijphart, 1999). Western Europe contains moderate and fragmented multiparty systems, as well as majoritarian and proportional electoral systems, unified and federal states and major differences in levels of technological diffusion and access to the Information Society between Nordic and Mediterranean Europe (Norris, 2001). Most West European nations experienced their democratic transitions in the 19th and early 20th centuries, although Portugal and Spain were part of the 'third wave' in the 1970s. There are also important contrasts in common patterns of political activism like electoral turnout, party membership and protest politics (Norris, 2002). The primary aim is not to analyze differences among European nations but rather to develop reliable

and well-tested generalizations about party websites that hold among many similar post-industrial nations and comparable established democracies.

The list of websites for 134 political parties was drawn from all parties in EU states with a website address given in *Elections Around the World*. To ensure that this list was accurate and comprehensive it was cross-checked and verified against two independent sources, *Governments on the WWW* and *Political Science Resources*.¹ For consistency, each political party with at least one official website was counted only once, excluding multiple entries such as separate websites for regional, state or local branches, or for affiliated party organizations like youth or women's sections. The analysis raised definitional and measurement problems in parliaments where there are frequent shifts in their nomenclature and membership, as well as the presence of many non-partisans or independents. Closely allied parties that are in semi-permanent coalition create other difficulties, for example the German Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union. In ambiguous cases, all parties with a distinct name were counted separately for analysis, on the grounds that each could have its own independent website as well as one that operated under any formal coalitional umbrella. Given the rapid pace of change, the analysis of party websites can only claim to provide a contemporary 'snap-shot' of parties online at the time of the analysis in June 2000. The picture will inevitably date, although establishing this information now provides an essential benchmark for monitoring subsequent developments. Previous work presented elsewhere gives the global picture from this database (Norris, 2001) and this study is confined to examining parties in the EU.

Three types of parties were distinguished based on the distribution of seats following the most recent general election result:

Major parliamentary parties are defined as those with more than 20 percent of all seats in the lower house of parliament.

Minor parliamentary parties are classified as those with more than 3 percent but less than 20 percent of seats in parliament.

Fringe parties are those that identify themselves as a party and run candidates, yet lack at least 3 percent of the elected members of the lower house of the national parliament.

This classification reflects conventional distinctions in the comparative literature; for example, the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) commonly assumes a threshold of 3 percent of seats. Parties were further subdivided by party family based on the classification given in *Elections Around the World*. This process proved most difficult with religious, agrarian and personalist parties, as well as those for social groups such as pensioners, without any other identification, which were categorized as 'other'.

Content of Party Websites

One critique commonly heard about American campaign sites is that parties use these primarily as a cheap, timely and efficient mechanism for distributing and publicizing materials about their candidates, policy platforms and organization, rather than as interactive mechanisms enabling unmoderated political debate and public comment that could eventually feed back into the policy-making process. If this pattern is also evident in Western Europe, party websites can be expected to be stronger in their 'top-down' information function, rather than as channels of two-way communication.

Party websites vary substantially in their contents and quality. Some consist of a few pages about the history and principles of the party, updated at infrequent intervals, lacking sophisticated graphics and features, often with web counters suggesting sporadic use. In contrast, other sites had multiple features: many layers of archived information about the history, organization and core principles of the party, including the full text of party manifestos; biographical and contact information about the leadership of the party, parliamentary candidates and elected members; regularly updated press releases and multimedia streaming audio/video of events such as leadership speeches; a schedule of activities and events at branch, constituency and regional levels plus links to local party websites; email addresses and telephone contact information, including how to join the party; links to related parties and affiliated groups at national and international levels; 'virtual' live annual conference coverage; and professional keyword search facilities plus a site map. American parties displayed some of the most sophisticated technical features, including facilities for multimedia presentations, interactivity and financial contributions.

To explore this more systematically, an international team of assistants coded the contents of the websites by two principle dimensions. The *information transparency* of websites was evaluated and measured by the presence or absence of 19 criteria, listed in Table 1, such as whether online parties included information about their party history, constitution, organization, program and schedule of events. In addition, websites were coded according to their *communication interactivity*, using 13 criteria such as whether people could join the party online, donate money, volunteer services, email officials and participate in online discussion groups. Some of these forms of interactivity are essentially mobilizing in function, providing positive resources for parties such as volunteer services or financial support, while others can be regarded as more expressive, where citizens are communicating political preferences or policy priorities. But in this regard participation through party websites reflects activism within traditional party meetings or rallies, which also combine mobilizing and expressive roles. Each of the functions was coded simply as present (1) or absent (0) when the websites were content analyzed, rather than using more complex evaluative scores based on the richness or depth of each item, in order to

produce a reliable scale. Finally, all the items were summed into two standardized 100-point information and communication scales, and these were then combined into a standardized 100-point summary index.

