

World Forum for Democracy 2013 Issues Paper

Exploiting the web as a tool of democracy: new ways forward in the study and practice of digital democracy

Amanda Clarke, University of Oxford

Table of contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Part One — The decline of traditional democratic politics	4
Part Two — The rise and decline of cyberenthusiasm	10
Part Three — A new approach for the practice and study of digital democracy.....	12
Part Four — Using the web to undermine democracy.....	16
Part Five — Recommendations.....	17

Executive Summary

Around the world, voter turnout rates are dropping, party membership is waning, and citizens report shockingly low levels of trust and satisfaction in their political leaders. At the same time, we read reports of impressive protest coordinated via the web, we see political news exchanged on social media sites, sign online petitions, and donate to crowdfunding initiatives. What role does the Internet play in democracy at a time when many 'offline' democratic activities are on the decline? This report addresses this question, and in doing so, offers a new way forward for the study and practice of digital democracy.

The report develops in five parts. Part one provides high-level, global data describing declining rates of 'traditional' modes of political participation such as voting, party and union membership, and advocacy. Part two outlines how, despite promises otherwise, the first phase of Internet-enabled political participation failed to remedy these worrying trends in political participation.

Part three argues that the web still has an important role to play in contemporary democracy, and that the best way to define this role begins with a discussion of the web's affordances as a communications medium. The web enables individuals with common interests to form communities that can serve as venues for political engagement in non-political spaces. The web reduces the costs of information exchange and collaboration, ushering in innovative models of citizen engagement. And finally, the web not only acts as a platform for democratic engagement, but also serves as a tool to study such engagement. Big data and web-based research methods offer new insight into the mechanics of collective action, insight that could help political institutions and civil society better design engagement initiatives in the years to come.

Part four reflects on the web's affordances again, this time noting how they can be exploited to undermine democratic ideals. State surveillance, online censorship and accountability issues raised by web-based engagement all suggest that we should not give into technologically deterministic analyses which presume the web necessarily supports a stronger democracy.

Part five concludes the report with a series of recommendations. Researchers need to better integrate web-based research methods and data generated by the web into their analyses, using these new opportunities to develop policy recommendations for civil society and political institutions. At the same time, civil society groups need to think more creatively and strategically about their use of digital media for recruitment, fundraising, advocacy and when scrutinizing the actions of governments. Finally, as new venues for participation emerge, and new insight into the mechanics of engagement is revealed, governments and legislatures will need to reform, and potentially abandon, current practices of representative democracy in order that the troubling trends with which the report begins can be reversed.

Introduction

Is democracy in decline? Voter turnout rates are dwindling, parties struggle to attract members, and citizens frequently express their mistrust of political institutions. In this context, it is certainly hard to conclude that democracy is 'alive and well'. That said, it is equally difficult to argue that democracy is in peril at a time when 'everyday citizens' talk politics in online spaces, digital technologies give citizens new opportunities to feed into the work of political institutions, online petitions receive millions of signatures, and social media are used to coordinate mass protests. 'Traditional' activities associated with representative democracy are in decline, but this decline may be offset or reversed by a new brand of digital democracy that has emerged in recent years. This report explores these trends and transitions, and offers a new way forward for the study and practice of digital democracy.

Part one outlines data evidencing the decline of democratic politics in recent decades. Fewer and fewer people vote in elections, join parties, and sign petitions. At the same time, more and more people express disinterest and dissatisfaction in their politics.

Part two outlines arguments made by early commentators on digital democracy, exploring the hopeful claims of the cyberenthusiasts, who argued that the web would revive contemporary politics, and the arguments of the cyberskeptics, whose empirical studies suggested the web was not a silver bullet solution for struggling democracies.

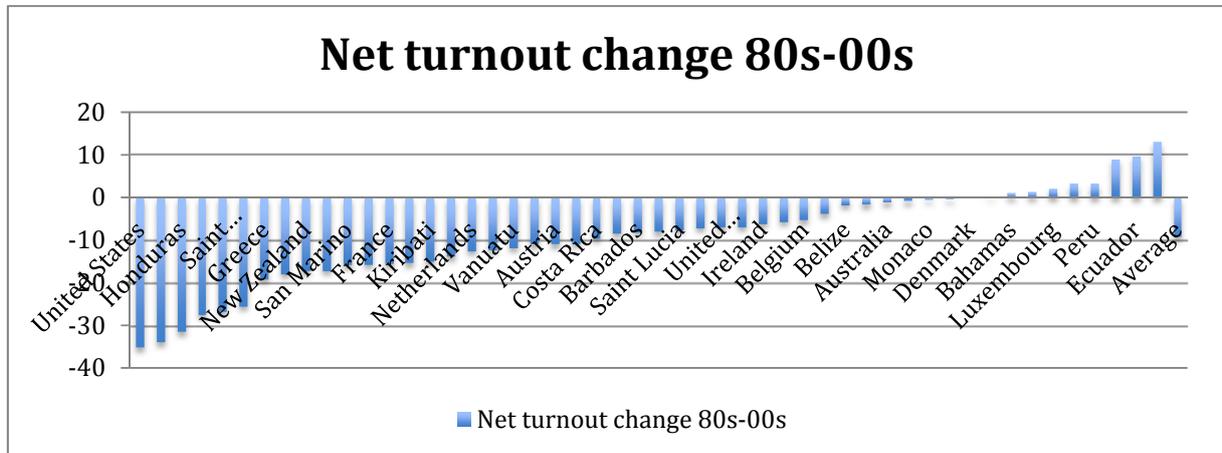
Part three follows the lead of recent research, and moves beyond the cyberenthusiast/cyberskeptic dichotomy that dominated early study of digital democracy. Here, the report argues that we should not evaluate the web as a tool of democracy through the lens of earlier, offline models. Rather a more fruitful line of enquiry in this field begins with a consideration of the affordances of the web, and asks how those can be exploited to bolster democratic engagement today. Adopting this approach, the report offers three examples in which the web's unique characteristics as a communications medium offer hope for democratic practice today: as a venue for politics in non-political spaces; by enabling innovative forms of citizen engagement such as crowdsourcing; and as a tool through which mechanisms of democratic engagement can be better understood and evaluated.

