

**John F. Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University  
Faculty Research Working Papers Series**

**Preaching to the Converted? Pluralism,  
Participation, and Party Websites**

**Pippa Norris**

**October 2001**

**RWP01-040**

**The views expressed in the KSG Faculty Research Working Paper Series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the John F. Kennedy School of Government or Harvard University. All works posted here are owned and copyrighted by the author(s). Papers may be downloaded for personal use only.**



# Preaching to the Converted?

## Pluralism, Participation, and Party Websites

Pippa Norris

Shorenstein Center  
John F. Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
Pippa\_Norris@Harvard.edu  
www.pippanorris.com

### Synopsis:

A growing body of American research based on analysis of campaign websites in US elections suggests three propositions. Firstly, party and candidate websites in America are more effective in strengthening representative democracy via pluralism rather than direct democracy via participation. In particular, there is evidence that the virtual world does provide a more competitive playing field for minor parties and candidates than traditional forms of campaign communications like paid TV ads and coverage in newspapers and television. Nevertheless, most campaign websites by mainstream parties and candidates have proved relatively conservative in design, acting more like electronic 'top-down' electronic pamphlets than as a radically new forum for interactive 'bottom up' participation. And lastly, among the electorate, campaign websites serve primarily to activate the active, rather than reaching the apathetic.

Are similar patterns apparent in the European context? To consider these issues, *Part I* lays out the debate about the function of the Internet for pluralism and participation. *Part II* outlines the research design including content analysis of 134 websites, and survey data of users in the fifteen European Union member states from the Spring 2000 Eurobarometer. *Part III* examines the evidence for patterns of competition in European party websites while *Part IV* analyzes patterns of participation among European users. The conclusion summarizes the key results and considers the consequences for representative democracy and for public policy.

Draft 1:

For *Party Politics*

In modern societies, the availability of information is critical to the quality of decision making by citizens and policymakers. In economic markets, consumers need accurate and reliable information to compare and evaluate products and services. In the political market, electors need information to judge the record of government and to select among alternative candidates and parties. If citizens are poorly informed, if they lack practical knowledge, if they are unaware of some electoral choices, they may cast ballots that fail to reflect their real interests (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Moreover policymakers need accurate information about citizens: to respond to public concerns, deliver effective services, and maximize electoral support. Information in the political marketplace comes from two primary sources. Personal interactions commonly include informal face-to-face political conversations with friends, family and colleagues, traditional campaign rallies, community forums, and grassroots meetings. These information resources remain important, especially in poorer democracies, but these channels have been supplemented in modern campaigns by the mass media, including the printed press (newspapers and magazines), electronic broadcasts (radio and television news), and also more recently the bundle of technologies associated with the Internet (including party and candidate websites). The rise of the Internet may be a particularly important development for channels of campaign information and communication. Potentially this bundle of technologies can function as a *pluralistic civic forum* by facilitating the voice of oppositional challengers and the visibility of smaller parties, so that citizens can learn about electoral choices, and as a *channel for participation and expression* by allowing interactive linkages between citizens and representatives (Norris 2001).

A growing body of American research based on analysis of campaign websites in US elections suggests three propositions. Firstly, party and candidate websites in America are stronger in strengthening representative democracy via pluralism rather than direct democracy via participation. In particular, there is evidence that the virtual world does provide a more competitive playing field for minor parties and candidates than traditional forms of campaign communications like paid TV ads and coverage in newspapers and television. Nevertheless, most campaign websites by mainstream parties and candidates have proved relatively conservative in design, acting more like electronic 'top-down' electronic pamphlets than as a radically new forum for interactive 'bottom up' participation. And lastly, among the electorate, campaign websites serve primarily to activate the active, rather than reaching the apathetic.

Considerable evidence supports these propositions in the context of US campaigns but, given established patterns of 'American exceptionalism', it remains unclear whether it is possible to generalize reliably from these findings to patterns of pluralist party competition and electoral participation elsewhere. In Western Europe, for example, if the technology adapts to the existing structure of the state, we might well expect to find that the Internet plays a different role in European countries characterized by multiparty systems, stronger grassroots mass-branch party organizations, and more inclusive levels of electoral turnout. To consider these issues, *Part I* lays out the debate about the function of the Internet for pluralism and participation. *Part II* outlines the research design including content analysis of 134 websites and survey data of users in the fifteen European Union member states from the Spring 2000 Eurobarometer. *Part III* examines the evidence for patterns of competition in European party websites while *Part IV* analyzes patterns of participation among European users. The conclusion summarizes the key results and considers the consequences for representative democracy and for public policy.

