

The Internet and Internal Party Democracy¹

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Abstract

In a large sample of Swiss local party sections, it is found that the extensity of Email usage correlates with patterns of intraparty influence distribution. On the one hand, executive boards exert more power when they rely internally on electronic communication; on the other hand, vertical email traffic (between leadership and ordinary members).promotes small power shifts in favor of the party assembly and the active members. Thus, online communication adds to the conventional power effects associated with the frequency of assemblies and meetings.

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1. Introduction

The new computer-based media are of particular importance for political parties and other voluntary associations, because due to their polyvalence, they can – on one and the same technical platform – support all communication flows (horizontal and vertical) necessary for operations, make them more independent of spatial-temporal and social restrictions, and integrate them all in a penetrable and comprehensive system (Geser 2001).

E-mail is a particularly important medium of communication, because in contrast to conventional one-way media (and also the World Wide Web), it allows truly interactive exchange. As opposed to the telephone, E-mail

- supports not only dyadic conversation, but also multilateral group-related communication;
- gives users the opportunity to exchange any number of complex and also multi-medial messages;
- facilitates more considered, thought-out responses that are less shaped by momentary emotions and ideas;
- supports complex, cumulatively progressing discussion, cooperation, and decision-making processes, because all previous communications are storable and accessible at all times to all participants.

The increasing diffusion of computer-mediated communication (CMC) media has given rise to manifold hopes for greater democracy, whether in the macro political sphere, where any number of small groups and individuals have at their disposal the same technical options as do the state and large organizations for making their voices heard worldwide and organizing effective campaigns (see Geser, 1996), or at the meso level of individual associations or political parties, where the "iron law of oligarchy" was up to now at least in part determined by conventional "one-to-many" media, thanks to which the higher echelons of party leadership could unrestrictedly monopolize communication.

On the other hand, there are also many theoretical reasons (and, as the research advances, increasingly also empirical reasons) for doubting these optimistic claims and assumptions that CMC enhances democracy.

At the most fundamental *theoretical* level, the *technological determinism* behind these predictions must be fundamentally rejected. Although because of its functional universality the Internet is a neutral tool that can be used to support any communications structures, it is never a causal factor that necessarily forces only certain uses and applications due to its intrinsic technical properties.

More specifically, in the case of voluntary associations this means, for example that

- a party apparatus that is committed to traditional means of communication and organizational procedures is not at all able to utilize the new possibilities of computer-mediated communication adequately (Hetterich, 2000, p. 128ff; Wiesendahl, 2002, p. 381)
- the dominance of a firmly established, centralist leadership can actually be increased when the leadership body, in addition to the conventional media, also utilizes Web sites and E-mail to communicate its positions, recommendations, and instructions to peripheral party members (see here, for example, Mantovani, 1994);

- activists who has already previously struggled for more influence can use the new media to strengthen its position within the group;

- grassroot collectivities (such as, currently, the "antiglobalist" movement) can utilize the Internet in order to do without leadership to an even greater extent than before and to accentuate their informal, polycentric internal organization.

In these and similar cases, statistical covariances would also be found between Internet use and organization structures; but when interpreting the findings it would be necessary to remember to view utilization of the new media as a conditioning or even dependent variable (instead of as a determining causal factor).

Moreover, the observation that we are at present in an intermediary phase of unforeseeable duration has *empirical relevance*. In this intermediary phase

a) a considerable percentage of members of organizations do not yet use the new media at all;

b) the users themselves have frequently not yet developed stable forms of use, as they are still in the process of exploring the options of the new media (which are changing constantly with new developments in software and hardware).

This "digital divide" could very well lead to the emergence of temporary inequalities in power and influence that later – when use of the medium has become ubiquitous and habitual – will disappear.

Despite all of these reservations, it cannot be excluded that the new media at least in the longer term will quite possibly have independent socio-structural effects. For even if their initial introduction is indisputably subject to strong contextual and individual factors and is governed by *ex ante* existing motives and objectives, it is just as undoubted that the new media in turn form the basis for new communication and needs for participation.

2. "Vertical" and "horizontal" use of E-mail in local party organizations

In the following we examine the question of whether there are significant statistical correlations between the *use of E-mail* and the *patterns of influence* in local party organizations and - a far more difficult problem – whether it is perhaps possible that E-mail can be made responsible for such differences as a causal factor.

Two modes of E-mail use will be distinguished:

1) *Vertical* use of the medium in the relationship between party leaders and the membership base

2) *Horizontal* use of the medium as a means of communication within the party executive committee.

The basic assumption concerning vertical E-mail use is that depending on the primary direction of communication, centralizing or decentralizing effects can emerge.