The comparison in Table 1 shows the proportion of parties that had different features on their websites. The results show that European parties commonly included information on their websites about the party's history (available in 85 percent of websites), organization (78 percent) and candidates (75 percent), as well as their party manifesto or statement of principles (71 percent). Citizens wanting to cast informed ballots, journalists on the road wanting to monitor press releases, groups wanting to find out about party policies, all have considerable reservoirs of information available from these resources, especially easily available information for minor parties that is detailed, real-time, unmediated and searchable on specific policies, issues or leaders. Nevertheless, the results also demonstrate that, contrary to expectations, many types of interactivity were encouraged as well, from the ability to email party officials (offered by 89 percent of websites) and join online (75 percent) to ways to submit messages (66 percent), contact candidates (73 percent), join party discussion groups or list serves (53 percent) and volunteer services (48 percent). Overall, the information score (60 percent) was slightly higher than the communication score (53 percent), although the difference was relatively modest.

Table 2 breaks down the information, communication and the summary scales by nation to see how far this distribution varies among the EU member states. The pattern that emerges suggests that party websites in Greece, Portugal and Spain rank relatively poorly on these scales, confirming a more general pattern of a North-South European divide where Mediterranean nations tend to lag behind Nordic countries in levels of connectivity and online use (Norris, 2001). Nevertheless, this pattern is far from uniform, since party websites in Finland and Denmark are also ranked fairly poorly on these measures, despite being at the forefront of the information revolution in other regards. In contrast, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and Germany all rank as leaders in terms of the information and communication facilities provided by party websites in these nations.

But how does this vary by type of party, and in particular does the Web maximize pluralistic electoral choices by providing a relatively accessible and cheap opportunity for communication, enabling fringe and minor parties with the technical skills and know-how to get out their message effectively compared with coverage of parties via the traditional mass media? Table 3 displays the combined information and communication summary score for websites by type of party and by party family. The pattern confirms that major parliamentary parties generally have the richest websites with the widest variety of functions (scoring 64 percent on the combined information and communication scale). Nevertheless, minor parties score about the same (63 percent), and fringe parties with few members of parliament were only just behind (55 percent). Among party families, websites for the Greens

Table 1. The contents of party websites

| | <i>Communication function</i> | <i>Information function</i> | % |
|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----|
| Can email party officials | * | | 89 |
| Party history | | * | 85 |
| Party organization | | * | 78 |
| Press releases/media section | | * | 77 |
| Parliamentary candidate information (e.g. biographies) | | * | 75 |
| Join party | * | | 75 |
| Parliamentary candidates' contact details (e.g. mail address, fax, telephone or email) | * | | 73 |
| Program, manifesto, statement of principles | | * | 71 |
| Email contact address for webmaster | * | | 66 |
| Submit message form | * | | 66 |
| Links to external websites | | * | 60 |
| Party congress, conference or convention | | * | 57 |
| Schedule of events | | * | 57 |
| Constituency information or election results by districts | | * | 53 |
| Join discussion/list serve | * | | 53 |
| Party constitution and rules | | * | 52 |
| What's new section/page | | * | 50 |
| Website in English | | * | 49 |
| Volunteer services | * | | 48 |
| Leadership information or speeches | | * | 46 |
| Search facility | * | | 43 |
| Other affiliated organizational section | | * | 42 |
| Youth section | | * | 42 |
| Any multimedia video or audio | | * | 41 |
| Can email party leader | * | | 37 |
| Can sign up to receive a regular electronic newsletter | * | | 35 |
| Women's section | | * | 34 |
| Union section | | * | 34 |
| Can email elected members of parliament | * | | 33 |
| Website in other non-native language | | * | 28 |
| Donate money | * | | 20 |
| Buy party goods (e.g. publications) | * | | 10 |
| N | 13 | 19 | |

Notes: All the above functions were coded as present (1) or absent (0) when the websites were content analyzed in June 2000. The content analysis examined the websites for 134 electoral party websites, defined as the number of parties contesting the most recent election for the Lower House of Parliament in the 15 EU member states. Calculated from *Elections Around the World*.

Source: www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm

Table 2. Analysis of party websites by nation, EU – 15 June 2000

| <i>Nation</i> | <i>Electoral party websites (N)</i> | <i>Standardized information scale (0–100)</i> | <i>Standardized communication scale (0–100)</i> | <i>Standardized summary scale (0–100)</i> |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Luxembourg | 6 | 82.5 | 76.1 | 82.1 |
| Netherlands | 8 | 81.3 | 69.5 | 78.8 |
| Germany | 8 | 78.1 | 68.5 | 76.4 |
| France | 7 | 70.0 | 58.1 | 67.2 |
| Ireland | 4 | 68.8 | 58.1 | 66.4 |
| Belgium | 15 | 65.7 | 60.9 | 65.5 |
| Austria | 6 | 62.5 | 63.6 | 64.5 |
| Italy | 15 | 63.7 | 58.1 | 63.1 |
| Sweden | 6 | 60.0 | 48.4 | 57.1 |
| United Kingdom | 12 | 55.0 | 54.6 | 56.3 |
| Spain | 15 | 54.0 | 36.5 | 48.6 |
| Denmark | 12 | 45.0 | 50.5 | 48.3 |
| Greece | 4 | 52.5 | 35.3 | 47.2 |
| Finland | 10 | 42.5 | 40.7 | 42.9 |
| Portugal | 6 | 41.7 | 20.8 | 34.7 |
| Total | 134 | 60.5 | 53.3 | 59.2 |

