Some of the best examples of using technologies to strengthen the democratic role can be found in the efforts of voluntary campaign organizations.

Not-for-Profits in the Democratic Polity

Two orthodoxies have constricted debates about contemporary democracy to an unhealthy degree. First, the consuming concern with the democratic deficit tends to narrow such debates to issues within the mainstream institutions of democratic life—parliaments, councils, voting, the relationship between legislators and executives, and citizen perceptions of politics and politicians. This thesis stresses the phenomenon of citizen disengagement with conventional politics, or the democratic deficit.

Three findings bring this thesis to life. The first is the rapid reduction of active party memberships since the 1950s. Even in instances with noted surges in party membership, such as the height of the recent popularity of Britain’s Labour Party, the numbers subsequently dive to pre-existing levels or lower. The second finding regards lower electoral turnouts. For example, the turnout for the last general election in the U.K. was the lowest for such an election in the 20th century. Moreover, the turnout, even for high-profile local and regional elections in the

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U.K., is now usually below 50% and still declining. The third finding is the underlying condition of reduced public trust in politicians and institutions of government. Western politics is frequently embroiled in scandal and corruption of a minor or major variety. There is also a rising sense of political failure, as politicians and governments fall short of their electoral promises. Indeed, opinion polls and other surveys consistently reveal the level of trust that citizens have for their politicians and the governments they form is quite low.

A recent study reported in [1] and conducted by the highly reputable Henley Centre and the pollster firm MORI, shows that public confidence in civil service has fallen from 46% of respondents expressing confidence in 1983 to 17% in 2000. Confidence in the legal system has fallen during the same period from 58% in 1983 to a current 22%; confidence in Parliament dropped from 54% to 14%. The same report reveals that by using predictive Internet segmentation, the deepest skepticism of established institutions of government and democracy lies in groups with the highest number of Internet users.

The second orthodoxy constricting the nature of democracy debates lies within the assumptive schemes of political scientists who have studied teledemocracy. Here, the paradigm shaping research and analysis has been direct democracy; a standard that has itself been shaped by assumptions about an apparently inevitable disintermediation brought about through telecommunications-intensive voting. Thus, the citizen is seen as establishing a direct line to governance and democracy to the detriment of representative and other intermediating institutions.

The core of the argument here is the contention that information and communications technologies (ICTs) are infusing all democratic impulses within the polity, whether those impulses are toward direct, representative, or pluralist forms of democracy. How are parliaments as an expression of representative democracy using ICTs to establish their position in the democratic polity [4]? Can we discern behavior by parliaments through the use of ICTs designed to counter the democratic deficit? Or, does the democratic deficit reveal the first signs that representative and parliamentary forms of democracy have reached a watershed formed in some considerable part from the effects of ICTs upon citizen and other institutional behavior? Within this second strand of orthodoxy is a scant understanding of how institutions—other than those in the conventional mainstream of the democratic polity—are providing enhanced forms of communication and information to discharge their claims as democratic actors. There are many such institutions that should be examined in this way in order to fully understand the nature of modern democracy and the significance ICTs have within it, including the media and telecommunications indu-
tries. The institutional type we examine here is the voluntary campaign organization, many of which have an explicit democratic mission. Our contention is these institutions are beginning to use ICTs in ways that are strengthening their democratic role.

**Campaigning Organizations in the Information Age**

Contrary to the democratic deficit, citizen engagement and trust in voluntary organizations is high. For example, research by the National Council for Voluntary Organizations found that 91% of respondents declared their trust in voluntary organizations [7]. That research also establishes some skepticism about these organizations, especially in regard to the close relationships that exist between them and the poorly trusted state sector. Nonetheless, the strong findings of high trust are in stark contrast to those that emerge from research into public trust of conventional institutions of democracy.

Evidence of active participation by citizens in this sector also supports a view that differs sharply with declining participation in conventional politics and democracy. A survey in 1997 [6] showed there had been a marginal decline in volunteering throughout the 1990s, from 51% of the population in 1991 to 48% in 1997, but the intensity of volunteering rose sharply in the same period. In 1991, the average volunteer gave 2.7 hours per week to volunteering whereas in 1997 the average was 4 hours. Moreover, our own recently completed survey of this sector, including associated in-depth case studies, suggests a rising number of issue/interest groups emerging within the polity. In the sectors we examined through case studies conducted under the aegis of the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council’s Virtual Society initiative [3], we found considerable evidence of burgeoning competition caused by new entrants. We found this to be especially true in ICT-intensive subsectors of the voluntary sector, such as telephone-enabled counseling services targeted at specific social groups.

