Y490 POLITICS OF THE INTERNET

October 1, 2009
E-Democracy

- What is democracy in general?
- How does e-democracy differ from it?
- Examples of earlier efforts to use technology to enhance participation:
  - Interactive cable TV
  - Public access TV
  - The WELL
Democracy in General

- Direct democracy vs. Representative democracy
- Role of elections and election campaigns
- Role of parties
- How parties interact with social movements
- The role of money in electoral systems
- Apathy of voters
Origins of Democratic Theory

- Jean Jacques Rousseau
- Tom Paine
- Alexis de Tocqueville
Key Issues in Representative Democracy

- Corruption (vote buying)
- Tyranny of the majority
- Holding elected representatives accountable
- Executives vs. legislatures vs. judiciaries
- Dealing with factions, special interests, partisanship
- Declining levels of popular participation
More Recent Thinkers

- Juergen Habermas – communicative action
- Benjamin Barber – strong democracy
- James Fishkin – deliberative democracy
Robert Putnam’s Work on Social Capital

- Professor of Political Science at Harvard
- Best-selling book, Bowling Alone
- Basic thesis:
  - Not as much participation in traditional civic associations by US citizens as in the past
  - This is bad because that participation increases levels of trust among citizens
- Possible reasons for this:
  - Television
  - Rise of alternative forms of civic participation
- Cable TV system in Columbus, Ohio
- Introduced in 1977
- Featured greater interactivity than existing one-way cable TV systems
- Financially a bust
- Ended in 1994
Example of CATS in Bloomington

Typical features:

- Gavel to gavel coverage of meetings
  - School board
  - City and county councils and commissions
  - State legislatures
- Citizen-created content
- Some local news
Definition of Digital Democracy

“…a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions, using information and communications technology or computer-mediated communications instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional political practices.”

Pre-Web systems designed to foster participation in the 1980s

Originally supported by Stuart Brand of the The Whole Earth Catalog and John Perry Barlow

Subject of Howard Rheingold’s book, The Virtual Community

The WELL had its ups and downs over the years and is now a fee-based web site
Constraints on Citizen Participation

- Long and irregular working hours
- Time spent on consumption activities: shopping, recreation, entertainment
- The lack of investment social capital (Putnam)
- Fear of reprisals or sanctions from other members of the community
- Lack of confidence and skills
- Environmental constraints: transportation issues, shortages of meeting spaces, etc.

Source: Chadwick, p. 92.
Pew Internet and American Life Project

- Initiated in the 1990s by the Pew Charitable Trusts
- Became part of the Pew Research Center in 2004
- Main tasks:
  - Monitor online activities
  - Examine how online activities affect families, communities, health care, education, and civic and political life
Internet had not had much impact on presidential elections in 2000 and 2004

Main use of Internet was by candidates and political parties

Public still got most of its information from newspapers and television but there was rapid growth in use of the Internet for this purpose
Conference on YouTube and the 2008 Elections

- Organized by Stuart Shulman (U.Mass. Amherst)
- Here is the web site for the conference.
- Reflects speculation about the growing importance of the Internet as a channel for communicating with the electorate
- Evidence for citizen participation via YouTube is mixed:
  - Great use of YouTube for repurposing TV ads
  - Limited use by citizens for comments, criticisms
AOL as a Negative Example

- Limits on sending email to lists (justified as part of anti-spam efforts)
- Monitoring and censorship of material posted to the site
- No town hall or town meeting forum for members
Key Questions

- What are the philosophical origins of e-democracy?
- Is geographical community and face-to-face interaction essential for democracy?
- Do virtual communities help or hinder democracy?
- Why is it so difficult to be an active citizen? Will the Internet help?
- Do corporate sector discussion forums provide deliberative public spheres?
- How useful are the concepts of social capital and public sphere for interpreting the Internet’s impact on democratic politics?