Note: Electoral parties were defined as all those that contested seats for the Lower House of Parliament in the most recent election. The table lists the proportion of all electoral parties (N.134) with an official national website in 15 EU member states in June 2000, according to *Elections Around the World*, and the results of the content analysis expressed as standardized 100-point scales measuring their information and communication facilities.

Source: www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm

Table 3. Summary score by party type, EU – 15 June 2000

| | <i>Fringe parties</i> | <i>Minor parties</i> | <i>Major parties</i> | <i>All</i> |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Greens | 67.2 | 74.4 | 70.4 | 71.9 |
| Nationalist, far right | 68.9 | 66.1 | 44.8 | 66.4 |
| Christian Democrats | 58.0 | 61.6 | 81.0 | 64.0 |
| Conservative | 63.2 | 63.0 | 62.6 | 62.9 |
| Center | 60.4 | 46.4 | 92.8 | 60.8 |
| Social Democrat | 45.1 | 66.1 | 62.4 | 57.0 |
| Liberals | 50.1 | 57.6 | 52.8 | 53.0 |
| Extreme Left | 46.6 | 54.9 | | 50.4 |
| Others including religious, agrarian, and regional parties lacking another identification | 43.5 | 64.0 | 54.4 | 46.1 |
| All | 54.5 | 63.3 | 64.2 | 59.2 |

Note: The percentage of the European adult population using political websites in the previous three months. European party groups: GUE = Confederal European United Left, V = The Greens, PES = Party of European Socialists, EPP = European People's Party and European Democrats, ELDR = European Liberal, Democratic and Reformist Party. These party groups are ranked from 'left' to 'right' based on self-placement of MEPs on left-right socio-economic scales in the European Representation Study, 1994. See Jacques Thomassen and Herman Schmitt, 'Partisan Structures in the European Parliament', Figure 7.3 in Richard S. Katz and Bernhard Wessels, *The European Parliament, National Parliament and European Integration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Source: Eurobarometer 53.0 Spring 2000.

Electoral parties were defined as all those that contested seats for the lower House of Parliament in the most recent election. Parties were classified by size according to the distribution of seats in the Lower House of Parliament in the latest election results.

Fringe parties included those with less than 3% of seats in Parliament.

Minor parties have more than 3% and less than 20% of seats.

Major parties have more than 20% of seats.

The 100-point summary score evaluates the contents of websites by their information transparency and communication interactivity. The table lists the mean score for 134 electoral parties with an official national website in June 2000, and the ideological family for each party, according to *Elections Around the World*. www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm

scored by far the best (72 percent), perhaps reflecting the educational and generational profile of their membership. Nationalist parties on the far right also took advantage of this new medium, followed by Christian Democrat and Conservative parties. The extreme left and 'other' parties scored lowest. Overall parties on the right presented slightly richer multifunctional websites than those on the left, although this varied among major and minor parties. Party differences may reflect access to financial resources and technical skills, as well as the tendency for party members and voters to be drawn from groups with widespread access to the Internet, such as those with higher socio-economic status and greater education.

We have no direct evidence for the political balance of parties in traditional forms of communication across Western Europe, like paid commercials or coverage by major newspapers and television news. This pattern also varies according to the legal regulations covering political advertising and party political broadcasting, and the formal rules and informal procedures determining political balance in newsrooms. Nevertheless, there are two main patterns (IDEA, 2001; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 1995; Norris, 2000). In countries where rules of public service television prevail, such as Britain, the amount of time devoted to each party in television news coverage and party broadcasts in election campaigns is roughly proportionate to their strength (measured by their share of votes or seats in the previous election). Alternatively, in countries with more laissez-faire traditions, such as the United States, news and commercial values prevail, and the major parties and front-runner candidates get the vast bulk of the news coverage and TV advertizing. This brief comparison of party websites suggests that compared with the visibility normally enjoyed by major parties in traditional news channels, the virtual world provides greater pluralism for party competition. Some smaller parties, including the Greens and Nationalists, have been able to exploit the new technology most effectively in developing their websites. This pattern is particularly important for maximizing electoral competition and choice within the multiparty systems in Western Europe.

