ICTs and Democracy

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Digital Democracy

Representative Democracy

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Problem

- Public becoming disinterested in political affairs

- Detachment from political parties

- Public becoming more complacent

- Criticism: More opportunities for criticism, deliberation, and decision making

Possible Solution

- Digital Democracy
- Limitless information via world wide web
  - Potential for public to become knowledgeable about public affairs
  - More articulate in expressing views via email, online discussion lists, chat rooms
  - More active in mobilizing around community affairs
  - 2-way communication: citizens $\leftarrow\rightarrow$ intermediary organizations (media, gov't, public organizations)

Democratization through ICTs

- Information available
  - Online bulletin boards, chat groups, list serve email, multi-user domains
- Exchange ideas, debate issues, mobilize opinions
- Facilitate opportunities
  - Electronic voting
  - Promote government accountability
  - Revival of community networks and urban neighborhoods

Howard Dean Campaign

- $ 11 Million raised via internet between April and September 2003
- Develop and update Web pages with engaging content to encourage repeat visits
- Register more than 450,000 subscribers
- 6.5 million emails to supporters
- Registered thousands of volunteers with easy-to-use internet tools for running their own campaigns, recruit others, and solicit contributions
- Process online credit card donations

Potential Problems

- Widen gap between engaged & apathetic
- Lose traditional face-to-face social networks
- Dominated by "big dog" corporations and media
  - No room for individual input, discussion, debate
- Technological resources not readily available to **all**
  - Amplify voices of affluent & educated
  - Marginalizing underprivileged & apathetic

Virtual Politics in Developing Nations

- Semi-democracies (new governments, not established)
  - Poor, non-industrialized
  - Weak governments, corruption, weak judiciary
  - Abuse of political rights & civil liberties (e.g. censorship of media)
  - Violence against minority groups, few checks on government, economic failure, poverty
  - Often revert back to authoritarian rule
- ***Ideally***, internet can help by providing a platform for opposing parties, protest groups, & minorities seeking to challenge authoritarian regimes

Question

- What do you suspect would be a potential problem when trying to implement digital politics in underdeveloped nations?

Virtual Politics in Developing Nations

- Internet regulation by government
  - Example: Censorship of internet in Cuba, China
  - Governments of underdeveloped nations using censorship of internet to their advantage
  - Internet becomes propaganda tool to strengthen govt's rule
  - Denying other parties any chance to present opposing views

3 Dimensions of Democracy

- Pluralistic Competition
  - Among parties and individuals
- Participation
  - Among *equal* citizens for election of representatives through free, *fair*, periodic elections
- Civil and Political Liberties
  - Speech, Publish, Assemble, Organize

Mapping Digital Politics

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copyright reasons.

e-Governance

- Internet serves multiple functions
  - Disseminating information about its operations and public services
  - Facilitating public feedback mechanisms (emails to gov't agencies)
  - Providing direct support for democratic process (electoral registration, online voting)

e-Governance

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The Virtual Political Party

The political party

- Political parties are the core structure mediating between citizens and the state
- Differ from other political organizations in that they are capable of:

    - aggregating diverse interests

    - mobilizing activists

    - competing for elected office

    - organizing government

The problem:

- Weakening partisan identification in the electorate
- Waning membership rolls

  Are these indicators of the decline and fall of political parties as mass organizations?

How can digital technologies help?

- Multiple websites by dissident parties may provide an invaluable channel of communication for mobilizing critical voices and challenging state propaganda

- The internet can maximize party competition, facilitating opportunities for insurgents and challengers to communicate their message, inform members, and gain visibility than through traditional mass media

Parties currently Online

- Interest groups vs. actual parties
- Electoral parties: judged by the distribution of seats in the lower house of national legislature

  - Major electoral: >20% seats

  - Minor electoral: between 3 and 20 seats

  - Fringe electoral: lack at least 3 seats

Distribution of party websites

- As of June 2000, 1250 party websites existed in 179 nations worldwide

  - average of 7 party websites per country

- Disparities however exist

  - North America: 41 parties online per country

  - W. Europe: 24 parties online per country

- 45 countries with NO party websites e.g. Vanuatu, Mali, Benin . These are countries with poorer democracies and authoritarian gov'ts

More disparities

- Scandinavia alone has more virtual parties than all of Sub-Saharan Africa
- Six times as many parties online in established democracies as compared to non-democracies
- Eighteen times as many parties online in rich societies as opposed to poor societies
- Data may seem to reflect global inequalities in general access to the internet but there are exceptions; poorer democracies with minimal public internet access where party websites still proliferate e.g.

  - Argentina with 29 parties online

  - India with 20 and S. Africa with 18

The types of parties online

- Percentages within parties:

  - fringe parties: 37%

  - minor parties: 47%

  - major parties: 52%

- The internet provides a more level playing field for party competition than traditional mass media

- Neither size nor ideological orientation determine the proportion of parties online

- Rough political balance on the Internet

	Fringe Parties (%)	Minor parties (%)	Major parties (%)	All (%)
Extreme left	35	65	44	42
Social Democrat	38	53	74	52
Greens	59	88	0	71
Center	33	45	28	37
Liberals	39	73	82	57
Christian Democrats	52	71	78	62
Conservative	36	55	66	51
Nationalist (far right)	49	41	32	41
Others	18	22	19	19
All	31	47	52	39

- The above table showing the distribution of websites by family provides evidence that there is no clear bias toward either the "left" of "right"
  - → Rough political balance exists on internet
  - → The Internet can provide a flourishing environment for groups that are currently marginalized in the traditional mass media
  - → Even though mainstream parties are more commonly online, many minor and fringe parties on from the extreme left and right have developed and online site for political expression, mobilization, and organization.

Functions of Party Websites

- Websites are classified according to their:

    - Information transparency

    - Communication Interactivity

- Some party websites are very sophisticated while others are barely developed

- Despite such discrepancies, there is no clear bias online toward either the "left" or "right"

- Again: a rough political balance exists on the Internet

What affects the distribution and function of party websites?

- The type of political system in respective countries: Older democracies vs. Transitional democratic societies

- Technological diffusion – proportion of population online followed by socio-economic development

    NOTE:

    The level of democratization has nothing to do with all this.

- Overall, the process of democratization more than democracy has affected the presence of parties on the net

Discussion Questions

- If a direct democracy system could be implemented, would it necessarily be better?

- What will be the overall impact of the information society on governments and civic society?

- Can ICTs help restore public confidence in political the party system?

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