

Workshop 20: PARLIAMENTS, PARTIES AND POLITICIANS IN CYBERSPACE

**Workshop Directors:
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New information and communication technologies are increasingly applied within European representative democracies, becoming therefore increasingly important in the relationship between the public and parliaments, parties and politicians. In a setting where citizens have become ever more distanced from parliaments, parties and politicians, where political apathy is increasing together with electoral volatility, but where party identification, party membership and political trust is in decline, the question is whether the new technology makes a difference; and if so, what kind of difference? This workshop aims to focus on whether the application of these new technologies has had an impact on how representative democracy works.

Internet studies have expanded considerably recently, including a number of studies focusing on how key political institutions such as parliament, parties and politicians apply the technology. Thanks to these studies we have acquired knowledge about how these central institutions are using the new technology in a number of countries. However, the technology keeps developing calling for up-to-date research, a number of countries have not been covered at all, and we still lack plenty of knowledge on the impact of this application both internally within the institutions and externally in their relations with the public. The purpose of the workshop is to assess not only how party organizations, parliaments and politicians in a wide range of European democracies apply the new technology when conducting their primary assignments but also, and primarily, to assess the reasons for and impact of this application.

The character of how parties, parliaments and politicians apply the new information and communication technology at and between elections have been analysed in a number of countries, resulting in studies that have contributed with substantial knowledge. However, we call for further research for mainly two reasons. First of all, the new technologies develop constantly and their application within the political sphere changes as well. Much has happened since the appearance of the first simple web sites containing nothing but a replica of a few printed documents. In order to appreciate fully the impact on democracy as such, we need to understand how the more advanced technologies are applied. Secondly, though we know quite a bit about a few case studies, there is still considerable scope to expand our knowledge of the way political institutions in Europe are using the internet. Some countries have been wellcovered, while others have so far been neglected. There is scope in particular for more in-depth comparative studies and for case studies from a variety of countries about which we know virtually nothing.

When assessing the reasons for applying the new technology, we focus in particular on the relationship between institutional characteristics and online presence. We need to understand the institutional context within which the parliaments, parties and politicians operate since the virtual world cannot be detached from the institutional world. This workshop builds on recent literature that calls for integration between the online and the offline contexts, exploring differences across Europe in the way the internet is being used, with particular attention on the extent to which the internet has added something new to the traditional institutional constraints.

When assessing the impact, we distinguish between internal and external consequences.

First, we want to assess how the technology may have an impact on the kind and level of activity, the assignments taken on and fulfilled, and the organizational characteristics within these political institutions.

One key challenge arising is to ascertain whether the institutional factors have an impact on the way websites are being designed and used, e-mails used etc. European parliaments, parties and politicians vary in their characteristics and in institutional factors such as their method of election or their structure. In order to evaluate fully their application of the new technology, and the consequences thereof, one needs to take into account their wider off-line context.

Turning to what we term here the external consequences, we want to analyse how the application of the new technology changes the relationship between parties, parliaments and politicians on the one hand, and the electorate on the other. The use of the internet should provide these central political institutions with a unique opportunity to overcome constraints resulting from institutional factors. The internet provides a cost effective and efficient means through which parliaments, parties and politicians can reach out to a very wide range of publics. It could therefore be a powerful tool to enhance their linkage with the electorate. Similarly, in the perspective of the citizens, they are provided with easier access to parliament, parties and politicians.

We invite papers that focus on the application of the new information and communication technology by European parties, parliaments and politicians. We welcome both analyses of the reasons for this usage, the character of the application and the consequences thereof. Papers may both be based on comparative studies and case studies, and they may apply either quantitative, qualitative research methods or a combination thereof. Innovative contributions are more than welcome. The aim of the workshop is to provide the basis for further collaboration in a comparative project on parties', parliaments' and politicians' application of the new information and communication technology and the effect thereof on how representative democracy works.

Participants

The workshop is open to all specialists – from graduate students to experienced professors – working on the topic of the workshop, and we are in particular interested in innovative submissions within the field. Participants should come from a wide range of disciplines: Political communication researchers focusing on new media and parties, politicians and/or parliaments, researchers from the more traditional legislative studies subject area working on the application of new information and communication technology by parliaments and politicians, and party specialists focusing on the character and effect of the application of new technology by party organizations, leadership, candidates etc. This will promote an inter-disciplinary approach to the topic which is intended with the workshop. Furthermore, we invite in particular participants analyzing European countries so far not covered within this research field.

Biographical Notes:

Karina Kosiara-Pedersen is Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Her research is currently focused on party membership, political campaigning, and parties' application of new information and communication technology. Recent publications include 'The Impact of Party Organizational Change on Democracy', *West European Politics* (with E.H. Allern), 'New Zealand Parties in

Cyberspace', *Political Science*, and 'New Technology in Ageing Parties: Internet Use among Danish and Norwegian Party Members', *Party Politics* (with J. Saglie).

Cristina Leston-Bandeira is Senior Lecturer in Legislative Studies at University of Hull, UK. She is currently working on the use of the internet by parliaments. She co-organised recently a workshop about Parliaments in the Digital Age at the Oxford Internet Institute, for which she received a British Academy grant. Her recent publications include: *Parliaments in the Digital Age – Forum Discussion Paper*, (ed. with S. Ward) and 'The Impact of the Internet on Parliaments - a legislative studies framework', *Parliamentary Affairs*