### **I: Theoretical Framework**

Two perspectives are commonly heard in debates about the political impact of the Internet. The first, 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 are 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 believe that the creation of effective, well-designed and innovative websites 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, common in the early 1990s, suggested that Internet participation represented a distinctive type of civic engagement that sharply differed from traditional activities. In this view the popularity of the Internet as a virtual public library, 24/7 bank, and multimedia stream of popular entertainment would gradually draw more people into the democratic process, a process particularly important for groups currently disengaged from public affairs, such as the younger generation. Therefore early 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 widening the pool of political participants.

Yet by the end of the 1990s, more skeptical voices, based largely on evidence about the role of the Internet in American elections, had raised growing doubts about these claims. True, multiple parties and candidates established an online presence with a plethora of dot.orgs in the 1996, 1998 and 2000 races. Nevertheless campaign websites by mainstream candidates for the US House or Senate tended to be 'all singin', all-dancin' affairs, full of multimedia gizmos and gadgets like streaming videos, easily available and searchable in real-time, but essentially similar in function to traditional published leaflets, position papers, press releases, and television commercials. Few offered opportunities for unmediated public debate or two-way interactive horizontal discussion among supporters and critics, still less between candidates and citizens. Many studies based on analysis of US surveys 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 (Davis and Owen 1998; Davis 1999; Hill and Hughes 1998; Bimber 1998; Kamarck and Nye 1999; Corrado 2000). Margolis and Resnick (2000: 54) present perhaps the strongest case that 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, online journalism can be expected to prove most popular among news junkies, NGO websites among local activists, and official government websites among consultants, policy analysts and lobbyists. Party websites, like traditional election rallies, partisan 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. If the population visiting political sites is atypical of the broader society, this also has important implications for how far the voices heard online, and the results of public consultation exercises, discussion groups, or online polls, can be regarded as representative of public opinion in America.

Yet most previous research has studied the role of the Internet in US elections and it is not clear how far we can generalize from this particular context to 'routine' uses of the Internet outside of electoral campaigns, as well as to the use of the Internet in other nations. 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, produce patterns of political participation that are atypical of similar postindustrial societies (Norris 2002). A growing body of work is being conducted in other countries, such as in Britain (Coleman 1999; Gibson and Ward 1998; Gibson and Ward 2000; Margolis et al. 1999), but little of this adopts a comparative cross-national design in a wide range of countries, and most research has focused on the structure and contents of political websites, such as those developed by government departments, parliaments, state and local authorities, and political parties, rather than the impact of the Internet on 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). Given what has already been established in the literature, we can examine evidence for three specific propositions, namely:

- (i) What is the pattern of European party competition online, and does this suggest opportunities for pluralistic competition for minor and fringe parties?
- (ii) What is the function of party web sites, in particular do they reflect the 'top down' function of providing information more than 'bottom up' function of interactive communications?
- (iii) Who uses party websites, and do they attract the active more than the apathetic?

## II: The Research Design

The comparative framework in this study focuses on the fifteen member states of the European Union to maximize the 'most similar' design (Dogan and Pelassy 1984). All are relatively affluent postindustrial economies with a long tradition of democracy, yet at the same time there are considerable variations in the political institutions of these states (see Lijphart 1999), including moderate and fragmented multi-party systems, majoritarian and proportional electoral systems, and unified and federal states, as well as major contrasts between Nordic and Mediterranean Europe in levels of technological diffusion and access to the Information Society (Norris 2001). Most countries experienced their democratic transitions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, although Portugal and Spain were part of the 'third wave' in the 1970s.

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 crosschecked and verified against two independent sources, *Governments on the WWW* and *Political Science Resources*<sup>1</sup>. For consistency, each political party with at least one official web site was counted only once, excluding multiple entries such as separate web sites 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 web sites 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% of all seats in the lower house of parliament,
- ?? *Minor parliamentary parties* are classified as those with more than 3% but less than 20% of seats in parliament, and
- ?? *Fringe parties* are those that identify themselves as a party and run candidates, yet lack at least 3% 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% of seats. Parties were further sub-divided 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 certain social groups like pensioners, without any other identification, which were categorized as 'other'.

### III: The 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 feedback into the policymaking 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 web sites 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 like 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. 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. Finally all the items were summed into two standardized 100-point Information and Communication scales that were then combined into a standardized 100-point summary index.

