



Programme “Society and Future”

Final Report – section “Summary of the Research Project”¹

PROJECT ACRONYM: **INTERMOB**

TITLE: POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY. A MULTI-LEVEL STUDY ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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¹ See art. 5.5.2 of the research contract.

Links naar de websites waar de werken van de onderzoeksploeg in het kader van het project worden vermeld

- <http://www.m2p.be>
- <http://www.kuleuven.be/citizenship/>

Summary

Political participation refers to all forms of involvement in which citizens express their opinion and convey that opinion to political decision-makers (Verba et al. 1995). Acts including in the concept are electoral participation, participation in advisory procedures, contacting politicians, political use of the Internet, membership of a political party or association, demonstrating against a policy measure, civil disobedience, direct action, boycotting products, and ethical consumerism. Within the scientific literature there is a broad consensus on the view that political participation is one of the cornerstones of a well-functioning democracy (Barber 1994; Putnam 1993). Participation entails both internal and external benefits. Internally, it has been stressed that participation exerts socialization effects, thus functioning as a 'learning school of democracy'. Civic skills, tolerance and political efficacy are enhanced by participation experiences. (Hooghe 2003). Political participation also entails external benefits, as it can provide more groups of the population with access to the political decision making process. In many respects, participation is the sole weapon of the weak. Only by relying on the force of numbers in collective participation, the weaker groups in society are able to voice their preferences effectively (Skocpol 2003). The occurrence of participation, however, is to a large extent dependent on the presence and the activity of mobilizing structures and campaigns, like social movements, political parties or the mass media (Tarrow 1998). Earlier, it has been shown that traditional mobilization structures, like political parties, gradually lose their prominent role, in favor of more recent mobilization agencies like the mass media (Walgrave & Manssens 2000). A basic question underlying this research project is whether Internet, too, functions as a mobilization structure, and if so, what are the democratic consequences of this new form of mobilization?

Since the 1990s digital information and communication technologies (ICT) are booming, and in barely one decade all kinds of ICT witnessed an explosive dissemination. The diffusion of ICT occurred much more rapidly than the spread of previous waves of technological advancements, like the introduction of the telephone or the TV. The ICT-revolution has led to sweeping changes in many spheres of life, including politics (Norris 2001). At the end of the 1990s, the scholarly literature assumed that the introduction of ICT would lead to large-scale changes with regard to political participation and political mobilization. Most of this literature was optimistic: ICT would lead to more interaction and more access opportunities for citizens (Coleman 1999; Rheingold 1993). More recently, doubts have been expressed concerning the democratic potential of the Internet (Margolis & Resnick 2000; Ward et al. 2003). Various authors have suggested that the Internet only reinforces already existing inequalities, both with regard to access (digital divide) as with regard to the ability of institutionalized actors to dominate Internet content. The debate clearly has not been settled yet: while some authors state that the Internet will mobilize new groups within the population (mobilization thesis), others assume that existing inequalities will be reinforced (reinforcement thesis) (Bennett & Entman 2001; Norris 2001). The basic, underlying question of this research project, therefore, is whether the Internet is expected to have a positive or negative impact on the democratic character of participation and mobilization in Western democracies.

Much of this debate, however, has been focusing on just one level of analysis: the individual users of ICT. The main research question has been to detect which parts of the population are

over- or underrepresented with regard to the political use of Internet. This question, however, only tells part of the story, i.e., the micro or individual level of political ICT use. This is indeed an important level, but if the objective is to determine the overall political impact of ICT on democracy, it is important to develop a comprehensive research design. At the meso- or organizational level, the question is whether organizations with fewer resources obtain more mobilization opportunities, because of the relatively low cost of ICT. The opposite hypothesis is that, given the costs associated with maintaining an attractive website presence, wealthier organizations will enjoy a competitive advantage. At this level too, mobilization or reinforcement trends might be occurring, a phenomenon that thus far has not been systematically studied. At the macro-level, however, the democratic potential of the Internet is just as well problematic. In most of the studies it is more or less taken for granted that the medium that is being used by participants to get their opinion across to decision-makers, does not have any impact on the effect of their participation act. It is, however, a reasonable assumption to expect that decision-makers will be less inclined to pay attention to messages that require little effort on behalf of the participant, e.g., like forwarding an e-mail petition. Therefore, it is equally important to study the way government agencies actually handle the information sent to them by citizens using ICT.

