Paper to workshop 'The Causes and Consequences of Organisational Innovation in European Political Parties',

ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Grenoble,

6-11 April 2001

The Cyber Party

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Abstract

This article explores the pressures and possibilities for party development in the age of widespread use of the Internet. It identifies internet-fuelled trends in political activity which affect party organisational development and proposes the 'cyber' party as a new 'ideal type' of political party. Cyber parties are organisations rather than institutions, to which voters with multiple preferences offer support according to context. They are characterised by technologically-aided relationships between party and voters rather than formal membership. The possibilities for cyber parties are illustrated with evidence from Britain but examples from other countries with longer experience of widespread Internet penetration provide pointers to the future. Finally, the article considers some of the possible threats posed by the emergence of the cyber party. It concludes that a cyber party that develops a stronger relationship with its voters (rather than mourning the 'golden age' of the mass membership party), could be a positive development in democratic terms. Parties which do not respond to competitive pressures to increase their nodality through innovative use of available technologies may be more likely to face decline.

The Cyber Party[1]

What difference does increasing use of the Internet make to the role played by political parties in the democracy of the future? Trends in party development have already pointed to the end of the era of the 'mass' party characterised by widespread and formal membership and the rise of the 'cartel' party[1]. This paper argues that current trends in political participation and organisational innovation point to the emergence of another 'ideal type' of political party - the 'cyber' party. The development of the cyber party is fuelled by increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by both citizens and organisations and the increasing potential of the Internet as the ideal forum for political activity.

This paper first identifies the key demand factors that put pressure on political parties to develop an Internet presence; declining membership, single-issue political activity, fluctuating party allegiance and widespread use of the Internet across society. The second section reviews the organisational response; the challenge that the Internet presents to organisations of all kinds (and the initial responses of parties) and second, trends in political party development. The paper goes on to suggests that these trends are leading to the emergence of a new ideal type of political party, the 'cyber ' party. Third, it outlines the key characteristics of the cyber party and the distinctive ways in which it can play the roles ascribed to political parties. The final two sections consider some of the consequences of the emergence of the cyber party – both in terms of threats that cyber parties might pose to a democracy and the dangers for parties which do not innovate.

Demand Factors: Changing Patterns of Political Participation

This section outlines three 'demand factors' in the development of political parties; that is, changing patterns of political activity. These are increasing reluctance of citizens to join organisations of any kind, particularly political parties, an increasing move towards single issue activity and multiple, fluctuating partisanship and the increasing use of the Internet throughout society and particularly for political activity.

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[1]This article benefits from discussion following the presentation of an earlier draft at a seminar of the Democratic Audit specialist group on political parties, at the School of Public Policy, UCL on 29 June 2000 and further discussion at a second meeting at Birkbeck College, 21st October 2000. Patrick Dunleavy made some important comments and suggestions in discussion prior to the writing of this paper. The paper draws on research carried out for Government on the Web (1999) and Government on the Web 2 (forthcoming 2001), two major studies of Internet usage by government organizations, carried out by Patrick Dunleavy and Helen Margetts for the UK National Audit Office.

Declining Membership

That membership of political parties is declining is indisputable. Most recently, Mair and van Biezen (2001) found the mean membership as a percentage of the electorate in 20 European democracies to be 5 per cent: 'total party membership expressed in both absolute numbers and as a percentage of the electorate is now markedly in decline'[2]. This mean figure is considerably lower than the figure of 10.5 per cent recorded among a smaller group of long established democracies by Katz et al in 1992 and those figures already indicated a long-standing downward trend. For example, in the Netherlands party membership fell from 10 per cent of the electorate in 1960 to less than 3 per cent in 1995; in Denmark membership declined from 21 per cent in the 1960s to 6 per cent in the 1980s. Britain has shown similar decline, with the 'density' of party membership in the late 1980s at 3.3 per cent around one third of its level in the 1960s[3]. Mair and van Biezen also showed that across 13 long-established democracies, membership levels in absolute figures have fallen by an average of almost 13 per cent: 'these parties are simply haemorrhaging members'[4]. Raw membership figures have fallen by 50 per cent in Italy and the UK. Given the difficulties in collecting such data, where researchers are reliant on information from parties who have incentives to over-estimate membership, the real membership figures may be even lower: 'members in this sense offer a source of legitimation to parties, both within the parties themselves and also without. For this reason, parties are often likely to claim larger (active) memberships than seems in fact to be the case'. In Britain where party membership is at the bottom of Mair and van Biezen's table at less than 2 per cent, party membership is likely to decline still more rapidly considering the average age of party members; the average age of Labour party members is 62 and only 5 per cent of members under 35.[5] The average age of Liberal Democrats is a not much more sprightly 58.

This decline in membership is not restricted to the main political parties, but seems to reflect a more general reluctance to join organisations. In the US, Robert Putnam reports an overall decline in membership of organisations of any kind of 30 per cent. In Britain, the Green Party's membership dropped from 20,000 to under 4,000 between 1990 and 1995 and experienced only a modest recovery to 5,000 by 1999. Even the more successful pressure groups have also experienced a reversal of an upward membership trend from the first half of the 1990s. Membership of environmental organisations may have quadrupled between 1971 and 1992[6] but by 1999 Greenpeace's membership for example was 170,000, closer to its 1985 levels than its 411,000 members in 1993[7].

