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# Digital Rank-and-file: Party Activists' Perceptions and Use of the Internet

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*Political parties are in a phase of transition. A declining, socially restricted membership, decreasing levels of activism and a shift towards more individualistic modes of political engagement threaten the linkage role that parties have played in modern democracy. The development of the Internet in a period of change has meant that it quickly became intertwined with debates about reviving representative political organisations. Using data from a survey of party activists in the UK (N = 4,770), this article answers questions about the perception and use of new media by party activists, the Internet's potential for members' participation and engagement and the penetration of the Internet in pre-existing political careers. In general, the article asks which role new media are playing in the transition of political parties.*

## Introduction

The apparent decline of parties as mass participatory vehicles over the past three decades has raised wider questions about their ability to perform their traditional linkage and representative functions within liberal democracies. It has been suggested that parties are moving away from their established aggregative role towards the articulation of interests. One key element in facilitating these changes within parties has been the rise of the electronic media, most notably television. It is not surprising, therefore, that the emergence of new media technologies, such as the Internet, has prompted further speculation about their influence on party behaviour. In particular, the potential of new information communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance and stimulate participation and revive the aggregative functions of parties has been raised. So far, however, much of the research agenda on parties and ICTs has concentrated on electoral campaigning and party websites—the public face of parties' new media strategies. Few studies have focused on the internal uses of ICTs or taken a bottom-up (member, activist and branch) perspective of new media activities. This article, therefore, examines the role of ICTs in terms of engagement and participation of party activists. It draws on survey evidence from UK Labour and Liberal Democrat party members and assesses, in particular, how far ICTs are facilitating party change through a widening and deepening of participation. Whilst the results of the survey may be disappointing from a cyber-optimist's viewpoint, we conclude that the application of technologies, whilst not necessarily leading to enhanced internal democracy, may further pre-existing trends in party change.

## The Dynamics of Party Change: From Aggregation to Articulation?

In a functioning political democracy, parties fulfil a range of linkage functions which connect the polity to citizens (Lawson 1980). Parties are participatory representative organisations which allow for the controlled selection of elites; the training and incorporation of cadres and sub-elites; the articulation of interests around programmatic platforms; the aggregation of interests in quasi-stable coalitions; and, ultimately, the allocation of political values according to socially negotiated preferences. However, the ability of parties to perform these functions has come under question from critics. The aggregation functions, in particular, seem to have been threatened over the past 30 years, most notably by the inability of mainstream parties to mobilise citizens (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). A number of common membership trends have been highlighted across a wide range of European countries, including: declining membership levels—overall patterns from the 1960s point towards a significant fall in the numbers of party members (Dalton 1988; Katz and Mair 1994); declining levels of activism—it is not simply recruitment that is a problem, but data also appears to indicate long-term declines in the activism of members. Hence, for example, local party organisations find it increasingly difficult to appoint officers and recruit candidates for elections (Fisher 2000). Similarly, others have noted the rise of the so-called chequebook members who pay their membership fees and receive party information but take little or no active part in party life (Jordan and Maloney 1997; Whiteley and Seyd 1998a). Even where parties can recruit members, they are increasingly from restricted social groups within society. Party members are increasingly middle class, with left-of-centre parties especially dependent on professionals from the public sector. Correspondingly, there is an under-representation of women, young people and ethnic minorities.

In part, the changes in party membership and activism are reflections of broader external changes in the political landscape and internal structural changes within parties themselves. These have arguably strengthened the position of party elites whilst eroding the collective power of activists. Externally, the changing ideological landscape in western democracies since the 1960s makes party positioning along traditional cleavage lines increasingly less electorally rewarding (Kircheimer 1966). This in turn implies a move away from the 'ideologically oriented' local activists towards more general appeals by parties to the electorate as a whole. Leadership power has also been enhanced by the changes in the media and communications landscape, most notably the dominance of television with its focus on personalities (Norris 2000). Media campaigns cost vastly more than the traditional local canvass campaigns and have thus helped the transformation of political parties from labour-intensive to capital-intensive organisations, controlled by professionalised campaigners directed from party HQ. Internally, the colonisation of state positions by party cadres has provided the leadership with a greater degree of independence—both financial and organisational—from local activists (Katz and Mair 1994). Moreover, the development of more direct links between party hierarchies and individual members through changes in party rules (e.g. increased individual

voting rights) has arguably bypassed the collective structure where activist power resided.