[Table 1 about here]

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% of websites), organization (78%), and candidates (75%), as well as their party manifesto or statement of principles (71%). 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% of websites) and join online (75%) to ways to submit messages (66%), contact candidates (73%), join party discussion groups or list serves (53%), and volunteer services (48%). Overall the

information score (60%) was slightly higher than the communication score (53%), but the difference was relatively modest.

[Table 2 about here]

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 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.

[Table 3 about here]

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% on the combined information and communication scale). Nevertheless minor parties score about the same (63%), and fringe parties with few members of parliament were only just behind (55%). Among party families, websites for the Greens scored by far the best (72%), 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 socioeconomic 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 (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 ads. 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 the rise of parties on the World Wide Web does seem to contribute towards pluralism, widening the range of information and communication resources essential for informed electoral decisions. 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 longstanding differences in the function and organization of parties in the US and Western Europe.

#### **IV: 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%) use the Internet at home, a pattern with marked differences between Northern and Southern European countries, ranging from 48% in Sweden, 46% in Denmark and 45% in the Netherlands down to 10% in Spain, 7% in Portugal and 6% in Greece (for details see Norris 2001).

[Table 4 about here]

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 prior three months. Table 4 illustrates the popularity of these activities among Internet users, ranging from emailing family, friends and colleagues (mentioned by 71% 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%), making a phone call (9%) or watching TV (7%) via the Internet, and building a website (11%). 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%), visiting the website of a local authority (23%), visiting a government website (16%), and visiting a political party website (13%). Among all European online users, politics is therefore a minority activity, but nevertheless the fact that between a 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 one in ten of those online visited a party website in the prior three months means that once access Internet widens to the general population this represents an important supplementary mechanism for parties to reach potential supporters via unmediated channels.

[Table 5 about here]

To reduce the number of items, principle component factor analysis was 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 prioritize 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 affairs, without necessarily spending much time or even encountering alternative information on other websites.



[Table 6 about here]

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 (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, 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 sub-group 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 socioeconomic 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, rather than drawing on groups less likely to participate into public life.

[Figure 1 about here]

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

[Figures 2 and 3 about here]

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 it is evident using two separate measures of ideological positioning, is both striking and somewhat puzzling. We have established that center parties are evaluated 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% of Center parties had established a website, compared with 62%

of Christian Democratic parties and 71% 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 both representative and direct forms of democracy, for ill or well. If more voices are heard in public affairs through a diversity of political websites then potentially this can strengthen pluralism and widen the availability of information available about electoral choices. If more opportunities for public deliberation and expression are available through discussion groups, list serves, email and consultation exercises, as well as opportunities for online voting, this promises to strengthen civic engagement. Yet in the early years of the emerging Internet age skeptics suggest 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 three specific questions:

- i. What is the pattern of European party competition online, and does this suggest opportunities for pluralistic competition for minor and fringe parties?
- ii. What is the function of party web sites, in particular do they reflect the 'top down' function of providing information more than 'bottom up' function of interactive communications?
- iii. Who uses party websites, and do they attract the active more than the apathetic?

The result of this comparison of the contents of party websites and the response of the online public suggests both good and bad news for Internet enthusiasts. Overall the idea that the Internet represents 'politics as usual' is too simple a conclusion to account for the European evidence. The evidence considered in this study suggests three main conclusions.

First, the availability of party websites has strengthened 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 is available 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.

Secondly, these websites are not simply 'top-down' channels of information, or party propaganda, instead they also facilitate 'bottom-up' communication from citizens to parties and elected officials. The content analysis showed that party websites contained a wealth of features that could potentially strengthen the relationship between supporters and leaders, providing opportunities for feedback and input into the policy process.

Lastly, the study established a broad picture of the European public who uses party websites. 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 one in ten 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.

Yet, the study suggests that party websites are likely to have greater impact on pluralism than on directly widening participation among disaffected groups, because these resources mainly reach citizens drawn from social and political groups which 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 representative 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<sup>th</sup> September suggest, they can be persuaded. For how long is another matter.

**Table 1: The Contents of Party Websites**

|   | Communication<br>Function | Information<br>function | %  |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------------|----|
| 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, phone 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 signup 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](http://www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm).

**Table 2: Analysis of Party Websites by Nation, EU-15 June 2000**

| Nation         | Electoral Party Websites (N) | Standardized information scale (0-100) | Standardized communication scale (0-100) | Standardized summary scale (0-100) |
|----------------|------------------------------|--|--|------------------------------------|
| 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](http://www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm).