Part four offers a warning, cautioning against technologically deterministic approaches which ignore how the web can be exploited to undermine democratic ideals. This sets the stage for the part five of the report, which lays out a series of recommendations for researchers, civil society, and governments and legislatures, outlining how each of these players can better exploit the web as a tool of democratic engagement in the years to come.

Part One — The decline of traditional democratic politics

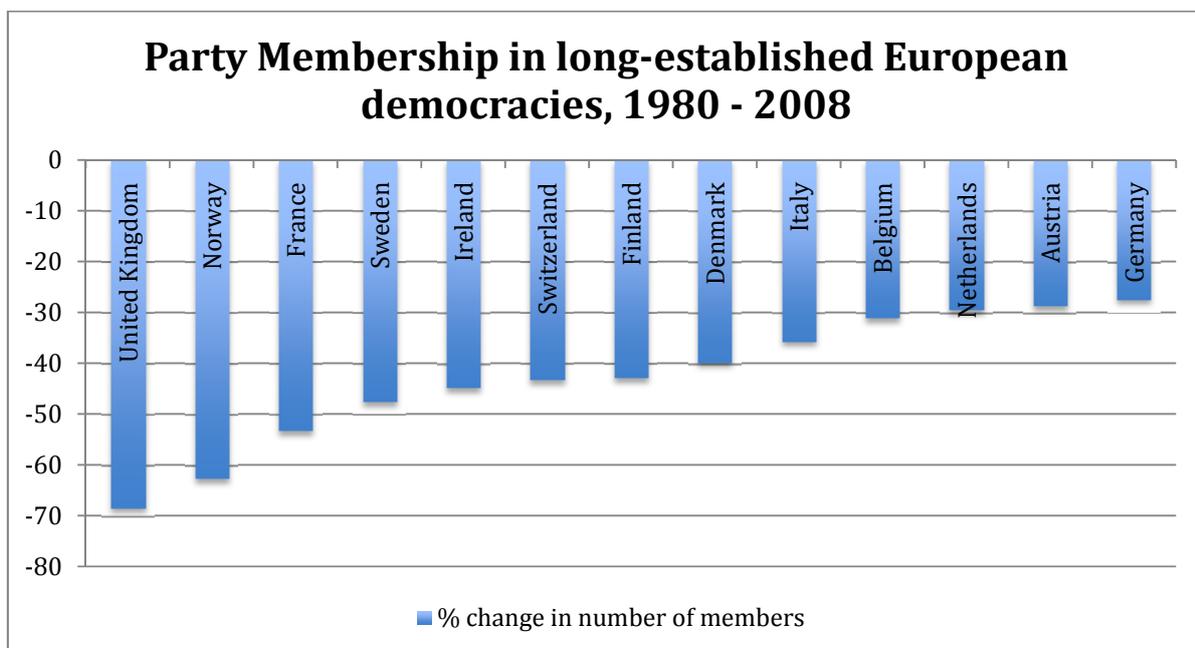
Turnout in democratic elections across the world has, on average, declined since 1980. Of 49 democracies¹, 40 saw turnout decline in elections to national parliaments between 1980-

84 and 2007-2013. On average, turnout declined by ten percentage points across these 49 countries.²

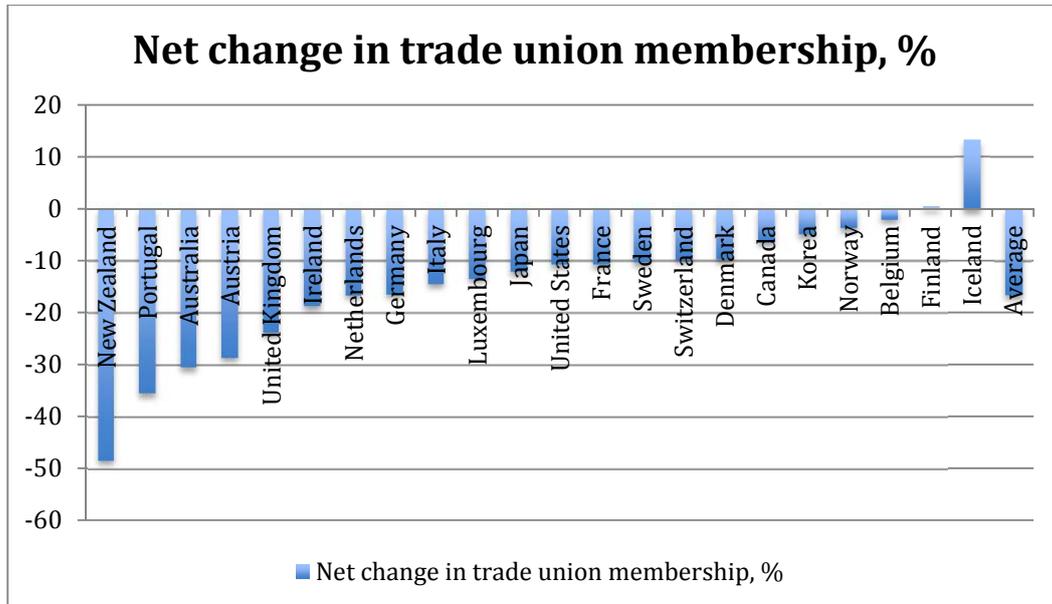


Research focusing on the African continent echoes this trend. From 2000-2009, turnout in general elections across a selection of African countries declined by 5 percentage points.³

Drops in voter turnout are not surprising given dwindling levels of trust in the political parties listed on election ballots. From 1990 to 2006, those who reported having a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in political parties dropped from 49% to 27%.⁴ This may explain why membership to political parties has also declined substantially over the past few decades, especially in Europe. 13 long-established European democracies all show a steep decline in membership⁵.

