

# **Virtually Participating: A Survey of Online Party Members**

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## **Abstract**

This paper assesses the role of ICTs in the context membership participation and activism within political parties. It uses an online survey of over 2000 UK Liberal Democrat party members to examine how far the Internet/email can: (1) widen participation within political parties by increasing the size of the membership and attracting new groups to parties; (2) deepen participation by increasing levels of activism within parties. The results of the survey indicate that whilst ICTs may enable parties to reach younger voters and increase levels of activism amongst the already active, the overall impact on participation and internal party democracy is likely to be limited.

## **Introduction**

Concern about health of party organisations and state of political participation have been increasingly prominent over the last decade. A barrage of evidence has built the impression of parties being increasingly seen as irrelevant and unloved organisations. Yet, as others have argued, parties remain central to the organisational infrastructure of most liberal democracies [Budge, 1996; Lipow and Seyd, 1997; Seyd 1998]. The emergence of the Internet and other new media in the same period has, not surprisingly, raised questions about their potential role in political organisations. New information communication technologies (ICTs) have been seen as either further eroding political parties ability to mobilise and act as participatory vehicles, or alternatively as tools for reinvigorating party organisations. So far, whilst there has been a growing amount of evidence examining parties online strategies and website activities from a top-down perspective, there has been little evidence emerging from the grassroots perspective about the role of the Internet. This paper attempts to fill some of this empirical gap, through a case study survey of online Liberal Democrat party members in the UK. The survey undertaken examines, the profile of party members online, the use of Internet and attitudes of members towards new ICTs and party participation. In short, it assesses what difference ICTs make in the context of party participation and activism. The paper begins by discussing general trends in membership participation and activism and also more specifically evidence relating to the Liberal Democrats. We then discuss the participatory potential of ICTs within party structures before reporting the research methods and survey results and finally assessing the wider significance of the findings.

## **I. General Trends in Party Membership, Participation and Activism**

In order to understand the role that ICTs might play in membership participation, it is important to place the development of online participation in the context of longer term trends in membership activity and behaviour. Evidence from a wide range of European countries over the past two decades or more has indicated increasing problems for parties in terms of their membership base. Four common trends can be detected:

- Declining numbers – long term trends in liberal democracies from the 1960s seem to consistently point to significant falls in the numbers of mainstream party members, even though some parties have occasionally bucked the trend over shorter periods. Whilst some of the original data on party numbers from the 1950s and 1960s is unreliable, hence, the declines maybe less drastic than the bare figures suggest, there is no doubt that party membership has fallen overall [Katz and Mair, 1994].
- Socially restricted membership – As numbers have fallen, so the social demographics of party membership have become more restricted. Parties are increasingly middle class, with left of centre parties particularly dependent on professionals from the public sector, notably teaching and higher education. Considerable gender, race, and age imbalances exist common to most parties, with under representation of woman, younger voters and ethnic minorities amongst party memberships.
- Declining levels of activism – It is not just a case of falling numbers, but declining levels of activism amongst members who form the bedrock of local party activity particularly election campaigning. Some of this can be seen in the moribund nature of local party organisations and the difficulties parties have in recruiting candidates for local elections [Fisher, 1999].

Others have noted the rise of the so called “cheque book member” (passive member) who pay their membership fees and receive party information but take no part in the party activities [Jordan and Maloney, 1998; Whiteley and Seyd, 1998].

- Shifts towards individual modes of participation – Although party membership may have fallen and some local organisations maybe moribund, paradoxically, members in many parties have gained individual participatory rights, notably in terms of leadership and candidate selection within parties [Katz and Mair, 1995]. In parties of all ideological persuasions, there has moves towards more direct forms of democracy away from the traditional representative style of internal party democracy.

The impact of these trends of party internal organisation and democracy is not necessarily clear cut. Many commentators have suggested that parties have gradually become more centralised and more leadership oriented over the past forty years [Katz and Mair, 1994, 1995]. The advent of the catch-all party in 1960s where parties responded to declines traditional cleavages (religion, class etc.) and less ideological and partisan electorates, by making broader cross class appeals, led to party leaders seeing themselves as more accountable to the whole electorate rather than party activists and members [Kircheimer, 1966]. Furthermore, the professionalisation of party campaigning, and in particular, the importance of television for party communication fostered the development of nationalised and centralised campaigning methods again downplaying the role of the local activist [Norris, 2000].

Though party members have undoubtedly gained individual rights, sceptics have argued that this has not necessarily improved elite accountability. Firstly, the process and agenda of membership rights is still largely driven top-down by party bosses. Secondly, party elites have generally

supported and used individual rights and direct democracy methods to bolster their own legitimacy and to bypass party activists. Hence, the collective elements of participation (the role of activist networks and constituency parties) which might have challenged elites have been eroded in favour of a more plebiscitary style of intra-party democracy [Katz and Mair, 1995].

Nevertheless, the picture of elite dominated, empty-shell parties with crumbling infrastructure should not be over emphasised. Party members can, and do, still make a difference, as several studies have indicated [Whiteley and Seyd, 1992, 1998; Whiteley et al, 1994; Denver and Hands, 1997]. The importance of local campaigning and healthy levels of party activism are important in winning marginal constituencies in the UK. Moreover, as party campaigns have become more professional, some have suggested that parties are using their more restricted membership base more efficiently and obtaining the same benefits from fewer members [Scarrow, 2000]. From a grassroots perspective, individual rights have not straightforwardly led to a more docile membership, as UK Labour Party members have shown. On occasions they can reject the official party line, for example, in the selection of the party's mayoral candidate for London, the leader of the Welsh Assembly and the election of dissenting voices to the National Executive Committee (NEC) in recent years.