Therefore, compared with the visibility of minor and fringe parties in the traditional mass media, the rise of parties on the World Wide Web does seem to contribute towards communication pluralism by widening the opportunities for dissemination by minor and fringe parties and by expanding the range of information resources available to the electorate. This does not necessarily mean that the public is paying attention to these websites, which remains to be determined, still less that this process necessarily affects the overall balance of party power, but nevertheless minor parties can compete more equally with major parties on the Internet than through paid or free television broadcasts or newspaper advertisements. Moreover, we can conclude that the critique that party websites are relatively conservative in design, acting purely as top-down information channels rather than bottom-up communication channels, receives limited support from the comparison. European parties commonly provided multiple ways for the public to connect with officials and candidates, as well as opportunities for further discussion and activism. If American websites tend to be more 'top-down' in design, this may reflect long-standing differences in the function and organization of parties in the USA and Western Europe, as well as contrasts between party and candidate campaign websites.

The Public's Use of Party Websites

But what are the consequences of these online resources for widening and deepening channels of political participation, and, in particular, do these websites tend to reach party supporters and political activists more than wavering voters among the general public? Given the relatively small number of users of party websites in most countries, national surveys often include too few cases to allow any reliable analysis. To overcome this problem, the study draws on the Spring 2000 Eurobarometer, including a pooled sample of 16,078 cases in the 15 EU member states, including 3,602 Internet users. The survey asked people about their use and potential interest in many different Information Society technologies, such as cable and satellite television, mobile telephones and fax machines, as well as desktop, laptop and Palm Pilot computers, and access to the Internet/World Wide Web. Overall, about one-fifth of all Europeans (22 percent) use the Internet at home, a pattern with marked differences between Northern and Southern European countries, ranging from 48 percent in Sweden, 46 percent in Denmark and 45 percent in The Netherlands down to 10 percent in Spain, 7 percent in Portugal and 6 percent in Greece (for details, see Norris, 2001).

The online population in Europe was asked about how far they had used the Internet at home for 25 different types of online activities within the previous three months. Table 4 illustrates the popularity of these activities among Internet users, ranging from emailing family, friends and colleagues (mentioned by 71 percent of online users) through research, leisure, banking and shopping, down to more technically demanding uses requiring high-speed broadband access for effective performance, like videoconferencing (2 percent), making a telephone call (9 percent) or watching TV (7 percent) via the Internet, and building a website (11 percent). Overall, four items can be used to compare uses of the Internet most closely related to politics, including reading articles from national newspapers (done by 33 percent), visiting the website of a local authority (23 percent), visiting a government website (16 percent), and visiting a political party website (13 percent). Among all European online users, politics is therefore a minority activity, but nevertheless the fact that between one-fifth to one-quarter visited a local authority or government website represents a substantial number, probably more than can be expected to have contacted a local authority or government department via conventional means of information and communication, suggesting that the Internet has the potential to reach millions of citizens for the delivery of official information and services once access becomes more widely available. The fact that at least 1 in 10 of those online visited a party website in the previous three months means that, once Internet access widens to the general population, this represents an important supplementary mechanism for parties to reach potential supporters via unmediated channels.

To reduce the number of items, principle component factor analysis was

Table 4. Popular online activities

| <i>Function</i> | <i>% of online users</i> |
|---|--------------------------|
| Emailed family, friends or colleagues | 70.8 |
| Searched for educational materials | 47.1 |
| Searched for a specific product | 46.6 |
| Downloaded free software | 41.0 |
| Searched for information on sport or leisure activities | 39.8 |
| Prepared a holiday | 37.2 |
| <i>Read articles from national newspapers</i> | 33.4 |
| Carried out operations on bank account | 30.9 |
| Played a computer game | 29.2 |
| Searched for information concerning your health | 24.2 |
| Searched for job opportunities | 24.2 |
| <i>Visited the website of your local authority</i> | 23.2 |
| Listened to radio or music on the Internet | 21.9 |
| <i>Visited the website of the government</i> | 16.2 |
| Visited the website of a museum | 16.0 |
| Bought a book | 14.3 |
| Bought a CD | 13.4 |
| <i>Visited the website of a political party</i> | 12.9 |
| Answered a public opinion survey | 10.8 |
| Built your own website | 10.5 |
| Made a telephone call using the Internet | 8.9 |
| Bought software | 8.1 |
| Bought stocks or shares | 6.6 |
| Watched TV channels on the Internet | 6.5 |
| Made a bid in an online auction | 4.8 |
| Held videoconferencing over the Internet | 2.2 |

Note: The percentage of the online population.

Q: 'Which of the following, if any, have you done online in the last three months?'