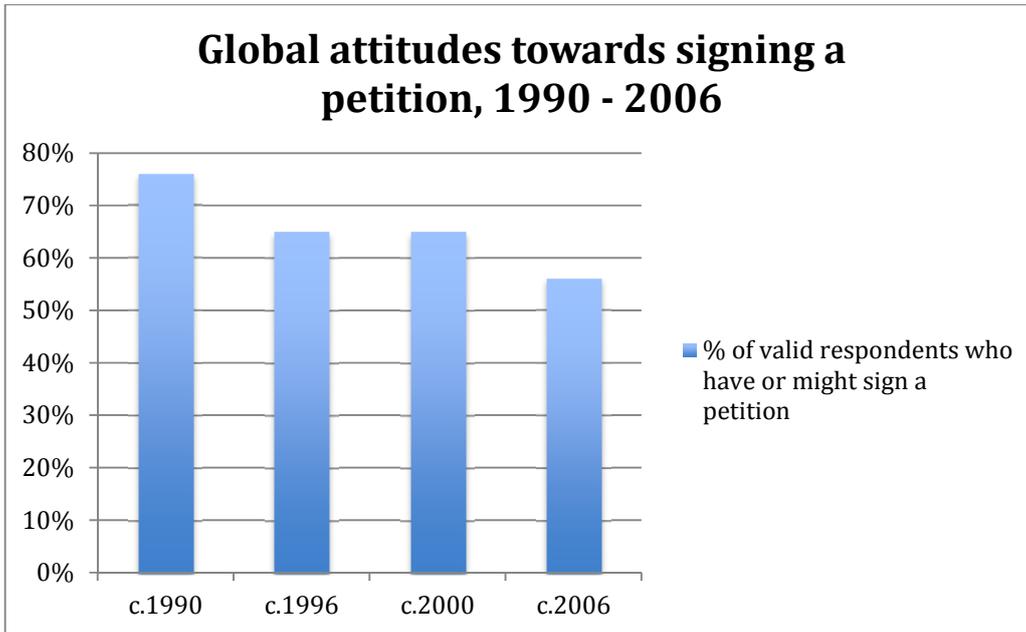


Of course, political parties are not the only associations that provide venues for political engagement. Trade unions, for example, have also traditionally fulfilled this role. Unfortunately, trends here are equally concerning. Since 1980, the proportion of salary earners that are trade union members has dropped in all but two cases across 22 nations surveyed by the OECD. On average, trade union membership in these countries declined by 14 percentage points.⁶

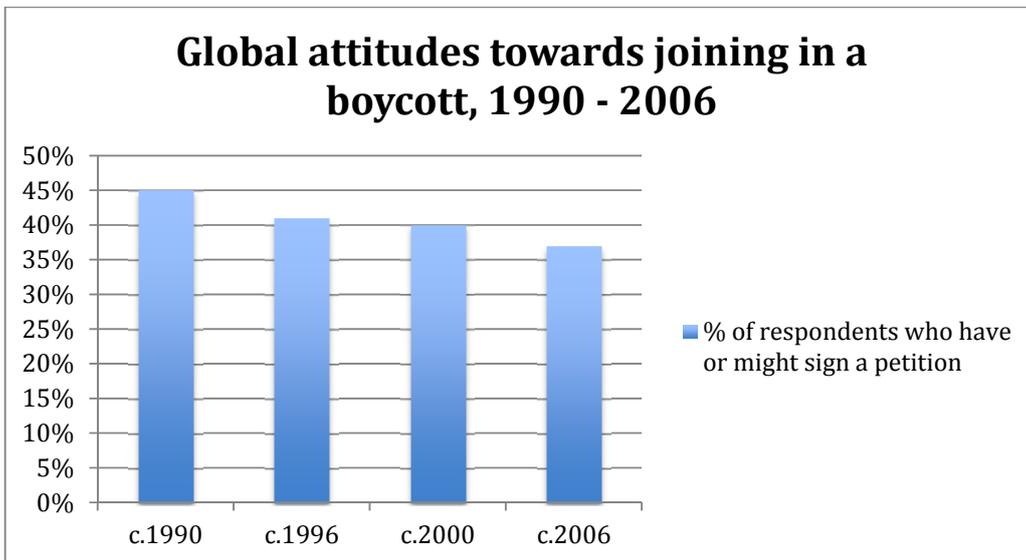


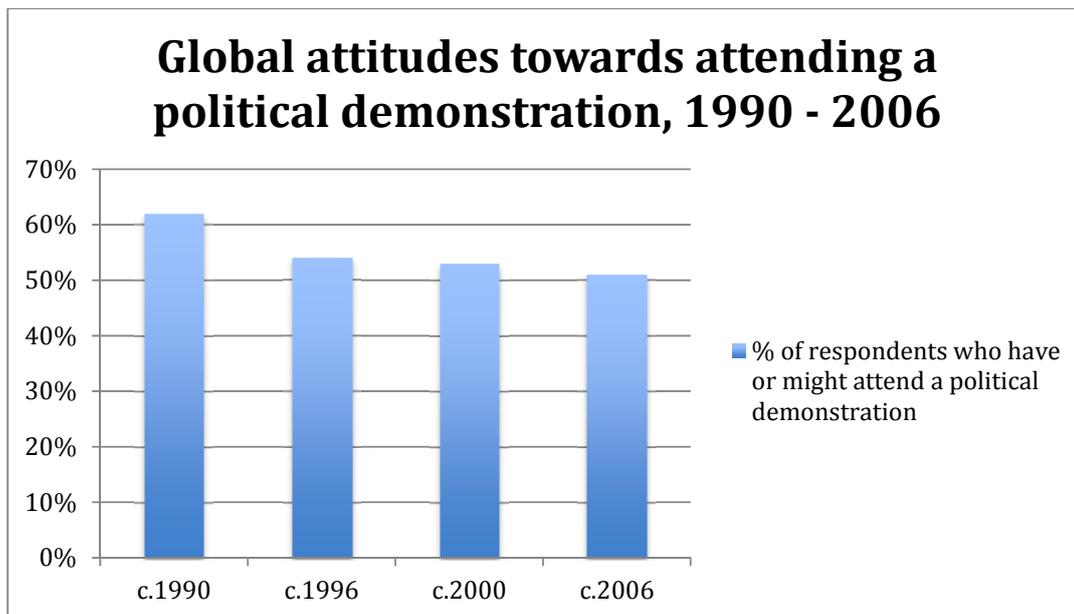
The data is equally daunting if we consider individuals' willingness to engage in traditional democratic activities like petition signing, boycotting, and attendance at demonstrations.