### ***Membership and Activism in The Liberal Democrats***

There is relatively limited empirical evidence of membership and activist participation in the Liberal Democrats. Moreover, long term trends are difficult to discern, since the party in its current guise was only formed in 1988 as result of merger between the long established Liberal Party and the relatively new Social Democratic Party (SDP). In theory, the culture and organisational structure of the Liberal Democrats places considerable weight on the role and importance of the party members and participation within the party. The party has strong roots in

community campaigning and has strong elements of federalism built into its structures. Party philosophy emphasises the bottom-up, grassroots democracy and independent thought [Ingle, 1996]. Organisationally, Liberal Democrats have arguably led the way in introducing increased individual rights for members such as one member one vote in electing party leaders. As Fieldhouse and Russell have noted the party has been developed on a paradox of the tradition of community politics and increased professionalism in the party. As a third party, it is dependent both on exposure of the party leadership in the mass media (virtually the only part of the party that gains coverage) whilst at the same time requiring strong local bases to increase local support, electoral credibility and parliamentary representation. This has meant that meant party remaining federal conglomeration but also with a degree of reciprocity between leadership and party activists - they both require each other in order to progress, more so than the two main parties.<sup>1</sup> However, despite these observations, Liberal Democrats have not been immune from some of the general party membership trends noted above.

Party membership over the past decade appears superficially to be stable. The official figure of around 100,000 has remained for much of the last decade. Although if one compares membership to available data on its predecessor the Liberal Party then long term membership since the 1960s has declined significantly. Yet such membership figures are difficult to verify and certainly the number of active members is considerably less judging from the turn out in the last leadership election ballot in 1999. However, the profile of Liberal Democrat members has been well established by two surveys conducted in 1993 and 1999 [Rudig *et al*, 1995; Seyd and Whiteley, 1999]. Both these surveys indicate that party membership is drawn from relatively narrow social groups. The surveys suggested that members are the most middle class of the UK party members, drawn largely from public sector occupations. There is a male bias especially amongst activists,

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldhouse, E and A. Russell (2001) ESRC end of award report available at

and members are predominantly 50+ in terms of their age profile (the average age of the member is 58 – according to Seyd and Whiteley). Rudig et al suggested from their evidence that the Liberal Democrats were less active than one might imagine given their party rhetoric and reputation. They report that around 63% of their sample described themselves as not at all or, not very, active. However, in comparative terms, Seyd and Whiteley claim that Liberal Democrat party members are the most active of the main three parties, particularly in terms of local election campaigning.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there was some tentative evidence that levels of activity were falling – party members were claiming to be less active than they had been previously - but again this difficult to establish within framework of relatively young party. Overall, it seems that Liberal Democrats face some of the same difficulties as other main parties but perhaps less acutely.

## **II. The Potential of the New Media for Participation and Activism in Political Parties**

The development of the Internet in a period of organisational change for parties has meant that it quickly become intertwined with debates about reviving representative political organisations. However, it is worth remembering that parties have increasingly used computer technology since the 1980s both for internal organisational purposes and for communicating with members and voters [Smith, 1998; Wring and Horrocks, 2001]. The arrival of the Internet and email in mid 1990s has provided further opportunities and challenges for parties to both modernise their organisation but also potentially to make internal democratic reforms. Whilst some have seen the new media as eroding traditional representative organisations, such as parties, by creating additional channels of direct communication between government and the governed [Bimber 1998; Morris, 2000]. Others have suggested that parties can harness the technology to reengage

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[www.ccsr.ac.uk/rschproj/libdemreport.pdf](http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/rschproj/libdemreport.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Seyd, P and P. Whiteley 'Middle Class Activists', *The Guardian*, 20 September 1999.

citizens in party activities [Budge, 1996]. Scope for participatory opportunities exists in two broad areas:

- Widening participation (increasing numbers and broadening the membership profile). At one level, the Internet can be used for recruitment purposes to increase and maintain membership numbers. From a rational choice perspective, arguably, the Internet lowers the barriers (costs) to participation for individuals from more marginal and excluded groups. Political activity such as information gathering, joining organisations or directly contacting political institutions and organisations could become far easier and quicker [Bonchek, 1995]. The arrival of set-top boxes and Internet TV could allow the house-bound, such as the elderly, single parents and the disabled, to participate more easily from their homes. It could also be employed to recruit new members from sections of the community that are less attracted through traditional media, and less likely to join political parties such as younger voters who have wider access via educational establishments.
- Deepening participation (providing increased in depth channels for member to member and member to elites communication). It has been suggested that the Internet could increase participation rates and deepen the quality of the participatory experience for members and activists [Pederson, 2001]. The interactivity of the Internet, in the form of email, provides members with an additional and speedier mechanism to voice their opinions on party policy and organisation. Individual members could be encouraged to advance their views directly to party elites. The party could put large amounts of policy information/documents online and encourage feedback directly from members. Similarly, leading party figures could engage in debate and question sessions with ordinary members. Parties, across Europe have already experimented with online discussion and online ballots and many now operate internal

computer networks (intranets) which are accessed via subscription by party members and staff [Lofgren, 2001; Ward *et al*, 2003]. The Internet also offers some opportunities to increase collective participation. Intra-party groups can develop their own independent patterns of participation and activity. Because of the decentralised nature of the Internet, intra-party groups, such as constituency parties, could publish their views to national and indeed, global audiences, without central party assistance/interference. Such autonomous websites and discussion lists could build links between geographically disparate groups of members and generate social and political capital. They could even provide a platform for intra-party groups to network and in some areas challenge the official party line.