Single Issue Activity and Fluctuating Political Allegiance

While traditional means of political participation such as party membership and

involvement with political institutions fell throughout the 1990s in Britain, there was a dramatic upsurge in single-issue protest activity and unconventional forms of political participation.[8] These activities were carried out in the name of a diverse range of interests, including anti-capitalism, fox-hunting, animal rights and the environment. As noted above, this trend is not accompanied by a rise in membership. Newer environmental groups rely on symbolic action rather than mass mobilization for their effectiveness: 'they have no central organisation and no centralized pool of resources and there is a strong ideological commitment to avoiding any institutionalization'.[9] The new kind of activist is likely to be associated with several issues and protest movements, but no particular organised group or alignment. By 2001, environmental activists are often labelled as such in interviews on British television rather than as belonging to any specific group.

Declining enthusiasm for joining groups and political parties however, does not seem to be accompanied by complete rejection of allegiance with political parties. In Britain, while measures of 'very strong partisan identification' have fallen strongly and consistently from 1964 to 1997 (from 44 per cent to 16 per cent for Conservative and Labour)[10], respondents reporting some kind of partisan identification has remained reasonably consistent between the 60s and 90s. The decline of strong identity is not the same thing as abandonment[11]. What has changed is the increasing willingness of voters to support a plurality of political parties, both for different levels of government and at different periods of time. In Britain, the cumulative vote obtained by the traditionally termed 'other' parties doubled from 3.5 per cent in the 1992 general election to 6.8 per cent in 1997; almost twice as many candidates stood for fringe parties as in 1992. In the 1998 local elections the Green Party's share of the vote in the 10 per cent of available seats it contested rose significantly to over 10 per cent in London and 7 per cent across the rest of the country. Over a quarter of voters in the 2000 elections to the London assembly and mayor voted for a party other than Labour, Conservative or the Liberal Democrats. An ESRC funded poll carried out straight after the 2000 elections[12] suggests that the mean number of parties voted for was 2.3 - 27 per cent of voters voted for three parties and 6 per cent of voters voted for four parties.). There is evidence that split-ticket voting across general and local elections runs at around 20 per cent and has done so consistently since the 1970s.[13] Now that representatives of smaller parties and Independents have been elected to national and supra-national legislatures, we might expect voters' willingness to vote for multiple parties to increase still further. Once voters have experienced voting for multiple parties - in elections to the Scottish parliament and Welsh and London assemblies for example, with some degree of 'success' in that different parties are successful in different ballots - then they are more likely to do so again, and long-held allegiances to one party are likely to weaken. In Scotland, where voters

already had experience of a multi-party system, over a third of respondents expressed some kind of positive 'liking' for two parties in an opinion poll straight after the 1997 general election, while one in six gave 'like' scores to three parties.[14] Evidently, the new electoral systems in operation are playing an important role in opening up these choices for voters: in the two party system of the US voters may stay attached to one party due to the lack of viable alternatives.

Increasing Use of the Internet

These new forms of political participation, while existing as an independent societal trend, have been fuelled by the increasing use of the Internet and web-based technologies by both citizens and organisations. By 1999, around 20 per cent of the British population (over 10 million) had Internet access and by 2001, this figure has already risen to over 30 per cent[15]. Percentages of Internet penetration are radically higher for some groups; for example around 40 per cent for 18-25 year olds even by 1999. Percentages also vary considerably across countries: in the US recent estimates suggest that around 57 per cent of adults have access to the Internet. Scandinavian countries also have high rates: 56 per cent in Sweden, 53 per cent in Norway and 44 per cent in Finland. Spain is much lower, at around 13 per cent, but has doubled since November 1998. Evidence suggests that a variety of factors affect internet penetration rates, among the most important of which are geographical diffuseness of the population and telephone costs[16].

The Internet has rapidly proved itself an ideal forum for political activity and from the 1990s, interest group activity has rapidly shifted to web-based venues. The June 1999 and April 2000 marches of Reclaim the Streets in London were largely organized on the Internet. International, electronically organised demonstrations are now commonplace on television screens. For example, in November 1999, the organization Euro-Hippies were jamming the World Trade Organization's web server with repeated e-mail questions in a virtual joining of protests. A representative claimed that the environmental movement had been revolutionised by the Internet, as 450,000 activists from different countries who had never met protested together in virtual fora over five days. By 2000, more traditional forms of political participation were turning to the Internet, as the TUC general secretary launched a new electronic database for trade unionists, stating that 'the future of organised labour lies with the internet'[17]. The union database will include a bulletin board detailing disputes across the world and a databank on the 50 per cent of workplaces in Britain with no union representation. It will also disseminate information on the use of cyber-picketing; for example, in 1998 the Communications Workers' Union deluged a Welsh telecommunications firm with e-mails to stop it receiving electronic orders as part of a union recognition dispute.

Party Responses: The Cyber Party?

      This section looks at possible responses to the trends identified above, in particular the organisational challenge of the Internet and trends in party development.