Between the late 80s and the late 2000s, those who reported that they might, or have already, signed a petition, dropped 20 percentage points, from 76% to just over half, at 56%.⁷



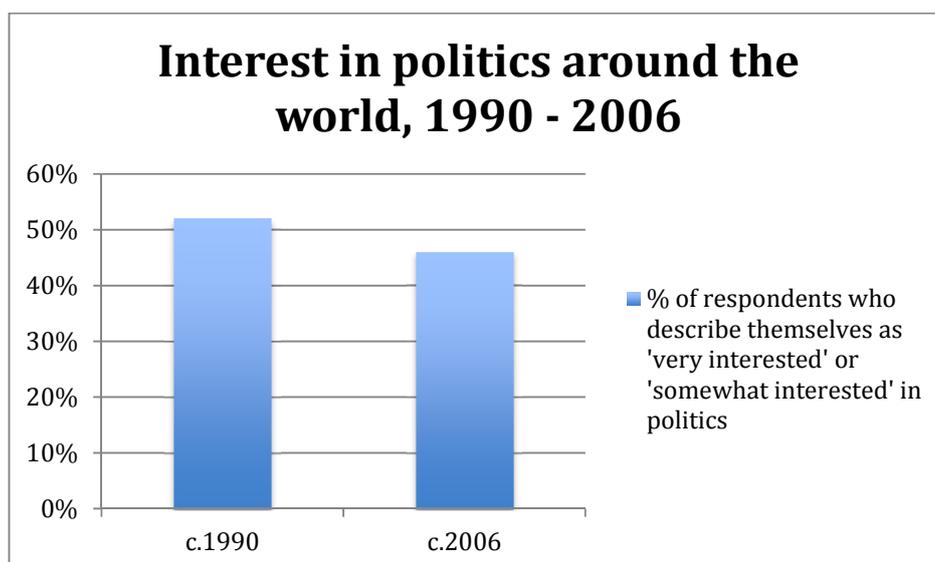
Similarly, fewer and fewer people have joined or would join a boycott or attend a political demonstration, two classic modes of offline participation that have traditionally undergirded healthy democracies. Here the declines are less striking, but the general downward trend remains. Whereas 45% of people said that they might, or had participated in, a boycott in the early 1990s, only 37% said the same in the late mid-late 2000s. Over the same period of time, those who said they had or might participate in a political demonstration dropped from 62% to 51%.⁸



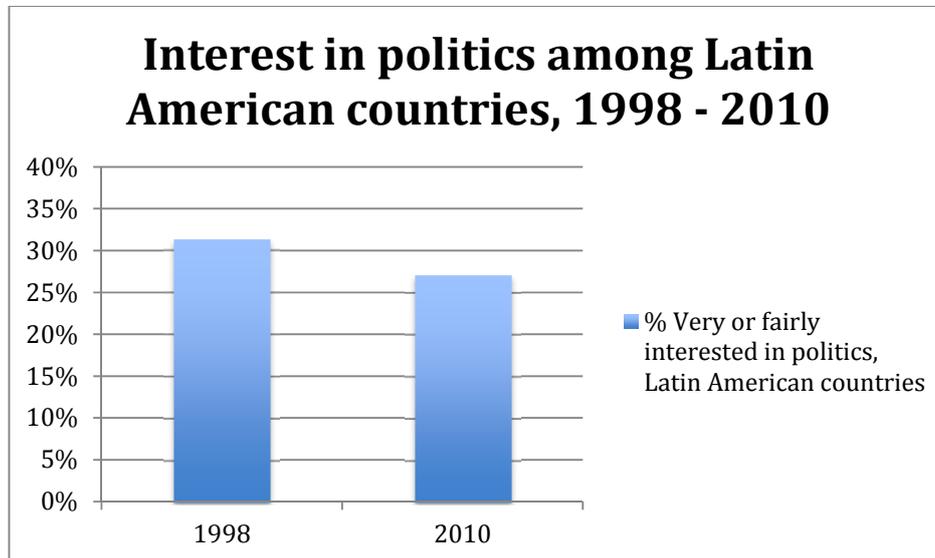


Turning from activities to attitudes, downward trends continue. In this case, attitudes toward politics have degraded less steeply than other trends discussed. However, attitudes towards politics were so low to begin with, that the less striking decline is hardly cause for comfort.

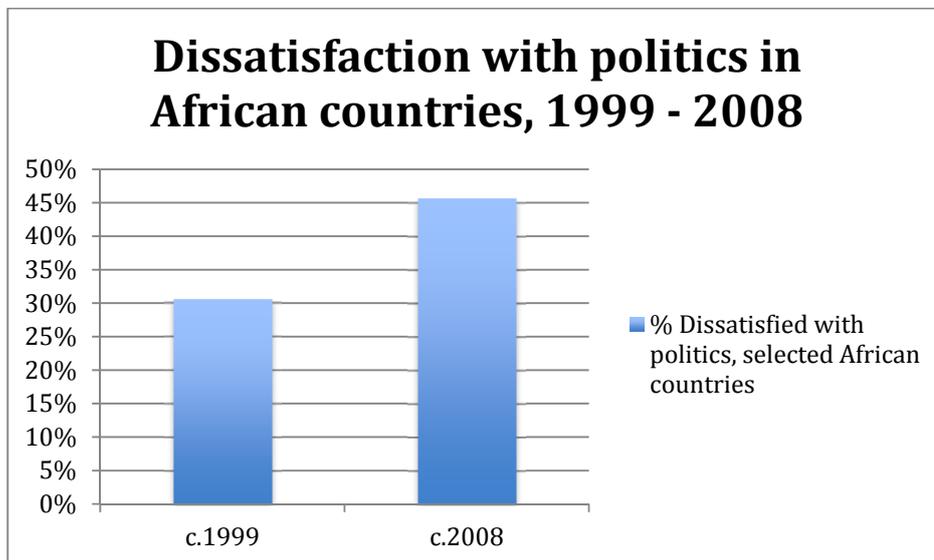
In the early 90s, the World Values Survey reported that, globally, only 52% of respondents would describe themselves as 'very interested' or 'somewhat interested' in politics. By the mid-late 2000s, this figure had dropped to 46%.⁹