Neither of these potentially positive scenarios have gone unchallenged (although there has thus far been limited amount of empirical study of online membership activity and attitudes). Firstly, parties because of their inherently bureaucratic and conservative structures they are unlikely to be able to compete with the more imaginative participatory uses of ICTs by new social movements or protest campaigns. In short, it has been suggested that increased societal use of ICTs will more than likely encourage more citizens to bypass parties and communicate directly with government or form ad hoc short term networks of interest online, thus eroding the legitimacy of parties still further [Bimber, 1998]. Secondly, evidence from empirical studies indicates that parties are not using the technology to reinvent mass participation but for improving campaign efficiency [Smith 1998; Margetts, 2001]. Party websites rarely include two way interactive channels [Gibson and Ward, 1998, 1999, 2000; Newell, 2001; Gibson *et al*, 2003] and where parties have internal computer communication systems they do not necessarily embrace the wider party membership [Gibson and Ward, 1999]. Thirdly, even if parties adopt the technology for participatory purposes, it is unlikely to widen or deepen the quality of participation. Several studies have pointed out that political communication via new ICTs

appeals largely to the already politically engaged or active [Norris, 2003; Pedersen, 2001]. The technology itself is not a stimulus to participation. Indeed, one of the problems for political organisations is that it requires user initiative i.e. it is difficult to contact people directly unsolicited. Finally, there is no guarantee that use of ICTs would increase participatory democracy within parties. As critics have noted use of new ICTs may simply enhance existing trends of centralisation and individualisation internally within parties. Since the ICT agenda and resources are likely to be controlled top-down thus party elites more likely to use them to legitimise their position – plebiscitary votes rather than to build member to member contact. Equally, it may be used to bypass local parties and activists creating a much more direct relationship between individual party member and party headquarters [Ward *et al.*, 2003].

### ***Liberal Democrats Online***

Along with ‘traditional’ uses of ICTs for campaign activities, the Liberal Democrats were one of the early party developers of ICTs for ‘innovative’ functions, in terms of both internal computer mediated discussion system, internal group democracy and a website aimed at engaging the general public. The use of ICTs for campaign purposes is not new for parties in general or the Liberal Democrats in particular. The EARS software designed for campaigning and fundraising, has been used by the party since 1983. Developed and now updated by a voluntary team, EARS is used to organise the canvassing, monitoring and polling-day activity by actively managing the electoral roll of constituencies.

Party conferencing was set up in earnest, almost ten years ago. The Nextra conferencing system (formerly CIX) has been in use within the party from the beginning of 1994. In essence, it is the party's electronic discussion platform, available to all members through a subscription based service, which also provides traditional (although not free) e-mail access. Along with several

discussion boards – mainly organised around the topics of news and comments, policy discussion and internal party business – the system is used to upload and download files, such as party logos, artwork and campaign material. In times of elections, the system is used to trouble-shoot, share campaign ideas, canvass results and as a point of encounter of candidates and electoral agents. The use of the system has grown from around 300 members, mainly activists, in 1997 to around 800 in November 2002.

A party group concerned with the use of technology in politics – the Liberal Democrats Online (LDO) was formed in the summer of 1999. LDO comprises lay party members with an interest in technology, and helps the party headquarters and technical staff manage electronic party communications. Although open to the entire membership, its 200 members are drawn from the parties' most IT literate membership. The Liberal Democrats were also the first party to consult online with their electorate for policy purposes. An online consultation, about IT policy, was launched by Richard Allan, MP, in April 2002 (<http://www.makeitpolicy.org.uk/>).

The public website was created in 1995 and has been relaunched on several occasions since. As with other UK party websites, it serves the main aim of information dissemination to wider audience. Interactive and participative opportunities tend to be limited to one-way email, rather than encouraging discussion or even feedback from the public or party members [Gibson and Ward 1998, 2000]. Whilst UK party websites have been criticised as propaganda or brochure-ware – the Liberal Democrat site is arguably less technologically sophisticated than two major parties, however, they claim that it is less gimmicky and that the site is a reflection of the party's straightforward image [Gibson et al, 2003]. At the sub-national level recent survey found around 25% of constituency parties, including many of Liberal Democrat MPs had created their own websites, a slightly higher proportion than the other main parties [Gibson and Ward, 2003]. The

apparently higher level of commitment to using the technology may be a reflection of the former leader (Paddy Ashdown's) personal interest in new technology. The Liberal Democrat take-on of technology, Ashdown argues, is linked to the party concern with the liberty values described above: "freedom of Information is central to the philosophy of the Liberal Democrats, and I am convinced that this core belief is the reason why the Party has embraced email and the Internet with such alacrity" [Ashdown, 1997: 7]. The 1997 Manifesto confirmed this attitude, and claimed that the Liberal Democrats would 'improve access to information technology and the Internet ... ensure that everyone in Britain can have access, either individually or through a wide range of public access points, to a nationwide interactive communications network by the year 2000' [Liberal Democrats, 1997].

### **III. Research Questions and Methodology**

In assessing the participatory potential of ICTs within a party framework we undertook an online survey of Liberal Democrat members. The survey set out to explore the use of ICTs by party members. In general, data was gathered in two areas. The first descriptive and explorative, the second more hypothesis based. We first asked about the demographic composition and patterns of Internet use of the Liberal Democrats online membership, as compared to the wider UK user population. Then, we investigated the political profile and the online political behaviours of members. Finally, in reporting party online connected-ness we wanted to understand whether ICTs *deepen* and *widen* membership participation? In short, four research questions are drawn from the debate on the changing nature of party presented above, and addressed in the context of ICT use by party membership:

- Increasing numbers: do ICTs widen party membership in Britain in numerical terms?

- Diverse membership: do ICTs expand the social characteristics of party membership?
- Increasing levels of activism: do ICTs increase members' party activism?
- Individualisation of the political link: do ICTs favour more interactive intra-party politics?