The aim of this project is to develop a more comprehensive assessment of the democratic potential of ICT, by incorporating individual level, organizational level, and political system level perspectives. Furthermore, the research design incorporates comparative approaches, both with the US (as the country where use of Internet applications is most frequently adopted by citizens), as with Canada (as the country where forms of e-government are most strongly developed).

More specifically, the three research questions guiding this project are:

- (1) Micro level: Does ICT reinforce or diminish existing individual-level participation inequalities?
- (2) Meso level: Does ICT lower the threshold for collective political actors wanting to mobilize the population?
- (3) Macro level: Does ICT augment the impact of political mobilization on political decision-making?

The research consists of a series of substudies tackling each of these three questions: (1) An overview of inequalities with regard to individual Internet use and its consequences for political participation (micro); (2) An analysis of the way social movement organizations use ICT to develop coalitions and to reach out to potential participations (meso); (3) A study on Internet as a campaign tool for political parties (micro); (4) A study on the effectiveness of Internet mobilization for social and political organizations (micro); (5) A comparative study on the way social movements use ICT for transnational mobilization (meso); (6) A policy oriented study on the organization of e-government as a way to support the communication flow between citizens and the political system (macro).

In term of approach, the study is internationally innovative through the conceptualization of both the independent variable, i.e. ICT use, and the dependent variable, i.e. frequency/ kind of Internet use, across different levels. Together with the comparative approach the researchers are able to give a comprehensive answer to the question how ICT has an impact on democratic participation and mobilization.

Research results

General conclusions about the impact of ICT on political participation need to draw the line between the direct effects on the political activity of individuals at the one hand, and the

indirect effects on participation through the impact of ICT on the mobilization possibilities and strategies of social organizations at the other hand. Therefore the main findings of the six substudies will be presented according to their level perspective.

1. Individual level

In order to answer the question how ICT influences individual level participation inequalities the researchers focused on three different types of individuals. They started with a broad approach incorporating the impact of ICT use and the Internet mediated mobilization on ordinary citizens' political activity. In a second phase they focus on two specific target audiences, i.e. political activists and the visitors of political party websites during election campaigns, examining how and what for they use ICT.

The first substudy focused on the Internet use of ordinary citizens and its impact on political participation. Therefore data of two different survey sources was employed. The data of the European Social Survey (2002-2006) allowed the researchers to compare Internet access and frequency of Internet use for the Belgian population over time. In a second step they zoomed in upon the (political) Internet use of the Belgian youth (18 year) and its differential impact on their levels of political engagement. The focus is on the Belgian youth, because if the Internet will have a significant effect, it should be most outspoken among young age groups. Young adolescents, compared to older age groups, do not yet have firmly engrained political habits, and therefore they are much more open to be influenced by new experiences. Moreover, political participation of young people remains a salient topic and an issue for social concern as various recent studies have sounded the alarm about the declining civic and political participation of youngsters in Western countries (Putnam 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993; Skocpol 2003). The results of the general population suggest that between 2002 and 2006 Internet access significantly increased, this does not imply, however that the digital divide has completely disappeared. Men, highly educated individuals and young age groups are still – although less outspoken - overrepresented among the online population. They also tend to use this medium on a more frequent basis. However, the results of the Internet use of the Belgian youngsters – 95 per cent of the Belgian 18-year olds is online – suggests that for the future generations unequal Internet access will completely disappear. Moreover, young people who spend more time on the Internet do not significantly participate less in offline political activities as those who spend less time. A third important finding is that some specific Internet activities can be successful in increasing political participation. Not the time spent online, but what they are doing on the net is of importance. The results suggest that certain activities on the Internet (i.e. chatting with unknown people, blogging and contributing messages to discussion groups, purchasing or selling things, following the news and forwarding political e-mails) affect youngsters' political involvement in a positive way. Despite the pull character of the Internet - what makes that is easy for the uninterested ones to neglect political information and activities online – evidence suggest that even when controlled for socio-economic status, socio-demographic factors, voluntary engagement and political attitudes various Internet related activities have a positive influence on levels of offline political participation. It seems reasonable that the new (especially interactive) possibilities on the Internet help to develop their capacities to express their opinions, to obtain information which help to shape their activities and involvement in every day life. The fact that these Internet activities are not solely related to political Internet use and that youngsters with higher educational credentials do not exclusively use them, entails that a more nuanced view can be drawn on the deepening divide. Internet is thus more than an information tool; the interactive features of this mass medium can help youngsters in expanding their social communication, relations and civic skills. The findings here show as a matter of fact that conditional upon for what it is used, the Internet can become an important political mobilization agent next to voluntary associations and parents.