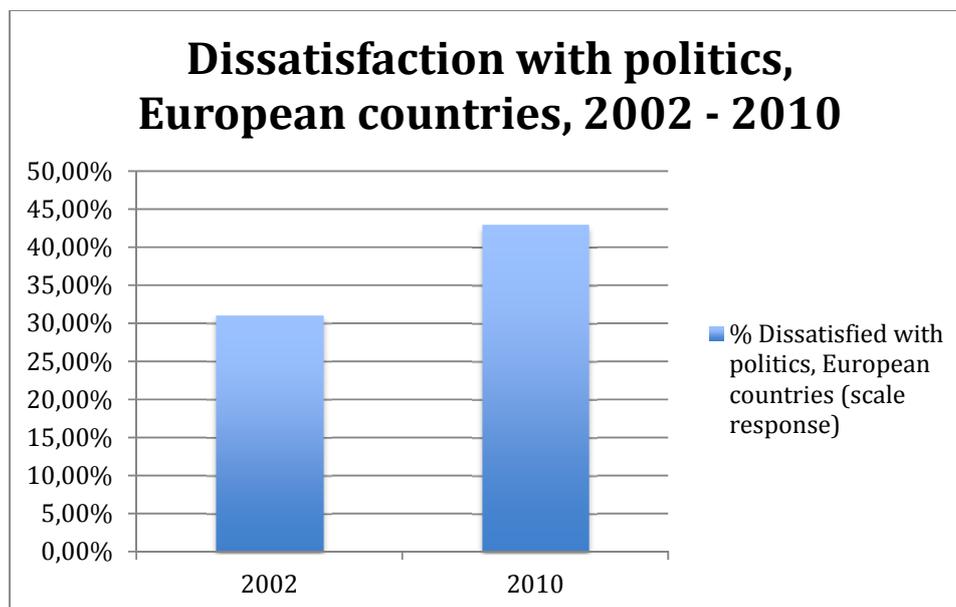
Regionally focused studies also exhibit this trend. In 1998, a mere 31% of Latin Americans described themselves as 'very' or 'fairly' interested in politics. In 2010, this percentage dropped even lower, to 27%.¹⁰



As interest in politics declines globally, regional studies also suggest that dissatisfaction with politics has risen. For example, across twelve African countries¹¹, dissatisfaction with politics rose by 15 percentage points over a ten-year period. In 1999, 31% of Africans surveyed were dissatisfied with politics. By 2008, this figure rose to 46% of those surveyed.¹²



The picture is no rosier in Europe. The proportion of Europeans that reported being dissatisfied with politics rose 12 percentage points, from 31% to 43 %, between 2002 and 2010.



Of course, ‘dissatisfaction with politics’ is certainly not the enemy of democracy. Far from it—some of history’s democratic triumphs were born of extreme dissatisfaction with the politics of the day. This logic was not lost on the earliest commentators on the Internet and democracy, many of whom assumed that the web would usher in a new brand of politics that dissatisfied citizens would eagerly adopt, reversing the worrying trends explored so far.

Part Two — The rise and decline of cyberenthusiasm

In the early phases of widespread Internet use, academics, governments, think tanks and media outlets argued that the web would usher in a new age of democratic participation, remedying the worrying trends witnessed in preceding decades. These so-called ‘cyberenthusiasts’ argued their case along a number of lines.

Some focused on the web’s capacity to host deliberative dialogues amongst large groups of individuals, and argued that this would improve upon standard consultation and engagement practices at work in governing institutions, thereby proving more appealing to citizens disillusioned by these older practices.

Others argued that the web, with its capacity to host rapid real-time, anywhere, interactions would enable citizens and their political leaders to interact more regularly and openly. The effects would be threefold. Citizens would be better able to communicate their needs and preferences to their political representatives. Having received this input, these representatives would make better decisions that more accurately reflected the will of the people, and citizens, in turn, would develop a greater sense of trust in their political system.

In other cases, cyberenthusiasts focused on the web as a democratic publishing platform. In particular, blogging was seen as a powerful tool that would give alternative perspectives an audience, contributing to a more competitive marketplace of political ideas than had been offered by traditional media. In addition to empowering the formerly voiceless, this new marketplace of ideas would give consumers of political information a broader menu to choose from, leading to a more pluralistic form of politics.

In many cases, cyberenthusiasts dwelled on the concept of 'digital natives', a term that some have applied to the millennial generation given the ubiquitous role that information communication technologies (ICTs) tend to play in the lives of those born from the early 1980s onwards. Drawing on this concept, authors argued that the Internet would prove particularly potent as a means of engaging youth, whose withdrawal from traditional offline politics had been well documented. According to this argument, the web would give youth a politics that was more in tune with their expectations and preferences.

And finally, a number of commentators predicted that the virtues generated by online political activity would carry over to offline politics. Participation in digital democracy would be a gateway to participation in analogue democracy, raising voter turnout rates and engagement with political institutions such as parties and legislatures.

Of course, the data presented in Part one of this report suggest that the Internet has not been a panacea for the complex, intertwined, and deeply-rooted conditions that have undermined the quality of traditional democratic participation over the past few decades. The advent of the Internet did not fix democratic politics, despite rhetoric suggesting otherwise.

This reality provides fodder for a number of critiques of these early cyberenthusiast accounts, as so-called 'cyberskeptics' note that the rise of Internet access has not caused spikes in 'real world' politics such as voting rates and party membership.¹³

Similarly, researchers have argued that the Internet has not necessarily been a causal factor in youth's decision to participate in politics, as often, young people participating in digital politics are already active in offline politics. At the same time, disengaged youth do not suddenly become interested in politics because it moves online¹⁴. Coupled with research that questions young people's digital literacy, arguments that rely on assumptions about 'digital natives' and political engagement have largely been discredited.¹⁵

Other cyberskeptics invoke data that question the extent to which opportunities for online citizen engagement are enjoyed equally by different segments of the population, noting that those who engage online are often the same as those that engage offline¹⁶. In this case, the Internet might actually broaden the gap between those who are politically active and those that are not as the former benefit from new opportunities to participate in their democracies via the web, and the latter continue on with life as usual.

Similarly, other researchers argue that far from generating a more pluralistic form of politics, the web merely reinforces divisive partisanship by creating ‘echo chambers’ of political ideology, and empowering already dominant political voices, such as the mainstream media and political parties, while marginalizing those outside traditional centers of political power.¹⁷

Suffice to say, the cyberskeptics offer a decidedly less hopeful analysis of the Internet’s potential as a tool of political participation than that which was promised by early commentators on digital democracy. Their analyses suggest that politics online is ‘politics as usual’, with few democratic benefits flowing from digitally-enabled political participation.