### *Survey methodology*

An online survey was used to collect information about Liberal Democrat members' online behaviour and party participation and activism. The questionnaire included twenty questions, plus seven additional questions on demographics, divided in four main sections: Internet use, off-line political behaviours and attitudes, Internet political use and Internet use for party activities.<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire was agreed with the Liberal Democrat web manager and endorsed by the party. The survey was administered online, using a simple HTML questionnaire, PHP form scripts and a javascript verification mechanism, that covered the first four questions for the questionnaire, and demographic variables. The tool was active for three weeks, from February, 26 to March, 18 2002. Procedurally, a 'cover' email was sent by the Liberal Democrat HQ to 9,000 party members. The e-mail included a link to the online questionnaire. The e-mail generated 2590 page impressions and 2230 submissions, in a format directly exportable to SPSS, which was used for data analysis. The submissions were screened for genuine duplicate submission by crossing IP, Host and date-time stamp (submission of questionnaire) and a battery of 10 randomly selected variables. After the screening, 2116 unique questionnaires were processed and analysed using SPSS. The response rate was approximately 23%, comparatively high for online surveys.<sup>4</sup> Originally, a thank-you reminder was agreed with the Liberal Democrat web manager. Given the good response rate, the reminder was never sent out.

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<sup>3</sup> The survey questionnaire and data-sets can be found online at [ **deleted for refereeing** ] .

<sup>4</sup> Response rates for online survey normally range from 5% to 20%, depending on topic and mode of administration.

Clearly our study cannot claim to be a representative sample of Liberal Democrat members nor would we claim that the members here are necessarily representative of all parties. Additional study of other parties and off-line members would provide an even fuller picture. Nevertheless, this online survey of over 2000 party members provides evidence of the behaviour and attitudes of a sizeable number of activists in particular. Moreover, given the lack of bottom up data on party members and activists use of ICTs and the difficulties in gaining access to party members in the UK we would argue it represents a useful benchmark.

#### **IV. Survey Results: Members and Activists Online**

##### *Diversifying and increasing the membership: Demographic profiles*

Our online survey collected the usual demographic and political engagement profiles. We also asked more direct questions about whether the party website and/or email contact with the party had led members to join the party. Although the survey is not representative, the data gathered allows us to compare online respondents with previous membership surveys, Liberal Democrat voters and the public generally.

In relation to the demographics of our study, the most apparent finding is that the online participants tend to be younger than general membership (table 1). The respondents' age profile resembles much more closely that of party's voters rather than traditional members. This partly reflects the demographics characteristics of Internet political users and also the general profile of party membership – the former tend to be younger [Gibson *et al*, 2002], the latter older. At the moment, therefore, the Internet has the capacity to attract to the party a wider audience in terms of age profile than the traditional party activists.

**[ table 1 about here ]**

In comparison to age, however, both the educational and gender profiles point to an unequal representation of members in cyberspace. On the one hand, one in ten of our online survey is currently in full time education, against one in fifty for membership as a whole. Moreover, almost 67% of members online have an University degree, compared to 42% of members and party supporters in the Whiteley-Seyd survey. In part, this over representation of students is a reflection of their free access to the Internet via educational institutions.

The gender distribution is even more skewed. The members online were overwhelmingly male, 76% of respondents, whereas the membership balance in total has a more even gender distribution. Our study confirms other surveys of political Internet users which suggest a significant male bias [Bimber, 1998, 2001; Gibson *et al*, 2002]. From this perspective, the Internet seems to be the playground of the young, educated male. Even as the digital divide is reduced over past couple of years the gender divide remains in the political web-sphere.

Along with a slightly different profile there is some evidence that the Internet could be an increasingly important recruitment tool. Around 31% of respondents claim that its use led them to join the party. This figure refers to not just people who have joined directly online, but respondents who report that the Web was a factor in their recruitment via traditional routes. 18% of members report the web as an important factor for joining, but did not join directly online. However, this finding is tempered by the fact that an even greater number reported having joined online but consider the web as a non-important factor. This perhaps suggests that whilst the content of party websites may have some impact on recruitment, websites may have more use as simply a replacement method of joining for those already predisposed to membership. In addition to websites, 5% of respondents claim that e-mail communication from the party led them to join.

**[ table 2 about here ]**

The profile of the web-led joiners further supports the idea that the net is attracting and actively enrolling an audience which is slightly different from the traditional party membership. There are two sets of interesting results. First zero-order correlations are used to compare those who have reported the Internet 'has led them to join the party' to the general membership, to detect significant differences.<sup>5</sup> In respect to long term supporters (table 3, sample A) and recent recruits (sample B), the web has been important in recruiting mainly a younger, less traditionally politically engaged membership, which is also less likely to employ the traditional media to keep in touch with the party.

**[ table 3 and 4 about here ]**

Results from a logistic regression (table 4) uncover the factors affecting web joining behaviour. 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 are as 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'. In relation to the SES measures, use of the web does not seem to interact with education, income and occupation, thus ruling out a reinforcement hypothesis [Norris, 2000]. Conversely, age, traditional media habits, existing levels of activism and frequency of exposure to the party site retain strong and significant relations.<sup>6</sup> In particular, frequency of visits to the national party site is a good predictor of online subscription. As each point's increase on the frequency scale yields a 76% jump in the odds of joining online, controlling for other variables in the model. By the same token, each point decrease in the index of party activity (0-4) increases the odds of joining online by 30%. Those who reported the web as essential factor for them joining are, in short,

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<sup>5</sup> The results presented in the table should be taken as illustrative of the difference between the two groups. In fact, members who have joined more than 5 years ago had no or extremely limited access to the Internet, and it was not possible to join online.