Although the exact nature and proportion of party change or even decline is the subject of ongoing debate (Dalton and Wattenburg 2000; Webb, Farrell and Holiday 2002), data seems to suggest that parties are abandoning aggregation functions and moving towards more electorally rewarding articulation functions. Since the 1960s, parties have migrated from society to state as party structures have evolved from cadre to mass, then catch-all and eventually electoral and cartel (Maor 1997). Similarly, political party linkages, i.e. the set of relations amongst party leaders, employees, members and the general electorate, have experienced considerable change. Aggregation, it seems, is increasingly delegated to civil society organisations and other informal loci of the political system (Poguntke 2002; Putnam 2000).

### New ICTs and Party Change

The development of the Internet in a period of party change has meant that it has quickly become intertwined with debates about reviving representative political organisations. Since the 1980s, parties have increasingly used computer technology both for internal organisational purposes and for communicating with members and voters (Smith 1998). The wide-scale expansion of the World Wide Web and email in the mid-1990s has provided further opportunities and challenges for parties both to modernise their organisations and to make internal democratic reforms. Colin Smith and William Webster (1995) distinguished five main characteristics of ICTs of special value to party politics: increasing the amount of information available; accelerating the processes of gathering, distributing and storing information; enabling information targeting by the information sender; encouraging decentralisation of communication control; and enabling interaction between sender and receiver. Consequently, ICTs increase the amount and timeliness of information stored and processed by parties, thanks to the use of databases, office automation applications and email communications (cf. Wring and Horrocks 2000). Yet, ICTs are also functional in furthering the reach of parties by direct mailing, and allowing more direct contact between party officials/representatives and party members/the wider public (Smith and Webster 1995, 1228–1230).

Smith and Webster also suggested a distinction between internal and external uses of ICTs. These two terms identify 'those initiatives used within the party and those between the party and external actors' (1995, 1228). The external, *inter-party* importance of new media for parties comprises increased media relations, computing and desktop publishing and the more efficient conduct of electoral campaigns. In terms of internal, or *intra-party* importance of the new media, this consists of improved organisation and communication, enhanced discursive democracy and the possibility of internal electronic voting and polls (Nixon and Johansson 1999). New media hold the potential for a renaissance of the declining aggregation of interests within parties, and the development of a more robust,

aggregative party democracy. More analytically, Gibson and Ward (1998 and 2000a) have identified six main reasons why British parties have adopted ICTs. Three of these can be defined as 'external': information dissemination; campaigning and electioneering; and party competition. The remainder are 'internal': networking and organisational linkage; participation and interactivity; and resource generation and recruitment.

To date, research on the impact of new media on political parties has focused almost exclusively on 'external' functions. In particular, Pippa Norris identifies the core areas of interest as: the type of parties which are currently online; ICTs' impact on party competition; the consequences of digital parties for political engagement (supply-side); and what explains the rise of digital parties (Norris 2001a, 2). In short, the study of parties and elections online has tended so far to concentrate on:

1. parties' style of campaigning, and particularly how the Internet relates to broader shifts towards more professionalised techniques;
2. inter-party competition, particularly the degree to which smaller parties use the Web to raise their public profile and gain greater media exposure (Gibson, Margolis, Resnick and Ward 2003, 48).

From this perspective, new ICTs enable different parties in different ways, either levelling or further tilting the political playing field, in favour of minor and major parties respectively (Margolis, Resnick and Wolfe 1999; Gibson and Ward 2000b). To date, the question is still open whether the new media reinforces established political interests (Margolis and Resnick 2000; Davis 1999) or, primarily, helps their minor counterparts gain visibility (Auty and Nicholas 1998; Copsey 2003) and gives voice to a plurality of different party positions (Norris 2001b). Some have even argued that the new media is eroding traditional representative organisations, including parties, by creating additional channels of direct communication between government and the governed (Budge 1996). Overall, the balance of evidence suggests that new media has favoured, to some extent even accelerated, inter-party pluralism (Bimber 1998). However, it has failed to attract the critical mass required to sustain claims of inter-party levelling, even though sizeable numbers can be reached online in exceptional circumstances (Boogers and Voerman 2002a). As Norris has argued:

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 (Norris 2003, 9).