The Organisational Challenge of the Internet

As usage of the Internet rises in society (as outlined above) there is growing pressure on organisations of all kinds to respond. For private organisations, competition gives clear incentives to offer multiple channels of access for consumers and to develop new forms of doing business. Many banks have transformed their relationships with their customers by providing Internet banking. Companies like the Prudential (Egg), the Financial Times (FT.com) and EasyJet (EasyEverything.com) have developed new business arms with new branding that exist solely for Internet customers. For public sector organisations, pressure has come from modernising politicians who see the Internet in particular and technological development more generally as a magic wand to increase public sector efficiency[18]. In general public sector organisations have lagged behind those in the private sector in web development but the potential benefits are clearly transformative[19].Unlike earlier information and communications technologies, which were largely internally based, web-based technologies provide real opportunities for transformation of relationships between organisations and their consumers. The 'build and learn' characteristic of the Internet is especially important here; while earlier information technologies lent themselves to large-scale, high-risk projects, web-based technologies have lower marginal start-up costs and initial small projects can be used to test user responses in an incremental way. Private companies at the forefront of web development invest a great deal of time and resources tracking the use made of their web sites and analysing users' behaviour. Their web teams are constantly devising new options to expand usage and encourage the retention of users in the site. Managers in the more innovative public sector organisations, such as the Australian Tax Office, anticipate a future where their organisation becomes entirely 'digital' : as one Australian official put it, eventually 'ATO will become its web site'[20].

      Nodality, denoting the property of being in the middle of information or social networks[21], is a key tool of organisations. While government agencies are in a unique position both to demand information from citizens and to dispense information to them, which is why Christopher Hood defines nodality as one of the four 'tools' of government policy, other organisations too strive to increase their nodality. As societal interactions move into web-based forum, the Internet and web-based technologies provide a major opportunity for such organisations to increase their nodality. Like governmental organisations, larger

political parties seem to be less innovative in their use of the web than pressure groups and smaller parties: 'critics charge that most parties have been slow to adapt, conservative in approach, and unimaginative in design' [22]. Newer and smaller parties have in some cases shown themselves to be more innovative – their incentives are greater, as an Internet presence can give them a forum in which to compete in a more equal footing with more established parties[23]. Given that political parties compete with all types of organisation, particularly pressure groups, for citizens' attention, if private companies and pressure groups are at the forefront of developing web presence, political parties that do not develop a web presence will find themselves losing comparative nodality. It is already clear that to some extent parties are trying to keep up with trends of Internet usage: 'the strongest and most significant indicator of the presence of all parties online is technological diffusion, measured by the proportion of the population online[24].

Trends in Party Development and the Cartel Party
Political scientists unite in identifying a constant process of change in political parties, one parameter of which is the relationship between parties, members and voters. The earliest parties termed 'cadre' or 'caucus' parties were based on political elites within the legislature, whose principal aim was to secure the election of their candidates: 'If such a party requires people to help in mobilizing voters, it will try to secure those individuals who will not demand any influence over party affairs in return for their assistance' [25]. Next were 'mass' parties, developing outside the legislature, where members were directly or indirectly organised into local branches, integrated into national parties through formally democratic organisations. Most analysts agree that the mass party is in long-term decline across liberal democracies, evidenced by falling party membership between the 1960s and the 1980s[26] and the continuation of this trend noted above. The decline of mass membership caused some to predict the widespread development of 'catch-all' parties, loosely structured parties such as the Republican and Democratic parties in the US, for which elections revolve around choices of leaders; voters are more free floating and are available to any of the competing parties which aim to satisfy the demands of pragmatic elector-consumer.[27] But more recently, declining membership of political parties across Europe has brought 'cartel' parties[28] as defined by Katz and Mair, characterised by the interpenetration of party and state and a pattern of inter-party collusion. The movement of parties from civil society towards the state is facilitated by a general decline in levels of participation, with citizens preferring to invest their efforts in groups - so that party leaders turn to the state rather than to members for resources. The result is the 'formation of a cartel, in which all parties share in resources and in which all survive' . In a 'cartelized'

party system, all the main parties expect a share of government. Members play servicing roles, particularly election campaigning, which in turn becomes less necessary in the age of the mass media. By 1997 Mair considered that the process of the emergence of the cartel party remained 'at an early stage'[29] but was present in many European states and cited Britain as an exception: 'the United Kingdom is a curious case in which the behaviour associated with the cartel party model is becoming less prevalent'.[30]

There is nothing pre-determined about such a trajectory and the parties with the characteristics of earlier models have continued to co-exist with later ones: Mair notes that mass parties did not displace cadre parties, that mass parties continued after the development of the catch-all party and that catch-all parties continue to exist in the era of the cartel party. Different types can even exist in the same country and the same time: for example, it has been suggested that after unification in Germany, two types of party have emerged: 'electoral professional people's parties' in the West and 'electoral professional cadre parties' in the East[31]. Thus, these categories are 'ideal types' to which individual parties approximate.

In Britain, the age of the mass party is often perceived as a golden era for political parties; and for many the decline of the mass party is treated as signifying the decline of the party as an institution generally, exemplified by Seyd, Whitely and Broughton in 1992: 'Mass membership parties are important in liberal democracies: they provide a vital democratic input if they ensure that leaders are accountable and responsive to a membership that is broadly representative of the party's voters'.[32] In the cartel party view, parties' quest for members is viewed more cynically but still as important, with members 'valued for contribution to legitimizing myth'[33].

The Cyber Party

The cartel party (and the many other organisational variants that have since emerged) might be viewed as one response to declining membership, although there are evidently other developmental factors. An alternative response might be another 'ideal type' of political party (shown on the right-hand side of the table below), with its origins in developments in media and information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, combined with new trends in political participation (the two are inter-related) and the de-institutionalisation of political parties: the 'cyber' party. Some of the characteristics of cartel parties are true of cyber parties also (the blurring of the distinction between members and supporters, for example) and some new causal factors play a role: the low start-up costs for minor parties to develop an Internet presence, for example.

