
The emergence of the Internet has transformed public affairs. Despite predictions to the contrary, representative institutions have survived the onslaught of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Early cyber-optimists envisaged that new ICTs, such as the Internet, would become the mechanism of self-government. Online deliberations, Internet voting, and referenda would facilitate a return to Athenian-like democracy and the erosion of the institutions of representative government. This erosion has not occurred. This is the starting point of Electronic Democracy. The editors, all prominent within the field, suggest that attention should shift from the study of the micro impacts of the Internet to the meso and macro levels. Electronic Democracy examines a variety of key actors within representative democracy to assess how they are using the Internet to fulfill their traditional functions.

In the introductory chapter, the volume’s editors, Rachel Gibson, Andrea Rommele, and Stephen Ward, begin by presenting four scenarios illustrating the possible impacts of ICTs on political institutions: erosion, limited erosion, modernization, and reinvigoration. Having rejected the first scenario, the potential effects could range from a reduction of the role of representative institutions (limited erosion) to a reinvigorated politics where representative institutions create meaningful engagement with citizens through technology (reinvigoration). The overall argument of the collection is that context matters. How any political institution employs the Internet within its daily operations is dependent on its unique institutional and organizational context.

The book is organized in two parts, focusing on macro- and meso-level representative structures. This important distinction between the two levels of analysis is never fully explained. However, the editors claim that by combining them, the volume presents a snapshot of how successful representative institutions are using the Internet within their traditional functions.

Several chapters feature case studies of different actors using the Internet within different national contexts. Three of the chapters are comparative in nature, constraining the use of technology by similar actors in different countries. For instance, Thomas Zittel compares technological developments within the national legislatures of Germany, Sweden, and the United States. With the exception of the theoretical chapter by Charles Raab and Christine Bellamy, the other chapters are empirically focused. Although the contributors use various methodological approaches, content analysis of websites, interviews, and examination of government documentation are three research methods used consistently throughout.

Though the volume presents a limited number of cases, it encompasses the full range of political actors that make up representative democracy: legislatures (local and national), political parties, protest movements, trade unions, and global organizations. The diversity of institutional actors is a clear strength of the collection. While the use of the Internet by legislatures and political parties has received wide scholarly attention, the inclusion of these other representative actors is insightful to those looking to understand the impact of the Internet within the wider political system. Another advantage is the volume’s comparative focus. It is well known that there is a dominance of American politics research in Internet literature. The case studies feature several advanced industrial countries, including Sweden, Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Additionally, two of the chapters focus on the impact of the Internet on international affairs. The collection, therefore, contributes to a greater understanding of Internet politics within lesser-known polities.
Although the system of representative government has withstood the Internet revolution, the Internet has definitely had an effect. Amalgamating the evidence from the chapters, the editors conclude that modernization best encapsulates the current state of Internet politics. Representative institutions are keen to use the Internet as part of their daily practices, but this use has not dramatically transformed their operations or their relationships with citizens. Catherine Needham, for instance, shows that online service delivery trumps e-consultation with citizens in the online strategy of American and British governments. Political institutions appear bound by their own organizational and institutional structure. The Internet is used to facilitate traditional functions of the actors, not establish new ones. This appears to be true regardless of the type of institutions.

It should be pointed out that many of the chapters themselves do not explicitly speak to the issue of context or institutional factors. The exception is Jenny Pickerill’s examination of two environmental protest groups, one of which is far more institutionalized than the other. Most of the chapters focus on providing an assessment of how well particular institutions are using ICTs. Joachim Åström’s chapter, for instance, compares how the attitudes of Swedish politicians compare with actual Internet use, as seen through the local government website. The goal of Jennifer Greer and Mark LaPointe’s chapter is to assess whether the websites of U.S. senate and gubernatorial candidates actually reflect the participatory communications style made possible through the Internet in the 1998 and 2000 elections. While the conclusions of the collection are logical, they do not necessarily follow from the evidence presented by the various chapters. The disjunction may stem from the fact that chapters began as workshop papers at the European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions in 2001, several years before the volume was published.

Electronic Democracy should not be considered the final word on the role institutional context plays in Internet use. More direct study on how the rules and functions of institutions impact Internet use is needed. However, the hypothesis that “context matters” is one that should feature prominently in future research. The volume provides an important starting point for this discussion. Electronic Democracy makes an excellent contribution to the Internet politics literature. The contributing authors provide valuable data and insightful analysis of their particular case studies. By moving the research agenda beyond the micro level, the volume provides a clear snapshot of the current state of Internet politics within representative government. For students of the Internet, this collection is a useful and interesting read.

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