**Table 3: Summary Score by Party Type, EU-15 June 2000**

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

Notes and sources:

*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 web sites 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](http://www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm).

**Table 4: Popular online activities**

| Function  | % Of Online Users |
|---|-------------------|
| Emailed family, friends or colleagues                     | 70.8              |
| Searched for educational materials                        | 47.1              |
| Searched for about 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              |
| <b><i>Read articles from national newspapers</i></b>      | <b>33.4</b>       |
| Carried out operations on your bank account               | 30.9              |
| Played a computer game                                    | 29.2              |
| Searched for information concerning your health           | 24.2              |
| Searched for job opportunities                            | 24.2              |
| <b><i>Visited the website of your local authority</i></b> | <b>23.2</b>       |
| Listened to radio or music on the Internet                | 21.9              |
| <b><i>Visited the website of the government</i></b>       | <b>16.2</b>       |
| Visited the website of a museum                           | 16.0              |
| Bought a book   | 14.3              |
| Bought a CD   | 13.4              |
| <b><i>Visited the website of a political party</i></b>    | <b>12.9</b>       |
| Answered to 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 on-line 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.

**Table 5: Factor analysis of online activities**

|  | Info | Politics | ShopMedia | PlayFinance | Tech |      |      |      |
|--|------|----------|-----------|-------------|------|------|------|------|
| 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 |          |           |             |      |      |      |      |
| E-mailed family, friends or colleagues       | .447 |          |           |             |      |      |      |      |
| Read articles from National Newspapers       | .444 |          |           |             |      |      |      |      |
| Visited the web site of a museum             | .368 |          |           |             |      |      |      |      |
| Visited a web site of the government         |      | .731     |           |             |      |      |      |      |
| Visited the Web Site of a Political Party    |      | .728     |           |             |      |      |      |      |
| Visited the Web Site 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 on-line auctions               |      |          |           |             | .359 |      |      |      |
| Made a telephone call using the Internet     |      |          |           |             | .745 |      |      |      |
| Held video-conferencing over internet        |      |          |           |             | .571 |      |      |      |
| Built your own web site                      |      |          |           |             | .431 |      |      |      |
| <i>% Of Variance</i>                         |      | 16.6     | 5.99      | 5.16        | 4.97 | 4.50 | 4.01 | 3.85 |

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.



**Table 6: Models predicting use of the Internet and of Party Websites, EU-15 2000**

|                            | Use of Internet |      |      | Use of Party Webs |      |      |
|----------------------------|-----------------|------|------|-------------------|------|------|
|                            | B               | S.E. | Sig. | B                 | S.E. | Sig. |
| <b>DEMOGRAPHICS</b>        |                 |      |      |                   |      |      |
| Age                        | <b>-.025</b>    | .002 | .000 | <b>-.028</b>      | .005 | .000 |
| Gender                     | .079            | .052 | .123 | <b>.557</b>       | .139 | .000 |
| Education                  | <b>.691</b>     | .040 | .000 | <b>.833</b>       | .114 | .000 |
| Income                     | <b>.186</b>     | .020 | .000 | .065              | .053 | .218 |
| Class                      | <b>.822</b>     | .066 | .000 | <b>.507</b>       | .195 | .009 |
| <b>USE OF MEDIA</b>        |                 |      |      |                   |      |      |
| TV News Use                | <b>.079</b>     | .079 | .017 | <b>.282</b>       | .105 | .007 |
| Newspaper Use              | <b>.095</b>     | .095 | .000 | <b>.245</b>       | .072 | .001 |
| Radio News Use             | .006            | .006 | .755 | -.031             | .054 | .570 |
| <b>POLITICAL ATTITUDES</b> |                 |      |      |                   |      |      |
| Left-Right Ideology        | <b>.028</b>     | .028 | .030 | -.006             | .031 | .850 |
| Political Discussion       | <b>.168</b>     | .168 | .000 | <b>.473</b>       | .058 | .000 |
| Political Knowledge        | .004            | .004 | .744 | <b>.134</b>       | .034 | .000 |
| <b>EU REGION</b>           |                 |      |      |                   |      |      |
| Northern Europe            | <b>1.190</b>    | .080 | .000 | <b>.968</b>       | .218 | .000 |
| Constant                   | -5.59           |      |      | -11.51            |      |      |
| Cox-Snell R <sup>2</sup>   | .153            |      |      | .037              |      |      |
| Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>  | .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