Despite the growing interest in parties' electioneering online, much less attention has been devoted to the 'internal' side of the party online activities, i.e. the importance of new media for intra-party, aggregation functions. Limited research data has been gathered on the use of new media by the party rank and file (e.g. Cross 1998; Pedersen and Saglie 2003; Ward, Lusoli and Gibson 2003), party sub-groups and activists (Gibson and Ward 1999) and party site visitors (Boogers and Voerman 2002a and 2002b). Such studies have tended to emphasise that parties have been relatively slow to develop the use of technologies for participatory purposes and

where it has been deployed they have made minimal impact on levels of participation or party organisation.

## Research Questions

The research here, therefore, attempts to fill some of the gaps on online intra-party, aggregation functions of political parties described above. We address, in particular, questions about the perception and use of ICTs by party members, ICTs' potential for participation and engagement of rank and file and the penetration of the Internet in pre-existing patterns of organisational behaviour. Elsewhere, we have argued that new media hold the potential to both *widen* and *deepen* individual citizen participation, in different institutional contexts such as parties, pressure groups and the wider polity (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2002a and 2002b; Lusoli, Ward and Gibson 2003). ICTs might widen participation, by increasing party recruitment, and broaden the membership profile by attracting new groups to parties but also deepen participation, by providing increased in-depth channels for member-to-member and member-to-elites communication. As a result, four specific questions are drawn from the debate on the changing nature of parties, and addressed in the context of ICT use by party membership:

- *Widening 1: increasing numbers*  
Do ICTs widen party membership in numerical terms?
- *Widening 2: diversifying the membership*  
Do ICTs expand the social characteristics of party membership?
- *Deepening 1: increasing levels of activism*  
Do ICTs increase members' party activism?
- *Deepening 2: individualising the political link*  
Do ICTs favour more interactive intra-party politics?

Overarching these specific questions is a more general concern with how the introduction of ICTs has altered the relation between party activists, on the one hand, and party elites, ordinary members and the wider public on the other. A change in the way party activists communicate and organise politically, primed by the use of ICTs, might help or hinder the restructuring of party functions. In short, do ICTs favour the *aggregation* or the *articulation* of political interest?

## Methodology

In assessing the participatory potential of ICTs within a party framework, we undertook a survey of UK Labour party (LP) and Liberal Democrat (LD) members. Both the LP and the LD have been at the forefront of UK politics in terms of understanding and adoption of ICTs (Gibson and Ward 2000a; Painter and Wardle 2001). In both cases, a mix of party political culture, historical opportunity and personal interest of the leadership explains the early uptake of ICTs respective to other UK parties (Ward, Lusoli and Gibson 2003). An online questionnaire was used to collect information about party members' online behaviour and party participation and activism.<sup>1</sup> Analytically, we first asked about the demographic composition and patterns of Internet use of LP and LD online membership, compared to the wider

UK user population. Then, we investigated the political profile and online political behaviour of members. Finally, in reporting party online connectedness we wanted to understand, more specifically, whether ICTs deepen and widen membership participation.

Both questionnaires were endorsed by the parties. The survey was administered online, using a single HTML questionnaire, PHP form scripts and a javascript verification mechanism. The survey was active for three weeks from 26 February 2002 (LD), and between 2 April and 16 April 2003 (LP). Procedurally, a 'cover' email was sent by the party HQs to the party emailing list subscribers, with a hyperlink to the online questionnaire. Responses were screened for genuine duplicates by crossing IP and Host data, date-time stamp plus a battery of 10 randomly selected variables. After the screening, 2116 (LD) and 2639 (LP) unique questionnaires were analysed using SPSS. The response rates for party members were 23 per cent (LD) and 17 per cent (LP), comparatively high for online surveys. Clearly, our study cannot claim to be a representative sample of LD and LP members, nor would we claim that these parties are necessarily representative of all parties in the UK or other countries. Nevertheless, this online survey of over 4,700 members of parties at the forefront of ICTs' adoption and innovation provides evidence of the behaviour and attitudes of a sizeable number of activists. Given the lack of intra-party data on members' and activists' use of new media and the difficulties in gaining access to party members in the UK, we would argue it represents a useful benchmark and stepping stone for further investigation.