Source: Eurobarometer 53.0 Spring 2000.

used to examine the underlying dimensions of online activities. The results in Table 5 reveal seven main types of Internet users, including information-seekers, shoppers, financial users, games-players, entertainment-seekers and technically advanced users, as well as political users who accessed the websites of government departments, local authorities and parties. What this suggests is that people who use the Internet to read newspapers are a general group who also commonly access the Web for many other functions, such as searching for information about health, holidays or sports, as well as emailing friends. In contrast, people who access the Internet for more directly political functions are a distinctive group, differing from others who give priority to shopping, games or finance. As a medium of choice, the Internet allows segmented audiences to tailor their experiences and bookmarks to their particular interests, whether pop music, pot holing or public

Table 5. Factor analysis of online activities

| | <i>Info</i> | <i>Politics</i> | <i>Shop</i> | <i>Media</i> | <i>Play</i> | <i>Finance</i> | <i>Tech</i> |
|---|-------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Searched for information on sports/leisure | .565 | | | | | | |
| Prepared for a holiday | .558 | | | | | | |
| Searched for information about | .521 | | | | | | |
| Searched for educational materials | .495 | | | | | | |
| Searched for health information | .456 | | | | | | |
| Emailed family, friends or colleagues | .447 | | | | | | |
| Read articles from national newspapers | .444 | | | | | | |
| Visited the website of a museum | .368 | | | | | | |
| Visited a website of the government | .731 | | | | | | |
| Visited the website of a political party | .728 | | | | | | |
| Visited the website of your local authority | .582 | | | | | | |
| Bought a CD | | | .764 | | | | |
| Bought a book | | | .745 | | | | |
| Bought software | | | .583 | | | | |
| Watched TV channels on the Internet | | | | .713 | | | |
| Listened to radio or music on the Internet | | | | .612 | | | |
| Searched for job opportunities | | | | | .632 | | |
| Played computer games | | | | | .496 | | |
| Downloaded free software | | | | | .396 | | |
| Bought stocks or shares | | | | | | .742 | |
| Operations on your bank account | | | | | | .680 | |
| Made a bid in online auctions | | | | | | .359 | |
| Made a telephone call using the Internet | | | | | | | .745 |
| Held videoconferencing over Internet | | | | | | | .571 |
| Built your own website | | | | | | | .431 |
| <i>% of variance</i> | <i>16.6</i> | <i>5.99</i> | <i>5.16</i> | <i>4.97</i> | <i>4.50</i> | <i>4.01</i> | <i>3.85</i> |

Note: The percentage of the online population. Q: ‘Which of the following, if any, have you done online in the last three months?’ Factor analysis with Principal Component Analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 9 iterations. Coefficients below .350 were excluded.

Source: Eurobarometer 53.0 Spring 2000.

affairs, without necessarily spending much time or even encountering alternative information on other websites.

To understand more about who uses party websites, the logistic regression analysis models presented in Table 6 examined the standard background characteristics that are commonly associated with Internet use (Norris, 2001) and with political participation (Norris, 2002; Verba et al., 1995), including the influence of age, gender, education, household income and social class (in that order), as well as use of TV news, radio news and newspapers, and selected political attitudes including left–right ideological self-placement, frequency of political discussion, level of political knowledge

Table 6. Models predicting use of the Internet and of party websites, EU – 15 2000

| | <i>Use of Internet</i> | | | <i>Use of party webs</i> | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>S.E.</i> | <i>Sig.</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>S.E.</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
| Demographics | | | | | | |
| Age | -.025 | .002 | .000 | -.028 | .005 | .000 |
| Gender | .079 | .052 | .123 | .557 | .139 | .000 |
| Education | .691 | .040 | .000 | .833 | .114 | .000 |
| Income | .186 | .020 | .000 | .065 | .053 | .218 |
| Class | .822 | .066 | .000 | .507 | .195 | .009 |
| Use of media | | | | | | |
| TV News Use | .079 | .079 | .017 | .282 | .105 | .007 |
| Newspaper Use | .095 | .095 | .000 | .245 | .072 | .001 |
| Radio News Use | .006 | .006 | .755 | -.031 | .054 | .570 |
| Political attitudes | | | | | | |
| Left-Right Ideology | .028 | .028 | .030 | -.006 | .031 | .850 |
| Political Discussion | .168 | .168 | .000 | .473 | .058 | .000 |
| Political Knowledge | .004 | .004 | .744 | .134 | .034 | .000 |
| EU region | | | | | | |
| Northern Europe | 1.190 | .080 | .000 | .968 | .218 | .000 |
| Constant | -5.59 | | | -11.51 | | |
| Cox-Snell R ² | .153 | | | .037 | | |
| Nagelkerke R ² | .235 | | | .179 | | |
| % Correct | 78.7 | | | 97.5 | | |

Note: The table reports the beta coefficients predicting use of the Internet based on logistic regression models. Use of the Internet and use of party websites are each measured as a dichotomy where 1 = yes, 0 = no.