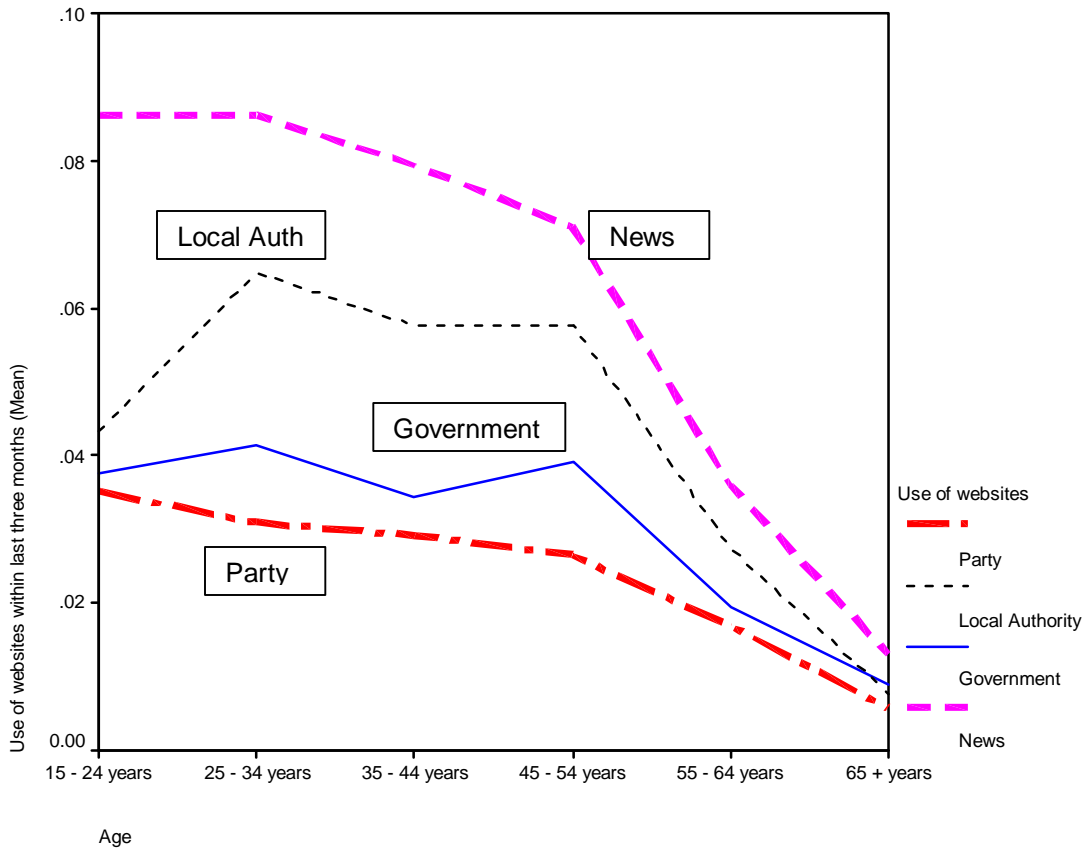
*Left-Right Ideology*: 10-point self-placement scale from left (1) to right (10)

*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.

**Figure 1:** Use of political websites by age group



Note: The percentage of the European population using political websites in the prior three months.

Sources: EuroBarometer 53.0 Spring 2000.