Table of Trajectory of Political Party Development and Categories of Political Parties[34]

	Caucus party	Mass party	Catch-all party	Cartel party	Cyber party
Emerg-ence	19th century	1880-1960	1945-	1970-	Late 1990s-
Origins	Caucus of elite inside assembly	Outside the assembly	Existing elite or mass parties	Growth of state funding of parties; falling membership; rise of electronic media in election campaigning	Changing patterns of political participation; mixed electoral systems; web-based technologies & Internet
Claim to support	Traditional status of leaders	Represents a social group	Skill at governing	Diminishing party competition between established parties	Direct linkages to voters; lively party competition for voters' multiple preferences
Member-ship	Small, elitist	Large card-carrying membership	Membership open to all and encouraged; rights but not obligations	Neither rights nor obligations important; distinction between members & non-members blurred	No membership - loose definition of supporters, potentially all voters
Party channels of commu-nication	Inter-personal networks	Party provides its own channels of commu-nication	Party competes for access to non-party channels	Party gains privileged access to state-regulated channels	Web-based channels of communication; intranets, extranets
Position of parties between civil society and state	Unclear boundary between state and civil society	Party belongs to civil society	Parties as competing brokers between civil society and state	Party becomes part of state	Parties as organizations (not institutions) operating on boundary between state and society
Examples	19th century liberal parties	Socialist parties	US parties	German, Austrian, Scandinavian parties	British parties

So what might be the characteristics of a cyber party? The key defining feature is that cyber parties use web-based technologies to strengthen the relationship between voters and party, rather than traditional notions of membership. There is evidence that technological innovations in political activity seem to be fuelling the trend towards lower

levels of membership, rather than being used to ameliorate it. In the UK in 2000, Smith found that 'Membership recruitment as opposed to voter recruitment was a low priority for party websites' in the 1997 election.[35] In general,

> 'Research suggests that ICTs are not being used within parties.....to reinvent or rejuvenate a mass party organisation. Instead, significant emergent relationships around parties facilitated by ICTs are those which are based upon .... improving and developing forms of campaigning which make very little recourse to the role and initiative of mass membership'.[36]

In fact, the use of ICTs within party organisations can make membership involvement more problematic rather than easier. For example, Smith also points out that the British Labour Party's fears about the technical competence of constituency parties led to the use of their 'Elpack' system (used to process canvass returns and produce constituency profiles and mailing lists) being suspended for the actual polling day on 1 May 1997, using traditional paper-based systems instead.

In place of members, cyber parties offer voters the opportunity to develop closer linkages with the party and more of the benefits traditionally ascribed to members. In a cross-country study of recent elections across Europe party web sites were found to be 'inspired by the search for new communication channels between politicians and the electorate'.[37] In Britain, telephone canvassing operations became especially sophisticated in the 1997 general election.[38] The Labour party, anxious to influence floating voters after 1992 canvassed over 80 per cent of voters in ninety Conservative-held marginal constituencies by telephone in order to identify and influence 'floating voters'. Thereafter electoral database software linked to desktop publishing packages allowed candidates to 'personally' keep in touch with potential supporters, and invite them to public meetings. Voter profiles in some marginal seats could be produced for canvassing teams at the touch of a button (Labour won all but one of these marginals). British parties uniformly offer visitors open access to parts of the site. The Liberal Democrat site, for example, allows all users of its web site to access folders containing policy documents and draft manifestos.

There are many more possibilities for parties to use web-based technologies to strengthen the relationship between party and its supporters, rather than members. A glance of the 'benefits for members' of the two largest British parties (listed on their web sites) shows how great the potential for such benefits (a) to be provided in some 'softer' form that might be accessible to any voter and (b) to be provided electronically. The Labour party offers involvement in leader and candidate selection; 'getting involved' in developing the next party manifesto through local policy forums; becoming better informed on government

and politics through regular party publications; campaigning in elections; and being 'an advocate for Labour by telling friends and neighbours about our achievements' - all of which might be widened to non-members and could take place electronically. Conservative party membership offers much the same benefits, along with 'representation on the Party's governing Board', 'direct influence in the development of policy'; a vote in local Constituency Association elections', as well as publications and an 'Ethics and Integrity Committee to ensure high standards' (although how members especially are able to enjoy this benefit is unclear). During June 2000, the site also offered visitors a chance to sign the 'world's first e-petition', from the professional contractors group, asking for a repeal of the introduction of IR35 in the last budget which changed the tax regulations for self-employed contractors. Traditional methods of participation are made much easier for smaller parties by electronic linkages: the Green party provides a 'webkit' on its national web site, to facilitate local Green groups to start up their own web sites and campaign machinery.