## Survey Results

### *Internet Use and Online Political Connectedness*

The survey revealed that UK party members are heavy Internet users, more so than the average UK citizen. Seventy per cent of our respondents use the Internet daily compared with just 32 per cent of general UK users.<sup>2</sup> The difference is greater at work, where party members are 2.5 times more likely than UK users to use the Net daily, and 1.7 times more likely to use it at all. At home, the disparity is less, though still significant (respectively 1.6 and 1.3 times).<sup>3</sup>

Respondents reported very high levels of online political connectedness, defined here as the use of the Internet to 'get political information or keep in touch with political life'. Local councils', government departments' and parliament's websites are visited on average by one in two members at least a few times a month, although daily usage is still limited. Online political news is extremely popular with party members (more than 50 per cent), with the BBC website in a dominant position. Also, members tend to consult online news sources very frequently—28 per cent daily and 11 per cent at least once a week. Pressure groups and trade unions are significantly less popular, as three members in five have never been in touch online. LP members are considerably more active across the board of online political connectedness, a statistically significant average difference of 15 per cent. The most popular political site is understandably members' own party site (91 per cent LP, 77 per cent LD)—32 per cent (LP) and 19 per cent (LD) visit at least once a

week. Visitors rated their party website quite highly, an average of 3.7 on a 1–5 scale, where five stands for very good (SD = 0.7). For those not visiting the party site, the most important reason is lack of time, rated by one in five members as very important, followed by a preference for the use of traditional media (one in 10), and the lack of awareness of the site (one in six, one in three for the LD). In summary, non-use is better explained by personal reasons than access barriers such as opportunity, cost and visibility.

### *Diversifying and Increasing the Membership Base*

The data gathered allowed us to compare online respondents' socio-demographic profiles with similar data from previous surveys of LD and LP members. The parties showed remarkably similar socio-demographic patterns. The most apparent finding is that online participants tend to be younger than general membership (see Table 1). In comparison with age, however, both the educational and gender profiles point to an unequal representation of members in cyberspace. Between 7 per cent and 10 per cent of our online survey are currently in full-time education, against

**Table 1: Social Profile of Labour and Liberal Democrat Party Members**

		LD online survey	LD offline survey <sup>(a)</sup>	LP online survey	LP offline survey <sup>(b)</sup>
		%	%	%	%
Gender	Male	74	55	72	65
	Female	26	45	28	35
Age	≤25 Y0	14	2	11	2
	26–35	16	5	14	5
	36–45 <sup>(c)</sup>	17	11	23	19
	46–55 <sup>(c)</sup>	23	23	21	23
	56–65 <sup>(c)</sup>	20	22	19	21
	≥66 <sup>(c)</sup>	10	37	12	30
Formal education	No qualifications	1	...	5	17
	GCSE—O levels	7	...	11	15
	A levels	12	...	12	9
	Graduate (e.g. BA)	40	...	35	28
	Postgraduate (e.g. MA)	21	42 <sup>(d)</sup>	17	12
	PhD	7	...	5	4
	Other	12	...	15	14
Students	In FT education	10	2	7	2
N		2,116	4,442	2,639	413

a. Source: Whiteley and Seyd (1998b).

b. Source: Lusoli, Ward and Gibson (2003).

c. As age categories were different in the surveys, figures are based on normal approximation.

d. Whiteley and Seyd provide a single figure for graduates.

one in fifty for membership as a whole. Moreover, 67 per cent (LD) and 57 per cent (LP) of online members have a degree, 25 per cent and 13 per cent more than general party membership. In part, the over-representation of students is a reflection of their free access to the Internet via educational institutions.

The gender distribution is even more skewed. In both parties members online were overwhelmingly male, about three in four, whereas overall membership is more gender-balanced. Our study thus confirms other surveys of political Internet users which suggest a significant male bias (Bimber 1998 and 2001; Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2002a). Even as the digital divide has diminished over the last few years, the gender divide remains in the political Web-sphere. Currently, therefore, the Internet has the capacity to attract to parties a wider audience in terms of age profile than the traditional party activists, although a more affluent and predominantly male one.