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

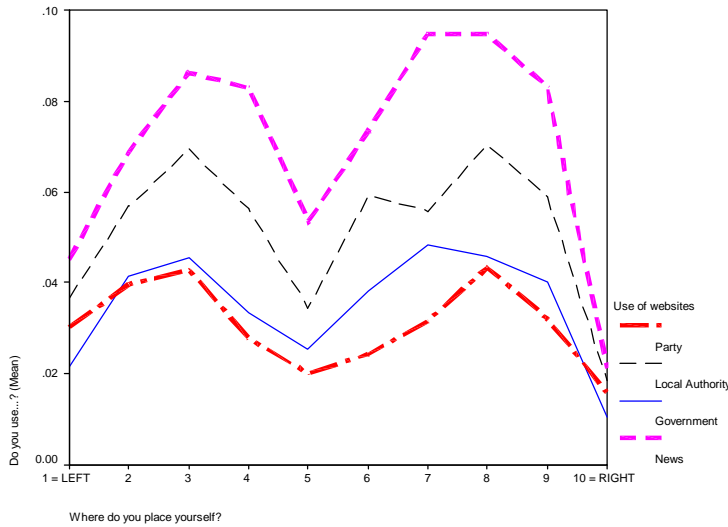
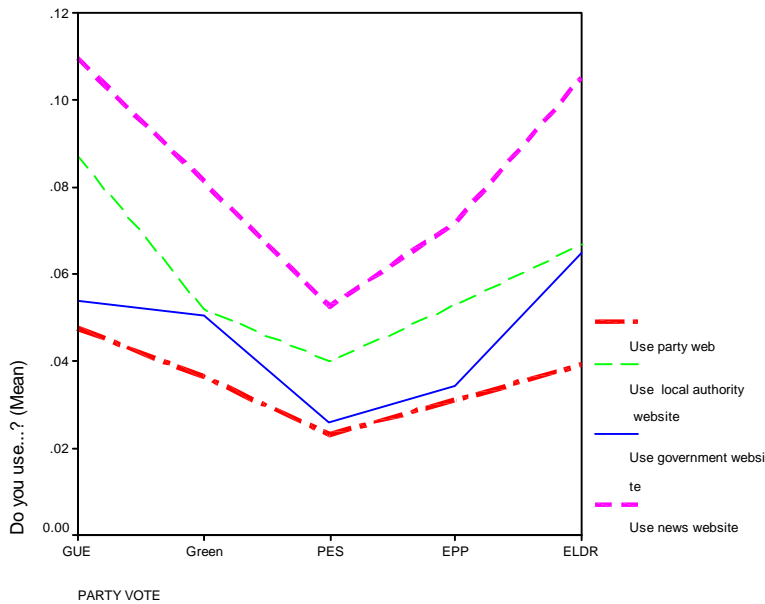


Figure 3: Use of political websites by party vote



Note: 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 socioeconomic 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. 1999. *The European Parliament, National Parliament and European Integration*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Sources: EuroBarometer 53.0 Spring 2000.

## References

- Bimber, Bruce. 1998. 'The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community and Accelerated Pluralism.' *Polity* XXXI (1): 133-160.
- Budge, Ian. 1996. *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Davis, Richard and Diana Owen. 1998. *New Media and American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Coleman, Stephen, John Taylor and Wim van de Donk. Eds. 1999. *Parliament in the Age of the Internet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Corrado, Anthony. 2000. *Campaigns in Cyberspace: Toward a New Regulatory Environment*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.
- Davis, Richard. 1999. *The Web of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dertouzos, Michael. 1997. *What Will Be: How the New Information Marketplace will Change our Lives*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Dogan, Mattei and Domanique Pelassy. 1984. *How to Compare Nations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gibson, Rachel and Stephen Ward. Eds. 2000. *Reinvigorating Democracy: British Politics and the Internet*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gibson, Rachel and Stephen J. Ward. 1998. 'U.K. Political Parties and the Internet: 'Politics as Usual' in the New Media?' *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*. 3(3):14-38.
- Grossman, Lawrence. 1995. *The Electronic Commonwealth*. New York: Penguin.
- Harper, Christopher. 1998. *And That's the Way it Will Be*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hill, Kevin A. and John E. Hughes. 1998. *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.
- Kamarck, Elaine Ciulla and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. 1999. *democracy.com? Governance in a Networked World*. Hollis, NH: Hollis Publishing.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1999. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lipset, Seymour M. 1996. *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lupia, Arthur and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1998. *The Democratic Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Margolis, Michael and David Resnick. 2000. *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace Revolution*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Margolis, Michael, David Resnick and Joel D. Wolfe. 1999. 'Party Competition on the Internet in the United States and Britain.' *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*. 4(4): 24-47.
- Negroponete, Nicholas. 1995. *Being Digital*. New York: Knopf.
- Norris, Pippa. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Democracies*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2001. *Digital Divide? Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2002. *Count Every Voice: Democratic Participation Worldwide*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Rash, Wayne, Jr. 1997. *Politics on the Nets: Wiring the Political Process*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- Rheingold, Howard. 1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading: Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Schwartz, Edward. 1996. *Netactivism: How Citizens Use the Internet*. Sebastapol, CA: Songline Studios.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Schlozman and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Elections Around the World*. [www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm](http://www.agora.stm.it/elections/alllinks.htm). *Governments on the WWW* [www.gksoft.com/govt/](http://www.gksoft.com/govt/) and *Political Science Resources* 'Political parties, interest groups and other movements' [www.psr.keele.ac.uk/parties.htm](http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/parties.htm).