There is already evidence that British parties at least are moving in this direction. By 2000, all the larger British parties were already showing signs of inviting users of their web site to adopt an intermediary status between member and voter. The Labour party invites visitors to its site at http://www.labour-party.org to 'Register here as a supporter', so that 'Your views will help us to build a better Britain', as well as on-line membership forms. For the election in 2001, visitors to the site are invited to 'sign up for enews from Labour' and to provide details of what is most important to them. The Conservative party site at http://www.conservative-party.org offers membership of the Conservative Network - 'a new active style of politics' for people in the 25-45 age range with career/family pressures and an itinerant lifestyle. Visitors can register on the Network's database for free, which entitled them to attend a range of regional events and seminars. The Liberal Democrats' site also allows visitors to register for customised content, providing those who sign up with their own user identification and password. These types of linkages between parties and voters do not have to be a one-way flow of information: discussion groups run by political parties are often open (for example, the Dutch Green party during the 1988 election; Al Gore's on-line questioning by gay and lesbian voters on the Gay.com web site in 2000; all the facilities of the 'Virtual Party Headquarters' of the German CDU, SPD and FDP[39]) and there is enormous potential for them to become more so. In this sense, changes in political parties might facilitate a more direct form of democracy by becoming 'continuingly responsive to popular reactions'.[40]

Such a process may be seen as an extension of the phenomenon identified by Mair

in 1997 and evident in many parties across Europe, whereby ordinary members (as opposed to middle level elites or activists) are empowered via postal ballots and one-member one vote procedures rather than party conferences, considered less of a threat to party organization. Such a process marginalises the activists who, in the British Labour party for example, are seen to be such a problem: ordinary and spatially dispersed members are less likely to mount a serious challenge against the positions adopted by the leadership.[41] By the same argument, voters and weaker levels of supporter of a party would appear to be even more disaggregated and even less likely to mount a challenge (possibly an attractive alternative to a Labour party bruised by its unsuccessful attempts to centralise recent candidate selections in Wales and London).

The Role of Cyber Parties in a Democracy

This paper joins with most political scientists[42] in starting with the premise that political parties do and will continue to form an important role in liberal democracies. As Ian Budge puts it:

> ‘Parties are the great political invention of the last two centuries, without which representative democracy could not function at all in the modern world. Parties are the only bodies to review, reasonably systematically, developments and prospects of the whole society and to propose a medium-term plan for dealing with them. They are also the only political bodies with enough cohesion and organization to carry their proposals through in government. They focus elections round their own issues and candidates, organize legislatures and systematize relations among representatives themselves and between them and their constituents’ .[43]

This section of the paper considers how cyber parties might continue to fulfil the long-held roles for this ‘great political invention’. Any text on comparative politics will give a list of the main roles played by political parties in a democracy; for example;[44]

1. **Leadership recruitment**: preparing and recruiting candidates for public office.
2. **Interest aggregation and articulation**: transforming a multitude of specific demands into more manageable packages of proposals. Parties select, reduce and combine interests, acting as a filter between society and state, deciding which demands to allow through their net.
3. **A point of reference** for many supporters and voters, giving people a key to interpreting a complicated political world.
4. **Direction to government**: steering the ship of the state, making public policy and providing leadership to government.

The distinctive way in which cyber parties might fulfil these roles in considered below.

Leadership Recruitment

Leadership recruitment in political parties has already become a more business-like matter and the work of being a politician more professionalised, with established career paths. In Britain, recent trends have been towards the input of ordinary members in the selection of party leaders, 'a trend which places more emphasis on the ability of candidates to reach out to a larger audience through the media'[45] and more recently the Internet. In an indirect way, candidate selection can involve the input of supporters and potential voters. The selection of mayoral candidates in the 2000 elections in London can be used as an example; the fact that the well-publicised Labour party selection was widely regarded as unfair among the electorate as a whole was evidently instrumental in Livingstone's victory as an Independent candidate, thereby having an indirect effect. In contrast, the Conservative party's assembly was perceived to be more democratic.

In many countries, primary elections involve a party's supporters voting to choose the candidate in an election that is run by the state. In the US, State laws specify how candidates may gain access to the primary ballot and who is to count as a being a party 'supporter' or 'member': 'In fact, the absence of formal membership in American parties means that, in practice, voting in primaries has been extended to a wide range of people whose connection tot he party is merely that they want to vote in that party's primary election'.[46] Some kind of electronic registration, with publicly provided terminals could qualify people to vote in primaries. Democratic primary elections held on the Internet in Arizona in March 2000 increased turnout by 622 per cent.[47] However, the state does not have to be involved in running primary elections as it was not in some London parties' selections of mayoral candidates.

Interest Articulation and Aggregation

The Internet and e-mail have already proved themselves as ideal arenas for interest articulation and political parties can exploit them to fulfil the same role. In fact, interest groups and movements have been more active than political parties so far in demonstrating the potential for opening new windows in political participation. What McKay and Jordan have termed a 'DiY culture' of popular protest in the 1990s is the most prominent illustration. Numerous political protests have been organised via e-mail, yet a conservative party spokesman admitted during the parties campaign in the London mayoral election that

while 'most people in London use e-mail ' its importance to campaigning is deeply underestimated by many in the party's hierarchy' .[48] US parties are more sophisticated at appealing to voters' special interests: Republican candidates use data sifting techniques to target specific groups of voters on the Internet with banner advertising and at a controversial point in his campaign for Republican nomination, McCain's campaign team fired off 43,000 explanatory e-mails to supporters.[49]

The aggregation of articulated interests is the real challenge for political parties, as this is their claim to be distinct from interest groups. Again, interest groups have been quicker than parties to utilize the Internet for this purpose. Some interest groups now bring together a wide range of other interests and issues to give their issue more force - the Reclaim the Streets marches of 1999 and 2000, for example, or the Countryside Alliance marches of 1998 and 1999. Tim Jordan[50] suggests that 'hacktivisim' - a technology-driven form of mobilisation, which allows assorted ideologies to find a common place - is developing as a political presence. The challenge for political parties is to find ways to aggregate interests in the same ways as popular social movements are already doing.