In a second step this project focused on the Internet use of political activists, i.e. the individuals

who are political active in the offline world. Within this specific group – in general men and higher educated with high levels of political interest – the researchers examined whether ICT had an effect on the frequency and the way in which activists shape their participation activities. So the scope is narrowed towards the very active population to see whether ICT has an impact for the ones who are already engaged. This is related to the question whether ICT can broaden and deepen the engagement of activists. In order to answer this research question three series of protest surveys were analyzed across eight nations, issues and time, covering in total 14 different protest events. For each of these demonstrations a very similar sampling and interview procedure was followed: two groups of interviewers, each directed by a fieldwork supervisor, hand out similar questionnaires asking protesters to fill in the survey at home and send it back with the postage-paid envelope. The results clearly show that ICT use for political purposes has a strong and direct impact on the heterogeneity of the multiple activities of the activists. In other words, the Internet helps activists to combine their different activities. The Internet allows them to follow a broader scope of subjects and campaigns in which they are interested and to make a more selective decision in which activities to take part. This medium entails activists to inform themselves about more activities of more social movements from a certain distance. This makes that the activist is now better able to make certain decisions to take part in activities based on his/her availability and motivation. Especially in the contact with distant movements or networks the Internet proves to be an effective medium. The ties that develop through these online contacts are rather weak ties. This makes that the Internet has an important effect on the participatory effort of activists. Another effect is that social movements are more integrated than in the pre-Internet age, due to the fact that it is very likely that their members are also integrated and active in other social movements. The overlapping activities of activists across different social movements, has an indirect bridging effect on the networks of these organizations. This makes that it is now easier for organizations and movements to mobilize on a large scale: the diffusion and overlap between networks makes that the communication and dissemination of information goes faster, further and to a more heterogeneous public. In short, this substudy showed that ICT use leads to multiple engagements and that these multiple engagements provide linkage to social movements. But, does ICT also have an effect on the *total* level of participation. If the diversification of activities is at cost of the total amount of time and effort activists put in their engagement, then ICT use is not per se a positive thing for the general quality of participation in our society. The fact that activists now can choose their involvement in activities more *a la carte*, makes that there is a shift in the mobilization costs from the organizations towards the individuals. If this would accompany a weakening of the social organizations, then this could have negative effects on the participation supply and their mobilizing power. Taking back the reinforcement – mobilization distinction, the conclusion is that the results confirm the reinforcement hypothesis as ICT rather reinforces existing inequalities between activists.

The next focus lies on another specific target audience, i.e. the visitors of party websites in election campaigns. Here the researchers draw the line between the individual and the organizational level. How do citizens interact with political parties through their websites? The central question is here which role party websites play in the overall election campaign: who visits these websites and more specific can party websites be used to reach out to new groups among the population, or are they mainly a method to preach for the converted? In other words, do party websites lead to segmentation and group polarization or does it have the adverse effect: Can party websites break through the traditional party communication flows? If the latter would be the case, this would imply that the Internet would foster political participation: citizens are exposed to new ideas and information which may lead to future participation. To ascertain whether political party websites 'reach in' or 'reach out', a web-based survey was conducted among the visitors of the websites of Belgian political parties, during the campaign for the local elections of October 2006. The results suggest that political party websites are visited by a very specific segment of the electorate. In general political party websites tend to attract higher educated Internet users, men, and citizens that are strongly politically interested. Almost half of

the respondents of the web survey are member of a political party, compared to six per cent among the general adult population of Belgium. Therefore, the reinforcement thesis seems to be supported. When party affiliation and party preferences of the visitors is taken into account, two distinct groups can be discerned: on the one hand staunch party supporters, who seek additional information on their own party; on the other hand those citizens who seek out information on other parties than their preferred one or who have not even decided yet. Both groups have distinct characteristics: while the party supporters score extremely high on political interest and are predominantly male, the second group has lower levels of political interest and there are more women present in this group. In this specific survey, 60 per cent of all respondents belonged to the group of party supporters, and 40 per cent to the group of pluralistic information seekers. So the conclusion is that party websites are an important tool for intra-party communication, and to a large extent they are indeed used by party supporters and party members. Contrary to what some have feared, however, they are also visited by a substantial number of Internet users who do not even think about voting for that specific party, or who have not decided yet. Another important finding is that the majority of the party website visitors reports to be looking for top-down information, such as the party program or specific information about the candidates. The interactive applications are clearly less popular. So, the immediate participation surplus value is limited (because seeking information is not really participation), however this does not imply that party visitors participate through other websites, applications and forums in the online world.