Part Three — A new approach for the practice and study of digital democracy

While the cyberskeptics should be commended for bringing more nuanced and evidence-based analyses to the study of digital democracy, we should not necessarily discount the web as a tool of democracy simply because it does not meet the overblown expectations that characterized early discussions in this area. Recognizing this point, researchers working in the field of digital democracy have, for the most part, moved beyond the strict enthusiast/skeptic dichotomy that shaped earlier debates, acknowledging that the web plays a role in democracy, but that the magnitude and nature of that role is unclear. More and more nuance is added to the discussion, as researchers ask, ‘Do social media foster engagement more than static websites do?’; ‘Does digital democracy vary in its effects by level of government/issue/region/characteristics of participant?’; ‘How are political parties/legislatures/governments using the web to engage the public?’. In some cases, researchers find that the Internet enriches democracy, in others, its effects are found to be neutral or even detrimental to democracy.

Despite variation in their focus and conclusions, what ties so many of these studies together—and indeed, what links them back into early enthusiast/skeptic debates—is their attempts to measure digital democracy by the standards of offline democracy; researchers focus on classic offline political activities and evaluate them as they are translated into digital form. Accordingly the gaze of these researchers is typically confined to traditional political institutions, such as parties, legislatures and governments; to traditional political actors, such as elected representatives, activists, and advocacy groups; and to traditional democratic activities, such as explicit political debate, and participation in protest or consultations.

This may seem a reasonable starting point. These researchers are, after all, attempting to determine how the Internet supports or undermines our traditions of democracy. On the other hand, the web has proven itself most powerful when we do not simply digitize offline phenomena, but instead, re-imagine old traditions, and create new ones by capitalizing on the unique affordances of this communications medium. Wikipedia has become a much-used resource because it capitalizes on the web’s capacity to host low-cost information exchange and collaboration, and not because it digitized the production and distribution models of offline

encyclopedias. Amazon is not simply a digital version of an analogue bookstore, but instead exploits the web's affordances to crowdsource reviews and better understand its customers.

What are the web's affordances exactly? Or, put differently, what is the web 'good at'? The web enables network effects; the production, collection and analysis of large-scale datasets that describe our activities online (big data); and reduces the costs of identifying and coordinating large numbers of actors with shared interests and goals. If we begin a discussion of digital democracy by considering these affordances, we can identify a new range of activities and practices that serve democracy in ways that digital democracy research has, thus far, largely ignored. Three examples are explored here.

1. Politics in non-political spaces

Reduced barriers to identifying and coordinating likeminded individuals in forums, blogs, and via Twitter hashtags not only enable even the most niche groups of individuals to build thriving online communities, but also, for these communities to host inconspicuous 'everyday politics'. Scott Wright of the University of Leicester (UK) has discussed this phenomenon, noting that non-political spaces online can become sites for those typically disengaged from politics to discuss the issues of the day as they relate to themselves and their online community's interests¹⁸. The UK's Mumsnet¹⁹ is a strong example of such 'politics in non-political spaces'. A forum originally intended to serve as a venue for parents to share parenting tips and support, this site has become a hub for parents to engage in political debates on issues such as food labeling, childcare policies, and advertising aimed at children. In this case, a site that is not conspicuously 'political' provides mothers—a busy demographic that can be difficult to engage—with a gateway into current political debates. That said, as most studies of digital democracy look for traditional offline political activities as they manifest online, sites like Mumsnet rarely fall on their radar. Studies instead evaluate the Internet's role in democracy by looking at political blogs, news sites, and explicitly political groups on Twitter and Facebook. These are important sites of enquiry, to be sure, but they only tell part of the story.

2. Alternative modes of political participation

Researchers have tended to evaluate digital democracy with pre-conceived notions about 'what counts' as democratic engagement. Studies evaluate the extent to which the web supports models of deliberative, direct and representative democracy, theories and practices that have well-established traditions in the world of offline politics. However, if we consider what 'the web is good at'—reducing costs of coordination and the real-time exchange of rich data—a broad new range of engagement practices arise which do not fit neatly into the models inherited from offline politics.

Many of these practices can be placed under the broad umbrella term of 'crowdsourcing', defined as initiatives that solicit resources (intellectual, financial, or otherwise) from a group of individuals or organizations, to produce some outcome, such as a decision, a product or a process.

Beth Noveck, author of *Wiki Government*²⁰, and US President Obama's former Chief Technology Officer, is a commonly cited advocate of web-based crowdsourcing. As she argues, crowdsourcing is a useful technique for tapping into the niche skills and insight of particular groups of citizens on particular issues that are of interest to them. She offers the example of the US governments' Peer To Patent system, in which the US Patent and Trademark Office engages citizens to better handle the massive number of patent applications they receive. In this case, participants are engaged to collaborate with government in solving a problem that they cannot effectively address on their own. Noveck calls this 'collaborative democracy', and suggests that the same model could be applied to engage many other niche groups in society. Crowdfund the evaluation of daycare programs from parents. Crowdfund ideas for student loan schemes from students. Arguably, if institutions adopted this approach, and regularly engaged non-representative samples of individuals on niche issues that they are affected by, we may find that online crowdsourcing leads to general increases in rates of participation, achieved through diverse, specialized engagement efforts that focus in on particular groups and particular issues. In the case of governments, this might mean engaging niche groups with special knowledge of particular policy problems—as in the Peer To Patent example. For legislatures and political parties, the niche group may represent certain segments of the population whose unique interests and needs they hope to better understand and address.