Age: Years. *Education:* Age finished FT education. *Income:* Harmonized HH income scale. *Class:* Manual (0)/Non-manual HoH. *Gender:* Male (1) Female (0). *Use of Media:* 5-point scales. *Left-right ideology:* 10-point self-placement scale from left (1) to right (10). *Political discussion:* 6-point scale combining frequency of political discussion and persuasion. *Political knowledge:* 9-point scale measuring awareness of EU institutions.

Source: Eurobarometer 53.0 Spring 2000.

and European region (North-South). Model (A) predicted use of the Internet and Model B analyzed use of party websites among the European population.

The results in Model A predicting online use show that all these factors proved significant except gender (suggesting closure of the gender gap in Internet access across Europe), use of radio news and political knowledge. This confirms the familiar patterns in the digital divide in terms of the social bias in Internet use towards the well-educated, more affluent and middle-class younger generations, especially residents in Northern Europe. The online population also had greater than average use of television news and

newspapers, confirming that the Internet supplements old media. Users were also more likely to engage in political discussion and persuasion, and to be slightly more towards the right in their political leanings.

The results in Model B show a broadly similar but not identical picture of the subgroup who used party websites. Again, when compared with the general population, there was a general social bias among users of party websites towards an over-representation among the younger age groups, better educated and middle class, those who live in Northern European countries and men. This group was also far more likely than average to use old news media resources like TV news and newspapers (but not radio), to engage in political discussions and to be more knowledgeable about EU institutions. In short, as expected, party websites tended to attract those who were already among the most aware of public affairs, as well as those with higher socio-economic status. The characteristics of party websites are therefore similar to the social groups who are already most likely to participate politically through non-virtual means, such as by joining parties, mobilizing community groups or voting in elections (Norris, 2002), rather than drawing on groups less active in public life.

The one exception to this pattern concerns the young, who usually have

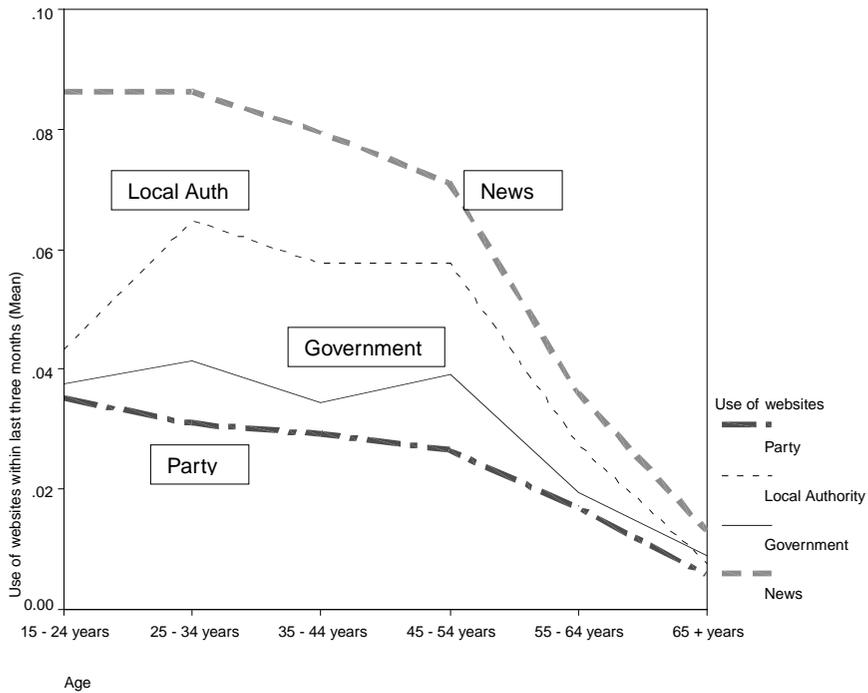


Figure 1. Use of political websites by age group
 (The percentage of the European population using political websites in the prior three months.)
 Source: Eurobarometer 53.0 Spring 2000.