<sup>6</sup> All five factors listed have significant zero-order correlations with the dependent variable. The only exception is gender, therefore excluded from the model.

significantly younger, Internet literate and substantially less engaged in party politics than other members.

***Activism and Interactivity: political behaviour on and off-line***

The survey asked a range of questions concerning levels of activity within the party, general Internet use as well as more specific questions regarding their political behaviour online and their preference for using online versus off-line communication methods. Such questions again allow comparisons with previous membership surveys and with the wider general public.

Levels of activism amongst online members: Respondents reported themselves to be predominantly political activists (36%), and not surprisingly “very interested in politics” (37%). Additionally, one in three holds an official position in the party. On average, they report that seven and half hours a week are devoted to party political activities of different sorts. Though there is considerable variation between members. One in four members reports no political activity, and the median value is two hours per week. However, a minority of members (5%) engages in 40 or more hours of political activity per week.

**[ table 5 about here ]**

The type of activity varies a great deal. As expected, relatively passive, individual forms of engagement are the most popular. Reading party literature is the most common party activity (68% of members), followed by donating money (53%). Interpersonal collective activities – campaigning, meet with other members and talk to friends and colleagues – follow closely, with more than two in five members engaged. Overall, nine in ten members engage in at least one activity, almost 60% of the members engage in at least three, while 3% of respondents are “super-activists”, engaging in all of the activities surveyed. Beside involvement in party activities, 35% of respondents are also a member of another (or multiple) political organisation,

including particularly, environmental (Amnesty, FoE, Greenpeace), electoral reform (ERS, Charter 88) and social/charity associations (e.g. Oxfam).

In the main, respondents are long-term supporters. More than half of the respondents report to have joined the party six years ago or more. Comments received on this item show that a number of respondents are very long-term members (20, 30 and even 40 years), founding members and former members of both Liberals Democrats and previously the SDP. One in five is a medium-term member, having joined between two and five years ago and one in four members is a newcomer, who has joined in the last year.

Internet usage and political activity online: Online Liberal Democrat members are heavy Internet users. The difference in terms of use between our respondents and the general British public which is online is large and significant. 60% of our survey use the Internet daily compared with just 32% of general UK population [Gibson et al, 2002]. The difference is greater at work, where members are 2.3 times more likely than UK users to use the Net daily, and 1.6 times more likely to use it at all. At home, the disparity is less pronounced, although significant (respectively 1.8 and 1.2 times).<sup>7</sup>

Respondents also report very high level of online political connectedness (table 6), defined as the use of the Internet (WWW, E-mail and Intranets) to 'get political information or keep in touch with political life' (table 5). The most popular political site visited is understandably their own party site (81%) with 27% visiting it at least once a week. In comparison, only 15% of the respondents reported visiting another party's website, which is unexpectedly low for party activists. The results for other political institutions (local councils, government departments and

the Westminster Parliament) are comparatively high, visited on average by three in five of the respondents, although regular (weekly or more) usage is still a fairly small minority around 11-15%. Surprisingly, pressure groups and TU/Professional association are significantly less popular, as three members in four has never been in touch online. This is somewhat low when one considers that a third of respondents are members of pressure groups. In fact, only 60% of respondents who are pressure group members keep in touch with them online – low when compared with party website use. Political news is also very popular with online members, as more than half of the respondents gets online news, with the BBC site being particularly popular. Although political news score lower than other online alternatives, members tend to consult online news sources more frequently: 18% daily and another 18% at least once a week. When compared with the general population, however, party members display far higher degrees of online connectedness. Data representative of the UK population show that only 5% of the UK public has visited the site of a party, 8% the site of a charity or pressure group, while 26% has accessed political news [Gibson et al, 2002]. This confirms, therefore, the general pattern of the of the political web sphere appealing mainly to the already politically active rather than reaching new audiences [Norris, 2000].

**[ table 6 about here ]**

We then asked a number of questions more specifically about the Liberal Democrat national website. Those who visit it, rated it quite highly overall, scoring on average 2.7 (SD = 0.7, N = 1464) on a 0-4 scale, where four stands for very good. Members who do not use the site (valid N = 318) were asked why they had not done so. The most important response 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 ten), and the lack of awareness of the site (one in six). The cost of using the Internet is considered somewhat important by one member in four, while the lack of Internet

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<sup>7</sup> The differences reported remain important even when controlling for the usual predictors of frequency of

access at work is a marginal reason for not accessing the party site. In summary then, the results suggest that it is mainly personal reasons that explain non-use, rather than access barriers or motives to do with the supply of participation opportunities.

Different features of the national party website were assessed in more detail, to determine the proportion of members accessing each service and the usefulness of the item (table 7).<sup>8</sup> Information on party policy is by far the most frequently accessed feature (around two-thirds), and was scored 4.3 in terms of usefulness. Information on current events, party structure and online campaigns, and the party newsletter (featuring a mix of the above) are as well very popular, more than half of the membership had accessed them, and found them useful ( $\mu$  is around 3.8 each). More interactive features, such as feedback (e-mail, polls and surveys), links to other and online membership renewal attract a smaller, yet still sizeable, audience (36– 40 %), and are rated above the average in terms of usefulness. The possibility of joining-renewing membership online is particularly appreciated once it has been used ( $\mu = 3.9$ ). Only online commercial services endorsed by the Liberal Democrats score below the average in terms of usefulness (2.6) and are visited by far fewer members.

**[ table 7 about here ]**

Along with the above questions on website use, we also asked whether web and e-mail communication from the party had led members to undertake a number of participatory activities, thus increasing their levels of activism. Results on all the indicators included were very low, ranging from 2 to 13 per cent (table 8). About one in nine members claimed that e-mail has been functional in getting him/her to contact the party and/or other members. Roughly the same

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Internet use (age, gender, education) which are more widely distributed in our sample than in the wider UK online population.