Another approach to crowdsourcing focuses on reducing the barriers that cause many individuals to refrain from democratic participation. Put differently, these efforts try to make it as easy as possible for individuals to contribute to a crowdsourcing effort, by capitalizing on the affordances of the web and related technologies. The Air Quality Egg²¹, a small, egg-shaped sensor that takes geo-tagged readings of air quality and sends these via the web to a central database, is one such example. The Air Quality Egg's effectiveness depends on it being present in many different parts of a region. Hence, its creators devised it such that it could be 'adopted' by citizens, who keep the eggs at their homes to generate air quality readings. This is a relatively passive act of participation, and when evaluated using traditional models of democratic engagement, it would likely not fit the bill. Citizens are not engaging in deliberative dialogue about their preferences and needs, nor are they directly voting on a policy issue, or advocating to a politician to represent their interests. Yet, by participating in the scheme, individuals contribute to a larger advocacy effort, helping build the datasets required to put air quality on the agenda of decision-makers, and to inform smarter public policy in this area.

Sites like FixMyStreet²² follow a similar model. Here, web developers at the UK's MySociety²³ offer the public a platform through which they can easily report problems like potholes and graffiti to local councils. Again, the initiative capitalizes on the web's capacity to host real-time, low-cost information exchange. Again, the act itself does not fit the mold of traditional acts of democratic engagement. Yet, as is the case with the Air Quality Egg, individuals that feed into FixMyStreet are contributing back to their communities, drawing on the Internet to inform the decisions and actions of decision makers in ways not possible before the web and related technologies.

3. *The Internet as research tool*

The web has proven itself a powerful research tool, both as a platform from which impressive amounts of data can be harvested, and as a platform on which innovative research can be conducted. Given these affordances, the Internet should be viewed not only as a tool of democratic engagement, but also as a tool for studying and evaluating such engagement.

Some scholars have begun to capitalize on this potential. The Oxford Internet Institute and the London School of Economics' 'Government on the Web'²⁴ project used web-based experiments to better understand the conditions under which individuals are likely to participate in collective action, such as joining a protest, or donating to a cause. They identified psychological variables at play in such decisions, as well as a role for social information cues in promoting participation (for example, notifying potential participants how many others had already contributed.)²⁵

These researchers also use big data scraped from the web to better understand the dynamics of collection action. In one study, analysis of data harvested from over 8000 petitions hosted on an E-petition site revealed that the number of signatures received on a petition's first day is an important factor in determining its long-term success, meaning that the most successful petitions get lots of support early on.²⁶

In these examples, the web gives researchers a platform for conducting research (in the case of experiments), and a new source of data (in the case of the petition study), from which important insight into the mechanics of collective action can be drawn. Such research can then feed into the design of engagement initiatives, both offline and online, with the aim of increasing participation rates. If digital technologies continue to play a key coordinating role in protest in the future, as was the case in the recent Occupy movement, the Arab awakening, and in protests against tuition hikes and austerity measures, research such as this will become ever more important. In this case, the web will not only prove important to protest movements for its role as a coordinating device, but also because of the insight it offers into the levers that must be pulled for such protest to gain widespread momentum.

In addition to the insight the web gives into the dynamics of citizens' democratic participation, the Internet also provides new tools and data that can be used to study the institutions governing these citizens, providing a new avenue to hold these institutions to account. Researchers use hyperlink analysis to determine which types of organizations political parties link to on their official websites, revealing the issues and ideologies informing parties' mandates²⁷. Other researchers harvest data from government social media accounts, and use this data to determine who governments network with online, what types of information they share (and withhold), and the extent to which such channels are used for meaningful engagement with the public.²⁸ As parties, legislatures and governments continue to grow their online presences, the data trails these efforts produce will provide new and important avenues for researchers, journalists and citizens when they scrutinize political institutions.

The three examples listed above suggest that a more fruitful discussion of the web as a tool of democracy begins not by a consideration of traditional democratic activities, and the role of the web therein. Rather, when we begin with a consideration of the web's unique affordances, a new range of democratic applications arise, all of which are born in some way of these affordances. So, what is the web good at? It helps people with common concerns establish communities, which can, in some cases, enable political engagement to emerge in non-political spaces. The web also reduces barriers to coordination and information exchange, opening new avenues for citizens to contribute to their governing institutions in non-conventional ways. Finally, the web is a powerful research platform, offering sources of data and tools of analysis that shed new light on old problems plaguing our democracies, and whose insights could greatly improve the design of engagement initiatives in the years to come.

Part Four — Using the web to undermine democracy

The previous section argues that we are better placed to evaluate the web as a tool of democratic engagement when we begin by considering its affordances as a communications medium. But in adopting this beginning point, we should also be mindful of the ways in which the web's affordance can undermine the values and tenets of democratic society.

Perhaps most obviously, given recent revelations from US whistleblower Edward Snowden, it is evident that the web can be used by states to undertake expansive surveillance programmes to an extent not possible before. As the web and related technologies increasingly punctuate human society, with so much of our social and professional lives leaving behind digital trails, the scope for privacy violations is greatly amplified. If such surveillance becomes, or is already, mainstream across the globe, it is likely that citizens' trust in political institutions will dwindle further. And without guarantees of privacy, online coordination of protest or circulation of government criticism will likely halt in those places where authoritarian governments already threaten the security of dissidents.

Similarly, when discussing the affordances of the web, it is important to remember that these affordances are not enjoyed equally across the globe. Sophisticated state-sponsored censorship programs restrict which sites can be accessed by citizens, and how. The web is not a uniform global phenomenon—different citizens have access to different webs depending on the state they call home. Where access to certain pieces of information, to certain sites, and to certain functionalities of the web is restricted, the web may prove itself a much less potent tool of democratic empowerment.

And finally, enthusiasm around new forms of citizen engagement made possible by the web should be tempered by a discussion of the accountability issues these raise. While reduced costs of collaboration may make it possible for political institutions to crowdsource funds, policy ideas, and, in the case of government in particular, public services, it is not necessarily clear that such efforts will empower the public, so much as it offloads responsibility for these

tasks to the public. Who is accountable when the product of a crowdsourcing effort fails? Are political institutions inclined to adopt these practices because it reduces the workload—and corresponding responsibility and accountability—that accompanies traditional production models in which they are the primary actor?

These three issues suggest that while the web has proven itself a powerful tool of democratic empowerment in certain cases, we should not adopt a technologically deterministic stance which presumes that the Internet necessarily supports democratic ideals. The web may exhibit particular affordances, but as a ‘tool of democracy’, the web is, in the end, largely what we make of it. Accordingly, the report concludes with a series of recommendations for researchers, civil society, governments and legislatures, in order that these institutions can exploit the web in support of, and not to the detriment of, democracy.