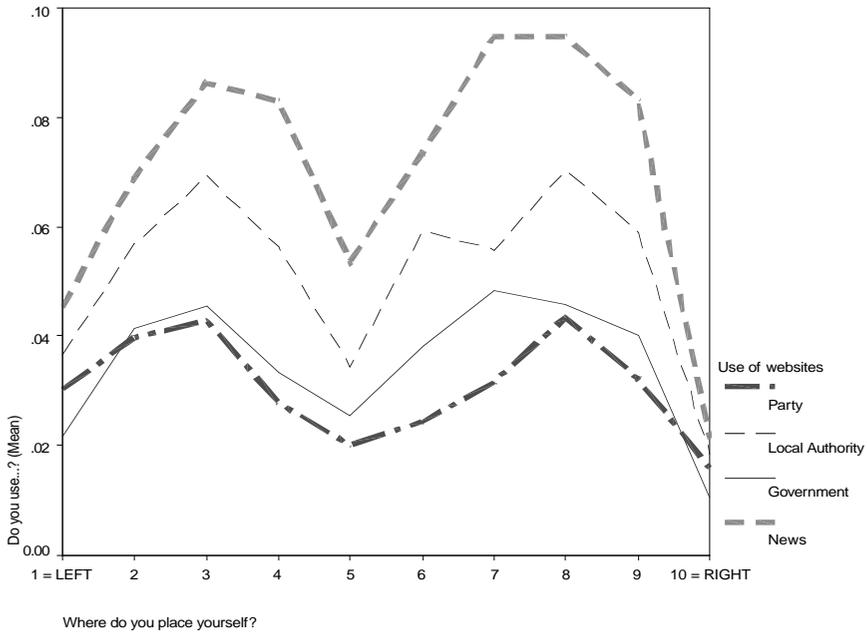


Figure 2. Use of political websites by left–right ideological self-placement

lower than average levels of civic engagement. If this group is finding new sources of information and political communications online from news, party and government websites, then this could have important consequences for the future of democracy, through the longer process of generational turnover. To look at this more closely, Figure 1 graphs the distribution of age groups who use the websites provided by political parties, local authorities, government departments and online newspapers. The pattern does confirm that, as expected, younger cohorts are far more likely to use these resources, especially electronic newspapers. If this pattern continues, it suggests that even if young people are less participatory through conventional channels like turnout, they are seeking and finding alternative channels of political information online.

Lastly, to examine the political attitudes of users of party websites in more detail, the distribution illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 shows their left–right ideological self-placement and party vote. The most striking pattern which emerges is that there is an ‘M’-shaped curve, with use of party websites most common among those on the moderate left and moderate right, but a sharp dip in the center of the political spectrum. The fact that this pattern emerges across all four indicators of use of political websites, and is evident using two separate measures of ideological positioning, is both striking and somewhat puzzling. We have established that Center parties are evaluated

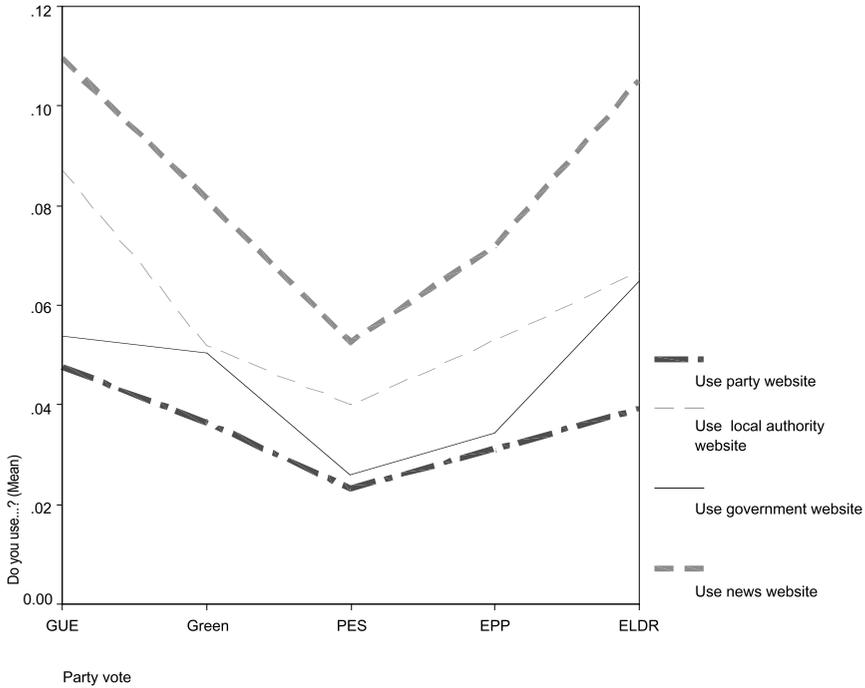


Figure 3. Use of political websites by party vote

(The percentage of the European adult population using political websites in the prior three months. European party groups. GUE = Confederal European United left, V = The Greens, PES = Party of European Socialists, EPP = European People’s Party and European Democrats, ELDR = European Liberal, Democratic and Reformist Party. These party groups are ranked from ‘left’ to ‘right’ based on self-placement of MEPs on left–right socio-economic scales in the European Representation Study, 1994. See Jacques Thomassen and Herman Schmitt, ‘Partisan structures in the European Parliament.’ Figure 7.3 in Richard S. Katz and Bernhard Wessels, *The European Parliament, National Parliament and European Integration*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).)