In a fourth step the project further builds on the mobilization potential question. This time the researchers decided again to broaden the scope towards young people who are not specific interested in politics or engaged in social organizations. The emphasize lies here on the effectiveness of *Internet mediated mobilization in comparison with* the more traditional *face-to-face mobilization* strategy. Is Internet based mobilization as effective as its face-to-face counterpart for political mobilization? Do both mobilization strategies have the same effect on political knowledge, attitudes and participation? This question is all the more salient, since the voluntary sector appears to change rapidly. Traditional forms of face-to-face interaction are being replaced by more distant and Internet-mediated forms of communication and mobilization (Skocpol 2003; Polat 2005). For various actors, this transition is a reason for concern, as it is believed that Internet mobilization and communication is less powerful and has less of a socializing effect than traditional forms of civic interaction (Putnam 2000). In order to examine this causal relation between the different modes of mobilization and participation the researchers employed an experimental research design using both traditional and modern incentives for mobilization. The experiment was conducted among university students in Belgium and Canada. The experimental campaign was offered by a (fictitious) environmental organization, which engaged the participants through various modes of mobilization, i.e. traditional (a non interactive face-to-face conference and an interactive role game) and Internet based (non interactive website and interactive website) modes of mobilization. In order to control the content solely the communication media were varied. To ascertain the long-term effects of the experiments, there were two post-test measurements. The first one was conducted immediately after the experiment (same day), while the second one was conducted 4 months later. The most important conclusion is that the Internet is more effective than face-to-face mobilization in stimulating political knowledge and attitudes, but it remains less effective than face-to-face contact when it comes to mobilization of actual behavior. The Internet seems to be an excellent medium for information dissemination, but it seems to be less efficient as mobilization channel. The results suggest that the Internet mobilization effects are mainly indirect. The Internet can help to stimulate knowledge and attitudes necessary for political participation, but the medium seems to be less successful in the direct stimulation of behavior. These conclusions are in line with the finding that ICT is especially useful for political activists to create weak ties, but that it is less effective in the development of the so called strong ties. Weak ties do not have the same power as strong ties to mobilize its nodes. Strong ties are better able to overcome the high costs inherent to political activity. What the experiments did not show are

the costs that are related to these different mobilization modes. The downside of face-to-face mobilization is that it is a very intensive and time-consuming procedure to reach out to potential participants. As a consequence, parties and social movements tend to limit their mobilization efforts to specific target audiences. Internet mobilization is less cost and time consuming, hence facilitating larger scale campaigns. From a participation perspective, the Internet could therefore have a positive effect on the overall level of political engagement among the population. The large-scale mobilization compensates for the loss in effectiveness.

2. Organizational level

In the previous section the project tried to disentangle the relation between Internet use of individual citizens and activists at the one hand and political participation at the other hand. Below the focus is shifted from the individual level towards the organizational level. Does ICT enable cooperation between social organizations? The relevance of this question lies in the fact that collaboration between social movements is closely related to their mobilization potential. The more cooperation between the campaign strategies of social organizations, the more integrated their networks. In turn this may have a positive effect on the scope of their recruitment network and the effectiveness of their campaigns. In order to answer the question how ICT can lower the threshold for collective actors wanting to mobilize other movement organizations and work together, the researchers made a distinction between the communication and cooperation between social movements within one country, i.e. the organizational structure of the Belgian section of the 'Clean Cloth Campaign', and the influence of ICT on transnational communication between social movements, e.g. a historical comparison of peace movement organizations collaborating during three particular periods of international mass mobilization.