<sup>8</sup> Usefulness is measured on a 0-6 scale, where 6 is very useful, 3 is neither useful nor useless and 0 completely useless.

proportion reported volunteering time/working for the party, or participating in a specific campaign as a result of e-mails from party sources.

**[ table 8 and 9 about here ]**

Both e-mail, and the web have very little impact on the more 'institutional' party activities, such as voting, attending branch meetings or rallies, around 5%. Overall, the data suggest that ICTs were of limited value in actively mobilising the membership. When comparing email with the Internet an interesting difference emerges. E-mails tend to induce a greater range of party activity, including: contacting other members (20 %); participating in specific campaigns (16%); and volunteer some time or work (15%).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the Web can be seen as an important tool for increasing the party membership passively, whilst e-mail is more useful as a tool to keep members engaged once they have joined. However, in order to understand more fully which groups within the party were more susceptible to ICT activism, we constructed an e-mail activation scale,<sup>10</sup> and regressed it on different demographic and Internet usage characteristics of the membership (table 9). E-mail from the party increases levels of activism of members who are already active. Additionally, the more frequently a member uses e-mail, the more they are likely to get activated.

Online and off-line activities compared: We asked members to assess their preference for using ICTs rather than traditional media for a number of party activities. Results (table 10) display a high propensity of party members to employ ICTs rather than traditional means across a wide spectrum. Reflecting the data on usefulness of the party site, members prefer using ICTs to receive the party newsletter electronically than by post ( $\mu = 4.7$ , range 0–6). As well, members

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<sup>9</sup> Results reported refer to the entire population in the case of e-mail (N = 2116), to members who have visited the party site for the web (n = 1700).

<sup>10</sup> Exploratory factor analysis and distance measurement revealed that WWW and e-mail activities are quite different. Therefore two separate scales were constructed. The e-mail activation scale includes 7 items, alpha = .76. The WWW activation scale includes 7 items, alpha = .58. The WWW was therefore omitted from analysis.

consistently prefer to contact the party by e-mail or on the site rather than using the telephone or paper mail ( $\mu = 4.5$ ). Both views are widely held across the population, as shown by the SD values – 1.7 for both. Consequently, it appears that bi-directional communication between party and members is best favoured by ICTs. The use of ICTs is also considered more preferable in the field of institutional activities, such as voting and renewing membership. Although the possibility was not available at the time of writing, respondents also expressed an interest in voting online for both organisational/ policy issues ( $\mu = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ) and elected officials ( $\mu = 4.3$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ). The low levels of DK responses for these areas indicate a good understanding of the use of ICTs for institutional communication and official activities

**[ table 10 about here ]**

By comparison, the results on interactive and member-to-member communication possibilities offered by the Internet are more controversial. First, although the mean of the results is above average, meaning equal comfort using ICTs vis-à-vis traditional technologies, the values are consistently lower than for the other areas of party activity. Second, 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, the results suggest an individual, member-to-party institutional relation is fostered via ICTs, rather than a more complex pattern of interaction of member-to member or collective member-to-elites.

## **V. Discussion and Conclusions: Widening and deepening - but not very much?**

Our initial question was simply to discover what members were doing and how far they used ICTs. It is apparent from this study, that for a significant number of activists, ICTs are becoming part of their everyday lives. The new media is being normalised relatively quickly amongst the political active. Internet/email communication is increasing in popularity and are for a sizeable

group of our respondents a preferred means of communication. Whilst ICT communication maybe replacing pen and paper and even telephone communication for some aspects of routine party business, the more interesting questions are how far do changed communication patterns produce organisational changes and increase participation. Here, ICTs impact seems less advantageous. From our evidence, the new media still have the potential to widen membership and assist them reach new groups, notably younger citizens, but whether parties will achieve this is down to their own recruitment strategies and wider social and political trends surrounding the relevance of political parties. It is doubtful that ICTs alone can reverse the long-term trend of declining membership. Nor does it seem likely to radically alter the profile of party members or activists. Although we find evidence that parties can reach younger less engaged sympathisers, this was more than balanced by other demographic biases. The web still favours the middle-class male, even though he maybe slightly younger than the traditional political activist. Overall, 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 the already sympathetic but this is probably not enough to revive parties in terms of their membership.

Our second area of concern was whether the new media could deepen participation within parties. Even if new media does not radically increase numbers, can it enhance participation and activism of the existing membership? Overall, ICTs made only marginal differences to increasing activism –However, this general trend masked several important points. Firstly, increasing use of the new media is likely to disproportionately increase the more passive elements of membership activity (reading literature, paying subs etc.). The interactive and networking possibilities of the new media, which have excited the most attention, seem to be of least interest to members. Secondly, if new ICTs are to increase levels of activism, it is amongst the already most active, where activists use it supplement and extend their range of participation. Hence, again there is

potential for parties to get more out of their existing bases through ICT strategy. Thirdly, it is worth reiterating the differences between the Internet and e-mail. The Internet may allow parties to recruit new members but email is more important for tying members into the party organisation. Indeed, overall although the Internet attracts more media attention, email may be of more importance in terms of the internal activities of political organisations.

Finally, do the changes and trends identified actually alter the broader parameters of internal party democracy and party organisational change? Certainly, we would argue that the new media supports individual functions and activism more than collective activities at present. Whilst new ICTs may increase member-to member networking, as we have seen it is individual member to headquarters that perhaps more directly affected. Currently, the web and email connect the party member more directly to the party centrally than to their own locality. The geographic nature of party membership through local constituency parties therefore could well be eroded by increased ICT usage. In short, the increasing use of the new media in internal party affairs is likely to enhance pre-existing trends towards individualisation and more direct relations between elites and members rather than reviving collective grassroots democracy.