In addition, we found evidence that the Internet is an increasingly important recruitment tool. Around 39 per cent of LD respondents claim that its use led them to join the party, compared to 28 per cent of the LP. These figures refer to ordinary members (non office-holders) who joined in the last five years, reporting that the Web was a factor in their recruitment, both via traditional routes and directly on the party website. Some 14 per cent of LD and 10 per cent of LP online joiners report the party website as an important factor for their decision to join, yet they did not join directly on the site. Equally, though, a considerable number (53 per cent on party average) of those who had joined online reported the Web made no difference. In other words, they would have joined anyway by whatever means. This suggests that whilst the content of party websites may have some impact on recruitment, websites are probably more important as a replacement method of joining for those already predisposed to membership.

The profile of the Web-led joiners supports the idea that the Net is attracting an audience that is slightly different from the traditional party membership. Results from a logistic regression model uncover the factors affecting web-joining behaviour (see Table 2). Initially, it appears that the LD are more successful than the LP at attracting new members to the party through their website. Partly, this might depend on the different nature of the party emailing lists. While the LD list is aimed at its core membership—including new recruits—the LP list transcends the boundaries of party membership, aimed at the wider community of party supporters. Partly, this is also the result of different party strategies as regards online recruitment, and confirms the proven capacity of the LD to reach and mobilise members effectively, evident over the last two national elections (Whiteley and Seyd 1998a).

Surprisingly, gender, income and formal education (including student status) do not have a significant influence on the recruitment potential of the Net. Similarly, respondents with different levels of political interest (high versus low) and political views (left, centre and right) are equally likely to join via the Web. This is interesting, since it implies that the Net is neither the tool of the 'converted', nor the tool of the politically 'agnostic', and is not sensitive to party ideology (cf. Ward, Lusoli and Gibson 2003). In relation to SES indicators, use of the Web does not seem to be linked with education, income or occupation, thus ruling out one-step

**Table 2: Predictors of Web-induced Joining Behaviour**

	LD	LP	Both parties
Age (>35 Y0)	† 0.68		* 0.73
Length of membership			
1 to 6 months	*** 7.80	*** 4.72	*** 5.78
Approx. 1 year	*** 6.68	*** 2.71	*** 4.42
Scale of offline party activity (0–7)	† 0.89		* 0.91
Frequency of access to party website (0–5)	*** 1.55	*** 1.46	*** 1.50
Use of phone to keep in touch with party (0–5)		* 0.79	** 0.79
Party (Labour dummy)	NA	NA	** 0.60
N	610	584	1,194
Cases correctly classified	73.9%	75.7%	74.7%

Source: Q10 Has the use of the party website ... led you to join the party?

Results reported are standardised log coefficients. A constant was included in the model.

† = sig. at  $p < 0.10$ , \* = sig. at  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* = sig. at  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* = sig. at  $p < 0.001$

reinforcement hypotheses. If reinforcement effects exist, they have to be looked for more accurately, both at the bottom and at the top of the digital pyramid: i.e. the issues of access and high-intensity participation.

However, age, traditional media habits, existing levels of activism and frequency of exposure to the party site all have significant and counterintuitive relations with online joining behaviour. First, the more frequent exposure to the party site the greater the likelihood of visitors becoming members. Second, young people and people with low levels of party activism are slightly more likely to have joined online than their older, more active counterparts. A two-point decrease in the offline participation scale corresponds to a 13 per cent increase in the probability of Web-induced joining, while being below 35 years of age increases the probability of joining online by 22 per cent.<sup>4</sup> The most important control factor is length of membership: the more recent the party recruit, the more probable the Internet has had an impact on their decision to join. This might reflect the wider availability of ICTs across social strata in recent years, and the increased prevalence of parties, government and politics in general on the Internet (Pew 2003). Equally, though, it is likely to reflect the growing sophistication of parties' online recruitment strategies (Auty and Nicholas 1998; Painter and Wardle 2001). In summary, those who reported the Web as an essential factor in their joining are significantly younger, Internet literate and less engaged in party politics than the general membership.