In the first substudy on the organizational level, the researchers conducted a national case study. The subject of this study was the 'Clean Cloth Campaign' (Schone Kleren Campagne [SKC]) and the impact of ICT for its internal collaboration at the national (Belgian) level. This campaign is active since 1995, which allows for a comparison with the situation in the pre-Internet age. In order to get a systematic insight in the way ICT influenced cooperation between the different member organizations of the Belgian section of the SKC, fourteen semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted with both the coordinator of the campaign, and several active as well as passive representatives of the member organizations. The results seem to confirm the findings at the individual level: ICT mainly enhances the possibilities of social organizations to maintain their weak contacts with other organizations. These weak ties are of significant importance when one wants to reactivate the campaign and organize activities in the short-term. The heart of the SKC, however, lies within the three-yearly face-to-face meetings. Another important finding is that contrary to what was expected, the Internet did not affect the centralized character of the communication stream between the different movements. This is an interesting finding as it is generally assumed that ICT fosters direct communication between all layers of an organization, resulting in a more decentralized communication pattern. Also here the conclusion is that the organizations do not take full advantage of the Interactive features of the ICT. This is for a part due to the fact that the campaign is made up of traditional movements, such as labor unions, and new social movements, such as environmental movements. Both kind of movements incorporate ICT in a different manner, the more traditional movements are more focused on face-to-face contact and direct interaction, for the new social movements is ICT an essential part of their internal working. Altogether, the impact of ICT on the functioning of the Belgian Clean Cloth Campaign is rather limited. The Internet did not bring about a revolution in the communication structure.

The limited impact of the Internet on the functioning of the SKC could also be part due to the fact that the case study included but national organizations that were all familiar with each other, hence this can diminish the need to take full advantage of the Internet's possibilities.

After all it might be expected that the Internet provides most advantages when one has to overcome the burdens of time and place, like when movement organizations try to collaborate on a transnational level. Therefore a comparison was made between three historic moments of international peace/anti-war coordination and mobilization. The researchers compared the most recent international mobilization campaigns against the imminent war Iraq in 2003, where ICT is said to play a crucial role, with the anti-missile protests of the 1980s and the protests against the Gulf war at the beginning of the 1990s. The results suggest that it is clear that the Internet has a cost reducing effect on international mobilization and collaboration. As a result the scale of the international cooperation between social movements substantially increased. Looking at the communication structure, however, no substantial differences with the pre-Internet age can be found. Similar to the national Clean Cloth Campaign, the heart of the international collaboration is still based on face-to-face contacts. The interviewees also suggest that despite the Internet, the same collaboration problems turn up: the ideological and cultural differences between the organizations in different countries, as well as the different political context in which they have to operate. The Internet may facilitate transnational communication, but the most important determinant for international collaboration remains to be the national context in which the organizations are embedded.

3. Political system level

The final substudy can be situated at the political system level. This study examined to what extent government agencies are employing new communication technologies to enhance citizen participation in policy making. After all, if political participation implies individuals sharing their preferences with decision-makers, it can be expected that governments organize, or at least facilitate, interaction between citizens and the state. Elections are one such an example of political participation organized by the government. The latter study compared the state of e-democracy in Belgium with the situation in Canada, a longtime forerunner in e-government. In order to answer the main research question, a series of in-depth interviews with decision-makers was conducted. The conclusion for the Belgian case is clear: the Belgian (and the Flemish) government does not put a lot effort to involve its citizens at the political level. It appears that most of the ICT-related government efforts are directed at improving service delivery and realizing cost-reductions, thereby greatly marginalizing the democratic potential of the net. However, the Belgian case appears to be no exception. Also e-democracy in Canada is still in its infancy. The obstacles that hinder realization of an electronic democracy are less of a practical than of an ideological nature. First, as long as the digital divide exists, decision-makers are rather careful in promoting internet-mediated political participation. Despite the fast growing internet penetration, young people, men and highly educated individuals are still overrepresented among the Internet population. Second, e-democracy implies a form of direct democracy, i.e. that citizens have a direct impact on government-decisions. Many representatives see this as a threat for their role as representative of the people. Taken into account these obstacles, the future of e-democracy appears to be not that bright. A possible in-between solution could be the development of so called government initiated e-consultations as they give a chance to the public that wants to have a say on the one hand, and do not threaten the representative power of politicians on the other.

General conclusion

Does the breakthrough of the Internet have now a positive or a negative effect on the levels and the quality of political participation? The different substudies show that the answer is far from one-dimensional. ICT has as well positive as negative effects on participation. First of all it is clear that the Internet lowers the barriers for mobilization and participation, due to its time and cost reducing effect for both organizations and ordinary citizens. This entails an increase in the available online mobilization information and a broadening of the recruitment network. This

makes it more likely that some people will participate more through a diversity of organizations and participation possibilities. However, it seems that ICT does not have generated a fundamental change in the participation logic and mechanisms. Besides the positive effects on the levels of participation the projects still clearly points to the increased participation inequality and segregation. Especially in the long run it could be possible that ICT would have a detrimental effect on the quality of participation, rather than it would stimulate the quality of engagement.

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