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**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of different samples of LD members.**

|                  |                        | Online members<br>survey (March 2002) | Whiteley and Seyd<br>(1999) <sup>(a)</sup> | National survey<br>(May 2002) |
|------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Gender           | Male                   | 74 %                                  | 55 %                                       | 51 %                          |
|                  | Female                 | 26 %                                  | 45 %                                       | 49 %                          |
| Age (years)      | ≤ 25                   | 14 %                                  | 2 %  | 15 %                          |
|                  | 26 – 35                | 16 %                                  | 5 %  | 15 %                          |
|                  | 36 – 45                | 17 % <sup>(b)</sup>                   | 11 %                                       | 18 %                          |
|                  | 46 – 55                | 23 % <sup>(b)</sup>                   | 23 %                                       | 17 %                          |
|                  | 56 – 65                | 20 % <sup>(b)</sup>                   | 22 %                                       | 16 %                          |
|                  | ≥ 66                   | 10 % <sup>(b)</sup>                   | 37 %                                       | 19 %                          |
| Formal education | No qualifications      | 1 %                                   |  |                               |
|                  | GCSE – O levels        | 7 %                                   | NA   | NA                            |
|                  | A levels               | 12 %                                  |  |                               |
|                  | Graduate (e.g. BA)     | 40 %                                  |  |                               |
|                  | Postgraduate (e.g. MA) | 21 %                                  | 42 %                                       | 42 %                          |
|                  | PhD                    | 7 %                                   |  |                               |
|                  | Other                  | 12 % <sup>(c)</sup>                   | NA   | NA                            |
| Students         | In FT education        | 10 %                                  | 2 %  | 8 %                           |
| Sample N         |                        | 2116 <sup>(d)</sup>                   | 4442                                       | 236                           |

**a.** The figures provided are computed from the final ESRC Award report.

**b.** As age categories were different, figures are based on normal approximation.

**c.** The figure includes people still in education.

**d.** Percentages reported are valid percentages, DK and ‘would rather not say’ responses are omitted. On average, they amount to 4 % of the cases.

**Table 2. Patterns of online membership.**

|  |     | Use of website led to<br>join the LD |     |     |
|--|-----|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|
|  |     | No                                   | Yes |     |
| Online membership<br>application / renewal | No  | 148                                  | 32  | 180 |
|  | Yes | 148                                  | 264 | 412 |
|  |     | 296                                  | 296 | 592 |

**Table 3. Membership profile and online joining behaviour.**

|  | Values                                  | Sample A | Sample B | Sample C |
|--|---|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>Frequency of WWW use</i>                                | Once a month or less                    | 3        | 1        |          |
|  | Many times a day                        | 36       | 46       | 51       |
| <i>Political use of the WWW</i>                            |   | 81       | 91       | 92       |
| <i>News outlets: BBC Online</i>                            |   | 47       | 51       | 58       |
| <i>Access to the LD website</i>                            | Never                                   | 23       |          |          |
|  | A few times a month                     | 15       | 23       | 31       |
| <i>Traditional media used to keep in touch with the LD</i> | Letter                                  | 55       | 46       | 40       |
|  | Fax                                     | 11       | 6        | 4        |
|  | Phone                                   | 62       | 52       | 43       |
|  | Visit the party's offices / branches    | 34       | 24       | 16       |
|  | Face to face meetings / events          | 60       | 45       | 34       |
|  | Membership application / renewal        | 71       | 65       | 60       |
| <i>Involvement with the LibDems</i>                        | Meet with other members                 | 23       | 19       | 12       |
|  | Volunteer clerical work                 | 10       | 9        | 7        |
|  | Attend rallies / political events       | 15       | 12       | 8        |
|  | Attend fairs / social events            | 17       | 11       | 7        |
|  | Talk to colleagues/friends about the LD | 35       | 37       | 38       |
|  | Campaign for the party                  | 29       | 20       | 14       |
|  | Read Party's literature                 | 64       | 67       | 65       |
|  | Donate money                            | 49       | 39       | 37       |
| <i>Gender</i>  | Female                                  | 25       | 25       | 22       |
| <i>Age</i>   | Below 18                                | 2        | 4        | 6        |
|  | 18 to 25                                | 16       | 29       | 30       |
|  | 26 - 35                                 | 18       | 27       | 32       |
|  | 36 - 49                                 | 25       | 23       | 21       |
|  | 50 - 69                                 | 33       | 15       | 10       |
|  | Above 70                                | 5        | 2        | 1        |
| <i>Occupation</i>  | Student                                 | 14       | 25       | 30       |
|  | Retired                                 | 15       | 6        | 3        |
|  |   | N = 1353 | N = 633  | N = 303  |

Results reported are percentages. Only significant values are reported.

Sample A: N = 1353. Non-officials.

Sample B: N = 633. Non-officials who joined in the last five years or less.

Sample C: N = 304. Non-officials, who joined in the last five years or less, and were 'led by the web to join the party'.

**Table 4. Determinants of active web-join behaviour.**

|                             |     |        |
|-----------------------------|-----|--------|
| Age                         | *** |        |
| Below 18                    | **  | 17.633 |
| 18-25                       |     | 4.636  |
| 26-35                       | *   | 8.273  |
| 36-49                       |     | 4.850  |
| 50-69                       |     | 2.793  |
| Letter                      |     | .910   |
| Phone                       | **  | .731   |
| Literature                  | *   | .850   |
| LD website access frequency | *** | 1.767  |
| Offline party activity      | *** | .693   |
| Constant                    | **  | .098   |

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N = 633, 68.5 % cases correctly classified

Results reported are standardized log coefficients.