We also found evidence of this sector’s growing use of ICTs to strengthen its influence both on public policy discourse and on the day-to-day actions of governments. Amnesty International, the human rights campaigner, has developed new *urgent action systems* enabling the organization and its supporters to become more efficient and effective in raising cases of human rights abuses. Specific knowledge of complex situations and the commitment of supporters to causes worldwide are brought together through new information resources. In addition, the information flows at a speed that ensures cases are brought to governmental and public attention.

Another example of the impact of ICTs comes from the National Children’s Bureau where intensive use of email within the network, including its wider network of relationships to local governments and other agencies, is enabling rapid response to government policy proposals. It does so in ways that allow for a collective and thereby more powerful response to government proposals than would otherwise be the case and at a speed that enables increasingly tight response deadlines to be met.

A final example of the way this sector is playing out a broadly democracy-enhancing role involves the environmental campaigning organization, Friends of the Earth (FOE). FOE was the only organization in the sector among our eight case studies that explicitly identified itself as pursuing democratic objectives. FOE operates as a campaigning organization intent on identifying the information needs of its geographically dispersed membership and the wider public.

Factory Watch, an application found on FOE’s Web site, offers data on local pollution levels against post-code data with the objective of raising the debate about pollution in localities where both campaigning and FOE membership are slight. In this way, FOE ties itself to a commitment to widening public discourse on issues that would otherwise concern only the highly educated. By democratizing the environmental agenda in such a way, FOE is explicitly bringing information resources to citizens. Moreover, FOE

*The core of the argument is the contention that ICTs are infusing all democratic impulses within the polity, whether those impulses are toward direct, representative, or pluralist forms of democracy.*
is doing so in places where the environmental agenda should be at its most intense, given the high levels of pollution that occur in those places yet where, historically, there has been a dearth of active awareness.

Looking More Deeply

The research findings discussed here point to a range of contributions made to democratic activity in the polity by voluntary organizations. Five organizations were selected for a Web site study, each of which was a high-profile campaigning organization in a field of activity in which there was a live issue in April 2000. Table 1 lists the organizations alongside their field of activity and the issue at that time.

The Web site of each of these organizations was scrutinized against a common set of criteria. Collectively, these criteria reveal the extent of democratic engagement by these organizations. Key findings from this study were:

- Only one organization, Greenpeace, explicitly pursued democratic objectives.
- All organization Web sites contained very high-quality information on their issue.
- All provided contacts internal to the organization for follow-up information.
- All provided information and advice on how to campaign and who to lobby, including links to the parliamentary process.
- Access to the site and navigation around the site were generally good.
- There was little direct democracy on these sites. Views were not solicited, issue preferences were neither requested nor recorded, and only weak discussion fora were available.
- Most surprisingly, all of these sites provided hotlinks to independent sources of information. Thus, access to an abundance of information on the issue in question was being facilitated, without regard to whether that information was supportive or opposed to the policy preference of the organization itself.

Having previously conducted extensive research on parliamentary Web sites for the new Scottish Parliament [4, 5] we are in a position to compare and contrast the democratic characteristics of these different sites. We do so at a general level, recognizing that parliamentary sites vary significantly. Nonetheless, we have been able to draw conclusions at this general
level. Table 2 offers these comparisons in simplified form.

**Conclusion**

We began this short article with a discussion of the so-called democratic deficit, a condition affecting the mainstream political institutions of many Western polities. Our research evidence shows that parliaments, as expressed through their Web sites, are locked into a parliamentary model of democracy that prevents a more informative, expressive, political, knowledge-developing and activist approach to relationships with citizens. The research findings on voluntary organizations, however, found attachment to the development of the characteristics of strong democracy.

We established earlier that citizens most negative about contemporary democratic institutions are the heaviest users of the Internet. It follows from the evidence presented here that those cyberoriented citizens are more likely to find democratic stimulation from the voluntary sector than from the time-honored institution of parliament. Those citizens will thereby further contribute to the simultaneous decline in democratic importance of parliament and the rise of voluntary sector democracy.

**References**


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