### ***Patterns of Membership Participation: Interactivity and Mobilisation?***

Moving to the second area of concern—the potential of ICTs to boost members' party activism—we asked respondents three main questions: how useful they

**Table 3: Members' Access to Party Website Features and Reported Usefulness**

	LD		LP	
	Accessed the feature (%)	Mean reported usefulness	Accessed the feature (%)	Mean reported usefulness
Information on policy	87	4.3	87	3.9
Information on current events	74	3.8	83	3.7
Information on party structure	66	3.7	75	3.4
Links to other sites	49	3.3	63	3.3
Information on online campaigns	67	3.9	59	3.3
Feedback (email feedback, surveys, polls)	63	3.6	59	3.2
Membership application/renewal	56	4.0	51	3.9
Commercial services endorsed by the party	40	2.7	50	2.9
N		1,353		1,417

Note: Usefulness is measured on a 0-6 scale for members who have visited the party site. 0 indicates that the feature is completely useless, 6 indicates a feature is extremely useful (scale average = 3).

found different features on the party website;<sup>5</sup> whether the use of the party website and email from the party led them to engage in a range of party activity; and, finally, how comfortable they felt using ICTs rather than traditional media for a range of party activities.

Information on party policy is by far the most frequently accessed feature (around 80 per cent), and was averagely scored 4.3 (LD) and 3.8 (LP) in terms of usefulness. Other information features—current events and party structure—are equally very popular; more than two thirds of the membership had accessed them, and found them useful (circa  $\mu = 3.7$  for both parties).

More interactive features, such as feedback (email, polls and surveys), links to other sites and online membership renewal attract a smaller, yet still sizeable audience (36–40 per cent), and are rated above average in terms of usefulness. Although accessed by only half of site visitors, the possibility of joining/renewing membership online is particularly valued by members of both parties ( $\mu = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ). Only online commercial services endorsed by the two parties score below the average in terms of usefulness (2.8) and are visited by far fewer site members, about 45 per cent. Finally, there are small but significant differences between the parties as to the usefulness of two online features. LD members find information on policy ( $\eta = 0.14$ , Spearman = 0.13 sig.  $p < 0.001$ ), and campaign resources ( $\eta = 0.21$ , Spearman = 0.20 sig.  $p < 0.001$ ) more useful than their LP counterparts. In the case of campaign information, LD members also access the feature significantly more frequently.

In terms of whether use of the party site and email communication from the party lead to increased levels of activism, we found that, overall, 39 per cent of party members have reacted in some way to party online stimuli, by engaging in the activities shown in Table 4. However, results on individual indicators were very low, ranging from 2 per cent to 14 per cent. Around 11 per cent claim email led them to contact the party or other party members, while another 10 per cent claim email was functional in getting them to volunteer some time or work for the party. Figures for web activation are even smaller, the peak being ‘contacting the party as a consequence of a site visit’ (9 per cent).

Both email and the Web appear to have very little impact on the more ‘institutional’ party activities, such as attending branch meetings or rallies. Overall, the data suggest that ICTs are of limited value in actively mobilising the membership. Emails tend to induce a greater range of party activity, including contacting other members, participating in specific campaigns and volunteering some time or work. Email is also more useful as a tool to keep members engaged once they have joined, therefore favouring aggregation rather than articulation functions.

Again, there are small but significant differences between the two parties. In general, LP members tend to attend local party meetings and contact the party with views or comments as a consequence of emails from the party. The LD members were significantly more likely to engage in campaigning activity, for example contact other members, volunteer time or work, write to the media and participate in specific campaigns. However, exploratory factor analysis showed no consistent patterns of Web or email activation. Web activation shows no patterns, while

**Table 4: Effects of Party Emails and Website on Members' Levels of Party Activity**

	LD		LP	
	Email from party %	Use of party site %	Email from party %	Use of party site %
Contacting other members	12.8	4.8	9.2	4.5
Volunteering some time/work	12.3	4.8	9.1	6.2
Participating in a specific campaign	10.7	5.9	6.6	4.7
Contacting the party with views/ comments	10.3	7.8	14.5	10.1
Writing to the media	8.3	5.1	6.1	4.4
Attending a local branch meeting	7.7	2.3	11.6	4.2
Attending a rally or demonstration	4.8	2.4	5.3	3.9
N	1,353	1,038	1,417	1,298

*Note:* Percentage of membership responding positively to Q10 Has use of the party website or email information from the party ever led you to undertake any of the following activities?

email activation composes a relatively reliable additive scale ( $\alpha = 0.73$ , seven items). Unlike Web-joining behaviour, the email activation scale is unrelated to party affiliation. Therefore, in order to understand which members were more susceptible to ICT activism, we regressed the email activation scale on different demographic and Internet usage characteristics (see Table 5). Overall, we found that party emails increase the levels of activism of members who are already very active, and visit the party site regularly.