Source: Eurobarometer 53.0 Spring 2000.

relatively well in terms of the quality of their websites for information and communications. One explanation could be demand-related: relatively few Center parties are online with websites. Comparison of the types of parties online presented elsewhere (Norris, 2001: Table 8.2) shows that only 37 percent of Center parties had established a website, compared with 62 percent of Christian Democratic parties and 71 percent of Green parties. Yet the fact that the pattern is not just evident on party websites but across the local authority, news and government sites as well throws doubt on this explanation. Alternatively, the reason could be supply-related: if more moderate voters are less actively engaged in politics than those who support parties on the center-left and the center-right. Obviously, further research is required to unravel this issue and explore these explanations in greater depth.

Conclusions and Discussion

Many hope, and others fear, that the bundle of technologies associated with the Internet have the capacity to alter democracy for ill or well. If more voices are heard in public affairs through a diversity of party websites, then potentially this can strengthen communication pluralism and widen the availability of information available about electoral choices. If more opportunities for deliberation and expression are available through party discussion groups, list serves, email and consultation exercises, this promises to strengthen political engagement within parties. The 'first wave' of theorists in the early years of the emerging Internet believed that the World Wide Web would boost direct democracy, yet the second wave of more skeptical theorists suggested that, at least in American campaigns, the Web has largely failed to alter 'politics as usual'. So what have been the consequences of party websites for pluralism and participation in Europe?

This study was framed by four propositions:

- Based on the relative costs of access to different commercial mass media, and regulations governing access to free party political broadcasts, we expected to find few substantive differences in the contents of party websites among major, minor and fringe parties, so that there would be more egalitarian patterns of party competition through this form of communication than via the traditional mass media.
- Based on the traditional hierarchical structure of party organizations, and classical functions of political communications for parties, we predicted that party websites would reflect the 'top-down' function of providing information from the leadership to activists, members and the electorate, more than a 'bottom-up' function of interactive communications.
- Nevertheless, we anticipated that party websites would also reflect the particular form of technology and internal democratic traditions within parties, offering more opportunities for 'bottom-up' communications and useful feedback to the party leadership, providing greater interactivity than the traditional mass media.
- Lastly, we theorized that given well-established patterns of self-selection in media exposure and attention, the opportunities for communication and information via party websites would attract the politically interested and active more than the apathetic.

The results of this comparison of the contents of party websites and the response of the online public in the EU largely confirms most of these propositions, and this suggests both good and bad news for Internet enthusiasts. Overall, the idea that the Internet represents 'politics as usual' is too simplistic a conclusion to account for the evidence presented here, although neither will it revolutionize direct democracy.

The availability of party websites has strengthened communication pluralism in Europe by widening the information available about minor and

fringe parties, allowing them greater voice and visibility than coverage in traditional news media. If the public is seeking information, then it can be found via the web for all sorts of minor and fringe parties ranging from the Dutch Groen Links, les Verts in France and Ecolo in Belgium to the UK Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, the Dansk Folkeparti in Denmark and the Italian Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore. This is important in principle for communication pluralism and the preconditions for effective party competition, even if, given limited patterns of public use, it has no real effect or only a very limited impact on party power.

Moreover, these websites are not simply 'top-down' channels of information, or party propaganda, instead, contrary to the American studies, in Europe they also facilitate 'bottom-up' communication from citizens to parties and elected officials. The content analysis showed that party websites contained many features that could potentially strengthen the relationship between supporters and leaders, providing opportunities for feedback and input into the policy process as well as the mobilization of support.

Lastly, the study established a broad picture of the European public who use party websites, largely confirming previous studies of the American electorate. At present, the impact of the Internet remains limited, since few are online in Europe, and even fewer use party websites. Across all the EU, we can estimate that about one-fifth of the population currently uses the Internet at home, and among this group only 1 in 10 had visited a party website within the previous three months. Nevertheless, as Internet access widens throughout Western Europe, as it already has in Scandinavia, North America and Australia, this resource can potentially provide citizens with an important unmediated source of political information supplementing traditional channels. Moreover, political sites on the Internet are particularly popular among the younger generations, an important group who are currently least engaged with many traditional channels, as well as among the well educated and higher social strata. The public located on the moderate-left and the moderate-right of the political spectrum are most likely to use the political resources which are available online.

Overall, the study suggests that party websites are likely to have greater impact on communication pluralism rather than by widening direct participation among disaffected groups, because these resources mainly reach citizens who are already most likely to be politically active, interested and engaged. Like traditional news media, politics on the Internet serves primarily to reinforce civic engagement (Norris, 2000). While party democracy is likely to be strengthened by this process, by further activating the most active, it is unclear whether the hopes of advocates of direct democracy will be realized through this development and whether other groups on the Internet can be persuaded to turn off their games, their online shopping or their music downloading for enough time to lend sustained attention to the political world. Perhaps, if politics matters, as the events of 11 September suggest, they can be persuaded. For how long is another matter.

Note

- 1 *Elections Around the World*, www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm. *Governments on the WWW*, www.gksoft.com/govt/ and *Political Science Resources*, 'Political parties, interest groups and other movements', www.psr.keele.ac.uk/parties.htm

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