\* = sig. p. < 0.05. \*\* = sig. p. < 0.01, \*\*\* = sig. p < 0.001

**Table 5. Members' involvement in party activities <sup>a</sup>**

|  |      |
|--|------|
| Read party literature                            | 65 % |
| Donate money                                     | 49 % |
| Campaign for the party                           | 30 % |
| Meet with other members                          | 23 % |
| Talk to colleagues and friends about the LibDems | 35 % |
| Attend fairs / social events                     | 17 % |
| Attend rallies / political events                | 15 % |
| Volunteer clerical work                          | 10 % |
| Visit party offices                              | 5 %  |
| Other  | 5 %  |

a. Results reported refer to non office-holders, N = 1353.

**Table 6. Online political connectedness of Libdem members.**

|                                | Never       | Once | Once a month<br>or less | A few times a<br>month | Every<br>week | A few times<br>a week | Daily       |
|--------------------------------|-------------|------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| LibDem site                    | <b>19 %</b> | 12 % | 18 %                    | 24 %                   | 19 %          | 6 %                   | 2 %         |
| Political party <sup>(a)</sup> | <b>30 %</b> | 4 %  | 27 %                    | 15 %                   | 8 %           | 7 %                   | 9 %         |
| Local council                  | 38 %        | 8 %  | <b>27 %</b>             | 12 %                   | 5 %           | 5 %                   | 5 %         |
| Gov.t department               | 39 %        | 8 %  | <b>28 %</b>             | 15 %                   | 5 %           | 4 %                   | 2 %         |
| Parliament / MP                | 43 %        | 10 % | <b>26 %</b>             | 10 %                   | 4 %           | 4 %                   | 3 %         |
| News                           | 45 %        | 2 %  | 7 %                     | 9 %                    | <b>7 %</b>    | <b>11 %</b>           | <b>18 %</b> |
| Pressure group                 | <b>72 %</b> | 3 %  | 12 %                    | 7 %                    | 3 %           | 2 %                   | 1 %         |
| TU / Profess assoc.            | <b>78 %</b> | 3 %  | 11 %                    | 5 %                    | 2 %           | 1 %                   | 0 %         |
| Other                          | 90 %        |      | 2 %                     | 2 %                    | 1 %           | 2 %                   | 3 %         |

a. Includes the LD.

**Table 7. Access to, and usefulness of, LibDem website features.**

|   | <b>Membership<br/>access</b> | <b>Mean<br/>usefulness<br/>(0-6)</b> | <b>SD</b> | <b>N</b> |
|---|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Information on policy                       | 67 %                         | <b>4.3</b>                           | 1.3       | 1411     |
| Information on current events               | 58 %                         | 3.8                                  | 1.4       | 1218     |
| Information on party structure              | 54 %                         | 3.7                                  | 1.4       | 1137     |
| Information on online campaigns             | 52 %                         | <b>3.9</b>                           | 1.4       | 1086     |
| Newsletter                                  | 45 %                         | 3.7                                  | 1.4       | 956      |
| Feedback (e-mail feedback, surveys, polls)  | 40 %                         | 3.5                                  | 1.5       | 828      |
| Links to other sites                        | 39 %                         | 3.5                                  | 1.6       | 833      |
| Membership application / renewal            | 36 %                         | <b>3.9</b>                           | 1.8       | 757      |
| Commercial services endorsed by the LibDems | 30 %                         | <b>2.6</b>                           | 1.6       | 611      |
| Other                                       | 12 %                         | 1.7                                  | 2.3       | 248      |

**Table 8. Activities led by the use of e-mail and WWW.**

|   | E-mail<br>% of<br>members | Web<br>% of<br>members |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Contact other members                   | 12.8                      | 4.8                    |
| Volunteer some time / work              | 12.3                      | 4.8                    |
| Participate in a specific campaign      | 10.7                      | 5.9                    |
| Contact the party with views / comments | 10.3                      | 7.8                    |
| Write to the media                      | 8.3                       | 5.1                    |
| Attend a local branch meeting           | 7.7                       | 2.3                    |
| Vote in a party ballot / election       | 6.5                       | 7.3                    |
| Attend a rally or demonstration         | 4.8                       | 2.4                    |
|   | N = 1353                  | N = 1032               |

**Table 9. Predictors of E-mail activation scale.**

|  |     |       |
|--|-----|-------|
| Offline party activity                                   | *** | .31   |
| Gender dummy (female)                                    | *   | .06   |
| Frequency of e-mail use                                  | **  | .08   |
| Use of the Internet to keep in touch with political life | *** | .15   |
| Constant   | **  | - .56 |

N = 1353 (4df, F = 56 \*\*\*) R square = .143

Results reported are standardized Beta coefficients.

\* = sig. p. < 0.05. \*\* = sig. p. < 0.01, \*\*\* = sig. p < 0.001

**Table 10. Preference for using ICTs rather than traditional media for different party activities.**

|   | <b>Mean (0-6)</b> | <b>SD</b> | <b>Valid N ( a)</b> | <b>% DK</b> |
|---|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|-------------|
| Receive newsletter                        | 4.7               | 1.7       | 2039                | 2 %         |
| Contact the party                         | 4.5               | 1.7       | 1987                | 5 %         |
| Vote on organisational /<br>policy issues | 4.5               | 1.8       | 2004                | 4 %         |
| Vote to elect officials                   | 4.3               | 2.0       | 2010                | 4 %         |
| Membership renewal                        | 4.2               | 2.1       | 1978                | 5 %         |
| Join specific campaigns                   | 3.9               | 1.8       | 1913                | 8 %         |
| Discuss issues                            | 3.7               | 2.0       | 1940                | 7 %         |
| Meet other members                        | 3.1               | 2.1       | 1855                | 11 %        |

a. DK values are not computed. N = 2086.