Finally, we asked members to assess their preference for using ICTs rather than the traditional media for a number of party activities (see Table 6). Overall, members display a high propensity to employ ICTs across a wide spectrum of activities. Reflecting the data on usefulness of the party site, members prefer using ICTs to receive party information electronically than by post ( $\mu = 5.0$ , range 0–6). They consistently prefer to contact the party by email or on the site rather than using the telephone or paper mail ( $\mu = 4.8$ ). Both views are widely held across the populations of both parties, as shown by the relatively low SD values—1.7 for both. Consequently, it appears that bi-directional communication between party and individual members is best favoured by ICTs. The use of ICTs is also considered preferable for institutional activities such as voting and renewing membership. Although the possibility was not available to party members at the time of writing, respondents also expressed an interest in voting online for elected officials ( $\mu = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ).

By contrast, the results on interactive and member-to-member communication offered by the Internet are more controversial. Although the mean results are above average, they are consistently lower than for the other areas of party activ-

**Table 5: Predictors of Email-induced Party Activity**

	LD	LP
Sex (female dummy)	* .06	
Scale of offline party activity (0–7)	*** .21	*** .19
Use of fax to keep in touch with party (0–5)	** .07	
Use of phone to keep in touch with party (0–5)	*** .14	
Scale of online political connectedness (0–36)	* .07	
Scale of access to party website (0–5)	*** .13	* .06
Constant	*** –.44	* .17
N	1,325	1,368
Model fit	R <sup>2</sup> = .18	R <sup>2</sup> = .05

Results reported are standardised Beta coefficients.  
 \* = sig.  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* = sig.  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* = sig.  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 6: Comfort Using ICTs Compared to Traditional Media for Various Party Activities**

	Mean	LD SD	% DK	Mean	LP SD	% DK
Receiving information	4.6	1.7	1	5.3	1.3	2
Voting to elect officials	4.4	2.0	4	5.1	1.6	3
Contacting the party	4.5	1.7	2	5.0	1.5	4
Renewing membership	4.4	2.0	3	5.0	1.7	4
Joining specific campaigns	3.8	1.9	6	4.3	1.9	8
Discussing issues	3.6	2.0	5	4.1	2.0	7
Meeting other members	3.1	2.1	11	3.4	2.3	11
N		1,353			1,417	

Notes: Comfort is measured on a 0–6 scale, where 0 indicates much more comfortable using traditional media, and 6 indicates much more comfortable using new ICTs.

ity. Moreover, DK levels are consistently higher in these areas, suggesting a lack of awareness on the part of the respondents about more interactive uses of ICTs in a party setting. Overall, there are no differences between the parties in terms of different forms of online communication, except a higher propensity of LP members to use new media across the whole spectrum of party functions. More importantly, though, the results suggest that individual, member-to-party institutional relations are fostered via ICTs, rather than more complex patterns of interaction from member-to-member or collective member-to-elites.

### *Summary Analysis*

From our evidence, new media technologies display a small potential to widen party membership and to assist parties to reach new groups, notably less engaged, younger citizens. They seem unlikely, though, to alter radically the profile of party membership or activists. Whilst we found evidence that parties reached younger, less engaged sympathisers, this was more than balanced by traditional demographic biases. The Web still favours the middle-class male, even though he may be slightly younger than the traditional political activist. In short, ICTs may make it easier for predisposed supporters to become members and, equally, the new media potentially make it easier for parties to market themselves to sympathisers.

Similarly, ICTs made only marginal differences to increasing activism. However, this general trend masked two important points. First, increasing use of the new media is likely to increase disproportionately the more low-intensity elements of membership activity (reading literature, paying subs etc.). The interactive and networking possibilities of new media, which have excited the most attention, seem to be of least interest to members. Second, if new ICTs are to increase levels of activism, it is where the already active use it to supplement and extend their range of participation.