Cyber parties can tackle interest aggregation in a variety of ways. First, moving from an interest group or social movement to a political party has become easier. The formation of new parties is benefited by the low start-up costs of web sites compared with other types of technology and the low marginal costs of additional users.[51] Some commentators suggested from early evidence during the 1997 election that Internet usage would 'reinforce the dominance of the larger, better resourced parties' .[52] Yet the SNP provided the most extensive opportunity for users to comment via survey forms on policy and the importance of particular issues[53] and Plaid Cymru offered an opinion poll asking users to vote on the issue of Welsh devolution for some months prior to the election. In London in 2000, Ken Livingstone's web site, superior to those of the far richer political parties during the mayoral elections shows how the 'build and learn' nature of web-based technologies can actually benefit smaller operations. His site was built earlier than those of the other candidates - which meant that his small campaign team had a chance to find out how visitors used the site and what facilities might be added. In addition, Internet presence is not - and cannot be - regulated in the same way as television presence, so new parties have far more opportunity to compete against well-established parties in cyberspace than they do on the television screen.

In addition, the more that party activity takes place in cyberspace, the more parties are able to aggregate interests across ethnic and linguistic divisions. A visitor to the Conservative Party's 'cultural unit' on the web site is more likely to feel that they are

dealing with an ethnically mixed group than attending a meeting (although there are more Asian than black faces depicted). In March 2000 the 'digital hit squad' of a grassroots Internet community for connecting black people (Dogonvillage.com) targeted black voters in the democratic primary elections held on the Internet in Arizona and claimed to increase turnout by more than 1,000 per cent[54]. It is easier for a non-English speaking voter to determine a party's manifesto and culture from a web site than to attend a meeting. Recent improvements in ICTs have made communication across linguistic divisions more easy; even the free Microsoft hotmail will translate e-mails into different languages. The written text - read at one's own pace - provides the option for better comprehension and communication, while Internet radio provides new possibilities for web sites to overcome literacy barriers to political activity.

Political Parties as a Point of Reference

There is no doubt that the capability of well-designed web sites to present a coherent front-end to fragmented organisations aids the ability of parties to provide a point of reference. Web sites can be used to link up local or sectoral units of decentralised parties and could be used to good effect in making coalition arrangements intelligible to the electorate. Web presence also provides parties with the opportunity to use the style of their site to present their image to voters. In the Netherlands for example, commentators observed how during the 1998 election campaign, the sites of Dutch political parties reflected the image each party had of itself;

> Because of its design and the way in which the party site appears on the Internet, the PvdA presents itself as a modern peoples party which is determined to Aconquer@ the electorate by using every technological means possible. The VVD is shown as a light-hearted party aiming to entertain. And the SP as an activist party trying to convince the electorate to take up arms against injustice and abuse. The groenLinks site, with its different discussion platforms, reflects the grass-roots character of the party. While the CDA with its ordinary and scarcely interactive site affirms its position towards traditional values and standards'.[55]

Almost all the main British parties offered a page of their web site detailing their philosophy and values during the 1997 election campaign.

Web-based technologies can make parties' policies and manifestos available to voters in an easily searchable and readable format. Technological innovations can also be used to make the choice of party based on policy preferences easier for voters, particularly in a multi-party system. In the Netherlands, a 'voter compass can be seen as a new

instrument which fills the vertical relationship between politicians and voters'. In the Netherlands, the Institute for Public and Politics in conjunction with the *Trouw* newspaper provided a voter compass via which visitors to the site could determine which party coincided best with their political views, testing views keyed in by the user with a database of party manifestos and politician statements. The IPP's compass was visited 12,500 times; another created by a consultancy organisation (Bolesian) was visited 28,000 times. Similar compasses were available during the 2000 London mayoral elections (for example, www.fantasymayor.com), although it is not known if the many Livingstone supporters who were told to vote Green let the compass deter them from their original intention.

Direction to Government and formulation of public policy

The extent to which political parties can form their own networks to direct existing administrative organisation is enhanced by the use of web-based technologies, particularly intranets. British political parties have invested extensively in decision support systems geared exclusively to political communications[56] and all now enjoy facilities to transmit information via dedicated communications networks, using e-mail and bulletin board systems both to exchange information in forums for supporters and through restricted channels used by party leaderships to issue campaigning information.[57] The Labour party's Excalibur system, which holds the records of the political views of millions of voters and also the political histories and speeches of opponent politicians in order to discover and capitalise upon inconsistencies and hypocrisy[58] was used to great effect during the 1997 general election and by 1998, the Conservative party was using it too.