Part Five — Recommendations

- **Researchers** need to expand their toolkits to include the web as a new source of data and a new platform of research when approaching the topic of digital democracy. Researchers will likely need to adopt more interdisciplinary, collaborative approaches to this field, drawing on fields such as computer science, and skills such as social network analysis to make sense of digital democracy. In conducting such research, academics should not restrict their gaze to traditional political activities alone, but should instead think more broadly about the non-intuitive, unconventional activities and venues that facilitate democratic engagement online. Finally, researchers should remain mindful of the need to develop policy recommendations from their findings. Civil society, governments and legislatures often lack the evidence they need to make good choices about the design and execution of engagement initiatives. There is much room for collaboration between academia and these other sectors in this respect.
- **Civil society** groups should examine the strategies currently used to encourage and facilitate their engagement with members of the public. In many cases, civil society groups have merely used the web to digitize older practices, by, for example, replacing letters with email updates. Crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, and viral social media campaigns offer potentially powerful engagement opportunities, yet these tactics are still not routine in the sector. In addition to better engaging with members of the public, civil society groups can also use the web as a platform to better hold governments and legislatures to account. As more and more political activity moves online, the actions of decision-makers leave behind digital trails in the form of tweets, hyperlinks, and website content. By collecting, analyzing, and publicizing conclusions drawn from these digital trails, civil society is afforded greater scope to scrutinize decision makers, and to strengthen the quality of democratic representation. In order to exploit these opportunities, civil society groups will need to tap into new types of expertise, recruiting those with computer programming and large-scale data analysis skills to complement

the existing skillsets the sector typically seeks out, such as advocacy, communications and fundraising.

- **Governments and legislatures** should recognize that they no longer have a monopoly in the business of democratic engagement; the web offers citizens many new venues to which their participation can be directed. While the proliferation of new opportunities for engagement is encouraging, it remains problematic that citizens are decreasingly willing to engage with more traditional institutions of democracy, as outlined at the beginning of this report. Mumsnet and the Air Quality Egg offer intriguing new forums for participation, but it is also important that people show up to vote in elections. After all, at least in the foreseeable future, the traditional institutions of democracy will remain formidable actors in the political system.

To re-engage the public in these institutions, governments and legislatures must think more creatively about the web's potential as a platform for engagement, instead of taking older mechanisms of engagement, such as consultations and townhalls, and merely replicating them online. Likewise, governments and legislatures should not assume that the public will necessarily want to engage on their terms or in their spaces; if the web gives citizens new venues to discuss political issues, then governments and legislatures need to find these venues, and take part.

Governments and legislatures must also make better use of the web as a source of aggregate data describing the preferences and needs of the citizens they represent. As discussed above, some governments are systematically analyzing web data as part of controversial intelligence gathering programs, but public sector agencies and legislatures could also use these methods to 'take the pulse of the people', and ensure the political agenda is more broadly representative of the issues people care about. At the same time, states must recognize that while some degree of secretive surveillance may be required in the name of national security, such programmes come with a cost, as they risk further alienating citizens from their governing institutions.

And finally, by drawing insight from emerging research exploring the mechanics of collective action, governments and legislatures can develop new models of voting, party membership and direct participation that are more appealing to citizens. In some cases, this may mean reinventing, or abandoning, the traditional practices of representative democracy at play in contemporary governments and legislatures. No doubt, such adaptation will not be easy, but it may be necessary to reverse some of the worrying trends explored at the start of this report, and which will inspire much of the discussion at the Council of Europe's World Forum for Democracy.

Endnotes

- ¹ 'Democratic' is defined as a country having an average Freedom House ranking of 3 or less. Freedom House uses a 7-point scale where 1 represents the most free and 7 represents the least free. Each country's rankings on 'Political Rights' and 'Civil Liberties' were averaged.
- ² The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
- ³ Afrobarometer
- ⁴ World Values Survey
- ⁵ Van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going,... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24-56.
- ⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- ⁷ World Values Survey
- ⁸ World Values Survey
- ⁹ World Values Survey
- ¹⁰ Latinobarometro
- ¹¹ Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe
- ¹² Afrobarometer
- ¹³ Bimber, B. (2001). Information and political engagement in America: The search for effects of information technology at the individual level. *Political Research Quarterly*, 54(1), 53-67.
- ¹⁴ Barnard, R. (2009). Decoding Youth Engagement. Presentation delivered at the Library of Parliament's Youth and Democracy Dialogue Session. Ottawa, Canada.
- ¹⁵ <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/27739/>
- ¹⁶ Di Gennaro, C., & Dutton, W. (2006). The Internet and the public: Online and offline political participation in the United Kingdom. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59(2), 299-313.
- ¹⁷ Margolis, M., & Resnick, D. (2000). *Politics as usual*. Sage Publications, Inc.; Hindman, M. (2008). *The myth of digital democracy*. Princeton University Press.
- ¹⁸ <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/scott-wright>
- ¹⁹ www.mumsnet.com
- ²⁰ Noveck, B. S. S. (2009). *Wiki government: how technology can make government better, democracy stronger, and citizens more powerful*. Brookings Institution Press.
- ²¹ <http://airqualityegg.com/>
- ²² <http://www.fixmystreet.com/>
- ²³ <http://www.mysociety.org/>
- ²⁴ <http://www.governmentontheweb.org/>
- ²⁵ Margetts, Helen Zerlina, John, Peter, Reissfelder, Stephane and Hale, Scott A. (2012). Social Influence and Collective Action: An Experiment Investigating the Effects of Visibility and Social Information Moderated by Personality. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1892805> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1892805>
- ²⁶ Hale, Scott A., Margetts, Helen Zerlina and Yasserli, Taha. (2012). Petition Growth and Success Rates on the UK No. 10 Downing Street Website. Proceedings of the 4th Annual ACM Web Science Conference, Forthcoming. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2041856> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2041856>
- ²⁷ Ackland, R. & Gibson, R. (2013). Hyperlinks and Political Communication: A Comparative Study of Parties Online. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*.
- ²⁸ Clarke, A. (2012). 'Open dialogue' and the Government of Canada's use of social media: bureaucratic barriers to democratic engagement in the digital age. Paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference. Edmonton, Alberta.