In terms of wider aggregation versus articulation functions, the data revealed small but significant differences between the two parties. In the case of the Labour party, our results point towards *aggregation* rather than *articulation*. LP members are more active politically, visit their party website and other political websites more often than LD members; they are more generalists in the features they access on the party site (information); party members are hardly recruited online, rather they join online as a result of existing engagement. Those who are reached and activated by email are very much the same 'old hands'. The LP e-news list is very much integrated with the party website, possibly trying to create a sort of LP members' online 'community'. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, the data suggests *articulation* rather than *aggregation* of interests. LD members are less active politically, visit their party site less often and keep in touch online with politics less than the LP members; they are more specialist as to the features they access on the party site, i.e. information on policy and campaign resources; they join the party consistently online, especially the young and previously politically inactive, in the last year or so. The LD e-list is more disconnected from the site; their members seem to be using the Internet in a more instrumental way than building community.

### **Conclusions**

Technology alone is unlikely to revive the aggregative functions of parties. The extent to which parties adapt ICTs for participatory (and, indeed, other) purposes is largely dependent on their own strategies and resources. Rather than parties being swept aside by a technological revolution, they are likely to adapt and incorporate technologies to reflect their pre-existing characteristics and goals. Hence,

our survey indicating very modest participatory boosts from technologies is, in part, a reflection of the cautious ways in which mainstream UK parties have used the technology. Yet, it seems reasonable to argue that new media technologies are likely to be much more central to the organisational existence of smaller parties, such as the Greens, who have a geographically dispersed membership, with high levels of access to the Net and a grass-roots participatory culture. Here, ICTs can play a key role linking members effectively and regularly at relatively low cost to the party. Essentially, these types of party have more incentives to make use of technologies creatively as means of furthering their organisational survival.

This is not to argue that new media technologies will have no impact on mainstream party life, although their main role is likely to underscore and in some cases accelerate pre-existing trends in internal party organisation. This can be seen in two areas especially. First, the geographic boundaries of party membership are likely to be eroded still further. The Web and email connect the member more directly to the national party than their own locality. Members will increasingly join nationally online and gain increasing amounts of online party information from national sources. Arguably, therefore, the Net is better at facilitating mobilisation within parties on an issue and national basis rather than the traditional constituency basis. Secondly, although ICTs may facilitate a modest widening of the party base, the more significant impact is a further deepening of participatory activities amongst activists. Consequently, ICTs may well further entrench existing participation divides in political parties. However, this need not necessarily be damaging to parties. At one level, technologies allow parties to extract more from their existing activist class through the provision of regularised online channels of participation. Hence, parties can now theoretically mobilise their activists on a 24-7 basis. In other words, ICTs enable activists to pursue their activism 24 hours a day, seven days a week, if they so wish. They can still attend traditional party meetings and canvass door to door but they can now go home and continue their party activities online at times of their own choosing. At the same time, however, technologies are currently also facilitating more individualised (and arguably) more passive forms of participation. Thus, rather than stimulating collective grass-roots activities, current online joiners seem more likely to swell the ranks of the 'chequebook' style of member. Overall, therefore, new media technologies could foster a looser kind of relationship between citizens and parties. People can associate themselves with, and support, parties online without having to invest large amounts of time in internal party life. New media technologies may allow parties to blur further the distinction between formal members and informal supporters. In sum, technologies may help parties survive declines in membership and activism without necessarily reinvigorating local grass-roots democracy. The process may be one of internal administrative modernisation but not necessarily wider democratisation.

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## Notes

1. The questionnaire is available on the project website, at [www.ipop.org.uk](http://www.ipop.org.uk).
2. Compared with similar data from Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2002b).
3. Data from a postal survey of Labour party members confirmed that party members are more active online than the average Internet user (Lusoli, Ward and Gibson 2003).
4. The party activity scale (8 points,  $\alpha = 0.75$ ) includes all measures of offline party activism except donating money to the party. Both factor and scaling analysis confirmed that 'donate' is a relatively autonomous mode of engagement.
5. Usefulness is measured on a 0–6 scale, where 6 is 'very useful', 3 is 'neither useful nor useless' and 0 marks 'completely useless'.

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