The possibilities for the use of ICTs in the formulation of public policy ('e-governance') are constantly increasing through technological development. Technological innovations open new policy windows and have the potential to strengthen the use of all four of the 'tools' of government policy.[59] New web-based technologies offer real possibilities of transformation of the relationship between organisations and their users (voters, in the case of political parties), in contrast with earlier ICTs which tended to be largely internal. Thus the Internet and e-mail offer great opportunities for a more open and interactive style of policy-making, although rather restricted use of the Internet means that most British government departments are failing to capitalise on them as yet.[60]

With regard to direction to government, ICTs have the potential to be extremely effective. ICTs have already been used extensively for communication within parliamentary parties; the 'on-message' nature of the parliamentary Labour party, carried out through extensive use of bleeps (and ideally suited to the new WAP mobile telephones) being a

prime example. In January 2000, the Labour government introduced a new electronic government information and rebuttal system (the 'Knowledge Network Project) to 'help Whitehall stay on message and respond to critical attacks by MPs, the press and the public' and to 'explain the government's core message' so that citizens can get 'the full facts without going through the distorting prism of media reporting' - based on a single database of the government's line to take on every key policy issue raised across Whitehall - every department will be able to 'feed their lines to take' on every key issue'.[61] The data will be processed by automatic mapping so it is broken down by BBC and ITV television region, local radio and local newspaper circulation areas as well as by constituency so that issues can be better explained at a local level. Opposition critics complained bitterly that the new system would politicise the civil service and might be used for Labour party purposes during forthcoming election campaigns.

However, the role of cyber parties in the British legislature is handicapped by the disparity in use of technologies by parliamentary elites and the rest of society. Some voluntary organisations find that they have to maintain paper practices purely for the use of policy-makers: in Britain the Carers' Alliance, for example, an umbrella organisation of 20-30 voluntary organisations of carers for particular groups of people conducts virtually all its business over web-based media, with publications shown on its web site and communication by e-mail - a small print-run of publications is continued solely for the use of politicians and civil servants. Attention to the poor technological facilities of parliament[62] and the lack of resources devoted to improving them would be one way of overcoming this disparity. In Britain's new parliamentary institutions, there is the opportunity to do avoid the stranglehold that technologically-backward elites are able to maintain on parliamentary practices and in Scotland information and communication technologies 'have been envisaged and anticipated as part and parcel of the invigorated democratic relationships within and around the new parliament'[63], taking its cue from democratic best practice in other countries as opposed to existing Westminister procedure.

Threats from the Cyber-party

The section above has provided an optimistic slant on the democratic role of cyber parties. This section takes a more cynical stance, looking at some of the possible democratic threats that the emergence of cyber parties might pose.

Social Exclusion

The most commonly cited democratic argument against the use of the Internet for

communication between citizens and political parties (and indeed any public organisation) is the lack of universal web access and the possibility of social exclusion of those who do not have web access. To some extent the current British government, with their enthusiasm for electronic service delivery (in theory if not yet in practise[64]) already realise the dangers and have introduced limited measure to increase access: for example, the introduction of cheap leasing of reconditioned personal computers to poor families, intended to increase by 10 per cent the number of people with access to the Internet. Evidently other stronger measures might be introduced, such as using regulation to force telephone companies to reduce the cost of Internet usage; in countries such as the US and Australia where local calls are very cheap, Internet penetration runs about double of that of the UK and still rising[65]. Initiatives of this kind are one way of dealing with the social exclusion argument, rather than using it as an excuse to prohibit web development. However, it is evident that a strong positive association between income levels and Internet access still exists in many countries – and, like most private sector companies and public organisations, political parties will have to maintain a multi-channel approach. But with the electronic delivery of many services a firm assurance of the British government (in line with many others), it is likely that political parties will not have to deal with the social exclusion problem alone.

Strategic Penetration.

Another threat to the involvement of voters in party decision-making is the danger of 'carpet-baggers'; if voters are able to influence party policy and candidate selection in the ways suggested above, what is to prevent strategic penetration of citizens who claim to have voted for a party at the last election, or say that they will do so at the next election? The US provides examples of how non-Democrat or non-Republican voters have registered for the party they did not vote for and endeavoured to influence decisions, usually at local level where small 'selectorates' and low turnout mean a small number of strategic voters are more likely to influence the result. However, many building societies during the 1990s suffered from 'carpet-baggers' who tried to force UK building societies into forming banks rather than retaining mutuality and have found a variety of ways around the problem.[66] Strategic penetration of political parties is more complex and there are many cross-pressures on voters which may disincentivize such strategies. A non-Tory interloper in the Conservative leadership selection, voting for an extremist candidate (Margaret Thatcher, for example, in the 1970s) in order to reduce the party's chances of victory at the election, may find themselves with a Conservative party leader and a Prime Minister that they did not want.[67]

Lack of Organisational Capacity and Resources

Party financing is evidently an important issue in democratising political parties and membership dues have traditionally been a regular and uncontroversial source of income for political parties. But lack of paid card-carrying membership is already a problem to the financing of political parties in many countries. The fees from the British Labour party's 300,000 membership a year comes to £6 million - this figure is significant but far from the proposed £20 million pound cap on party spending now introduced. Before the 1997 election Labour received six donations of £1 million or more plus another two worth £500,000.[68] Furthermore, absence of membership does not preclude donations (small as well as large) from supporters (in fact the Labour party plans to collect 40 per cent of its income from small donors). The Labour party's membership form already states 'We would welcome whatever you can afford to cover your annual membership fee' and offers a range of prices both below and above the standard membership fee of £17.50. Although membership income forms a large proportion of income for some political parties (in Denmark income from members and branches accounts for an average of almost 45 per cent of the head office income of the main parties), there are plenty of examples where it does not. In Norway and Sweden the main parties derive only around 10 per cent of head office income from members and 'the costs of maintaining the membership organization may well exceed the revenue it generates'.[69] It is also worth nothing that Internet technologies (unlike the large-scale high risk information technology projects that preceded them) have already demonstrated enormous cost savings on previously expensive administrative tasks such as telephone calls and postage, as already demonstrated in more technologically advanced governments: in Singapore, for example, electronic tax filing is estimated to have saved £7 per head of population.

Lack of Organisational Capacity and Resources

Some analysts argue that grassroots members are vital to elections and lack of paid up foot-soldiers will cause serious financial problems for British parties: 'local campaigns by party activists are very important in mobilising voters...... In 1997 Labour activists played a very important role in delivering the landslide election result.'[70] If this is true, then the absence of party members willing to play a campaigning role and the necessity of using paid staff (Greenpeace, for example, already use contract staff for campaigning) will suggest additional election costs. However, an increasing role for Internet and e-mail campaigning and advertising could well play a concurrent role in reducing the costs of election campaigns; even Internet banner advertising is much cheaper than television advertising. The Internet

and e-mail can also be used to raise money. Credit card donations are already easily collected via the Internet by British parties. But the US, where Internet penetration is higher and politicians have a longer experience of on-line campaigning, provides an illustration of what is possible. In 2000, Bill Bradley, the challenger to Al Gore for the democratic nomination raised $1.3 million on-line. It is estimated that presidential candidates raised a total of $30million by the time of the US election in November 2000; Al Gore raised 20 per cent of his campaign income on-line.[71]

The Future for the Cyber Party

Technological development will not inevitably lead to the formation of cyber parties, nor will cyber parties exist entirely in cyberspace - but most of what cyber parties do could, in fact take place via the Internet. As Oscar Wilde once said 'the problem with Socialism is that it cuts so dreadfully into the evenings'. Web-based political participation can make political participation virtually cost-free and overcome the problem of attending meetings that Wilde was referring to, making political activity possible at home and at any time. There is a resistance to such an idea from existing politicians that seems to suggest that political participation should involve suffering. Consider this comment from Dr Tony Wright MP in response to the suggestion that party supporters might use the Internet at home late in the evening to participate in party business:

> 'If you describe it in that causal incidental way that gives a picture of people in a sense of having nothing better to do than to press buttons, not because they have anything particular to contribute but because it is dead easy to do it'.[72]

In Britain there is an association of political activity with pleasure in recent technological aided movements that works against the 'political participation as pain' principle: protests that celebrate environmental activism, animal rights and anti-capitalism and that integrate pleasure into popular protest, particularly derived from dance-floors, clubs and rave venues[73]. Such movements suggest that pleasure might be something that political parties could add to the other more pedestrian selective benefits (such as visa cards and party filofaxes) they already offer. In this way, mass media and particularly the Internet can help political parties, as long as it does not continue be used as an excuse for their demise; for example, 'The demise of the mass party was partially conditioned by the rise of a mass media facilitated by a changed technological context'.[74] Television too has long been seen as a threat rather than a boost to participatory democracy[75] and even Peter Hall [76] who in general argues that British society is politically active states that 'it is hard to imagine that

levels of social interaction outside the household would not be higher if television did not exist'. In fact, television itself is becoming more of an interactive medium, with the BBC encouraging viewers to online question-and-answer sessions on its web sites at the end of selected television programmes. And recent work on the so-called 'media malaise' suggests that the news media actually reduces barriers to civic engagement across Europe and the United States.[77] Likewise other commentators have shown that the Internet is neither the major threat nor boost to participatory democracy that others have feared or hoped.[78]

A move towards cyber parties need not be viewed pessimistically. The move towards party-voter linkages, as opposed to party-member linkages suggests that there can be degrees of intensity of political activity that work up from the political act of voting, rather than down from a nostalgic vision of the party activism of the past - to which the British population at least looks unlikely ever to return. As John O'Farrell, a Labour party activist, put it after his first experience of voting at the local elections in 1982:

> It was like the first time I ever had sex - I was pleased to have done it, but it was all over far too quickly. ...... For years I had wanted to make my voice heard. And then I made one little mark on a piece of paper and it was over for another couple of years. I still feel shortchanged every time I vote. The trouble with democracy is that everyone's vote is equal. There's me voting Labour with a passion that nearly snapped the lead in the pencil and that counts as one vote. And then a floating voter goes 'eeny-meeny-miny-mo' in the polling booth next to me and cancels out my choice with a random choice next to the Conservative. I thought it would be far more democratic if people's votes took into account how strongly they felt about their support for their particular party.'[79]

A democracy where voters become involved in policy decisions and candidate selection at the painless click of a button may be more vibrant than one where a dwindling number of disillusioned members force themselves to tramp the streets at election time.

Parties experience increasing competition for citizens' attention, especially with the increase of single issue protests and 'DIY culture' of political activity. Parties that continue to rely on the notion of membership for their 'legitimising myth' rather than working on their digital presence may find themselves suffering a loss of comparative nodality and having to turn to alternative resources to retain influence. The incremental 'build-and-learn' characteristics of web-based technologies mean that parties, like all organisations, have to start interacting with supporters in order to develop the relationship. An Internet presence is not something that can be set up overnight. With organisations of all kinds responding to

pressure to invest time and resources in web-based technologies to develop their relationship with their customers, political parties which do not follow suit may find themselves increasingly cut off from their supporters.

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