For example, the dominance of the leadership body (party executive committee or president) can very well increase if E-mail is used primarily as a medium for *top-down* communication, which, in addition to previously used one-way media, serves informing of the membership of the party leadership's positions, intentions, and decisions or mobilizing the members for participation in collective activities. In reverse, however, decentralizing effects would be expected if *bottom-up* communication predominates: here, peripheral party members use the new medium as a low-threshold, accessible channel for expressing their preferences, suggestions, and criticisms to party leaders.

As a medium of horizontal communication within the party executive committee, E-mail is more likely to facilitate oligarchic tendencies within the party, in that it extends and strengthens the party leaders' capacities for joint decision-making and action. For example, it becomes possible for members of the party executive committee to

- a) maintain multilateral contacts also prior to and after meetings (and to make all sorts of decisions that previously necessitated tedious paperwork);
- b) better prepare in advance for meetings and business through rapid and complete exchange of written documents;
- c) participate in discussion and decision-making processes of the party executive committee even when they can not be physically present;
- d) sound out possible consensus within the party executive committee on a broader range of issues and petitions and thus to develop altogether more initiative as a group;
- e) respond more rapidly (and as a group rather than as individuals) to critical inquiries from the party members.

However, it is especially true of local political parties that the new computer-mediated communication has to become integrated into a dense, pre-existing field of primary face-to-face communication that fulfills to a high degree social-expressive functions (for example, the function of friendly sociability) that, due to the participants' physical and social presence, always remains relatively easily accessible.

" [...] in the depths of today's parties, something age-old and pre-modern [lives] on, the roots of which go back to the culture of associations of the early nineteenth century. Down at the level of local associations, conditions have perpetuated themselves that are cut out to satisfy the primary attitude-expressive and social-integrative communication needs of voluntary members. Communicating is direct, spontaneous, genuine, and refers to self. In conversational exchange, the assembled make sure that their approaches to experience and their worldviews are the same, they express mutual annoyance with political opponents, and usually take leave of each other in the certainty that they are working together for a good cause. On top of that, what is also satisfied is the demand for intellectual edification and meaning, for the metaphysical, and for passions and deep sentiments, paired with leisure-time sociability and diversion."
(Wiesendahl, 2002, p. 365; freely translated here).

For this reason it is probably to be expected that functional relationships between E-mail communication and these more basal primary interactions are complementary (rather than substitutive).

This means specifically, for example, that (brief) communication via E-mail will be easier because already very extensive agreements, understandings, and consensus have been achieved previously "off-line", and that the main benefit of E-mail use is

information delivery in the preparation as well as in the aftermath of meetings and assemblies.

3. Research methodology

The empirical findings presented below stem from two, practically identical empirical investigations conducted in the fall of 1989 and 2002 by the Institute of Sociology at the University of Zurich. Both studies surveyed all local political parties (approximately 5,000) in the municipalities of all three language regions of Switzerland. A lengthy questionnaire was sent to all local party presidents, who were asked to give detailed information on membership base and organization structure, ideological and issues positions, internal processes, and the external political activities of the party. In both surveys, about 2,600 completed questionnaires were returned (response rate of about 50%). Approximately 80% of these local groups are local sections of the four nationally active, large parties represented in Switzerland's Federal Council (Radical Democratic Party (FDP), Christian Democratic Party (CVP), Swiss People's Party (SVP), Social Democratic Party (SP)); another 8% of the groups are local branches of smaller political parties, and the remaining 12% are autonomous local groupings not associated with cantonal or national organizations.

In the survey of 2002, informants were asked

- a) whether party leadership regularly sent E-mail to rank and file party members and, if yes, what percentage of all members were reachable via this new medium (vertical use of E-mail),
- b) whether the members of the party executive committee communicate among themselves by E-mail and, if yes, what percentage of those members did so (horizontal use of E-mail).

The frequency counts show that at present, E-mail is used by only approximately one-third of local political parties for communication between party leadership and the membership. So far, E-mail has become a truly inclusive medium that reaches practically all (more than 80%) members of the party for only about 5% of the local parties (see Table 1). Surprisingly, the French-speaking region of Switzerland is clearly taking the lead (with over 47% of the local sections), whereas the lower percentage for the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland (about 29%) clearly reflects the general lower availability of Internet connections in that region to date.²

By contrast, in over 75% of all local parties, party officials use e-mail to communicate among themselves. Contrary to the vertical use of E-mail, here the German-speaking region of Switzerland takes the lead, with party leaders in over 35% of all parties participating in the new computer-mediated communication – as compared to only 8% in the Italian-speaking region and only 12% in the French-speaking region (Table 2).

² See results of biannual surveys covering Internet usage within the Swiss population produced by WEMF AG. <http://www.wemf.ch>

Table 1: Vertical E-Mail communication in local political parties: Percentage of local party members regularly reachable via E-mail, by language region of Switzerland (percentage of local parties)

<i>Language region:</i>	Percentage of party members reachable via E-mail				
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	over 80
German-speaking	64.8	12.9	9.1	7.9	5.3
French-speaking	52.8	17.3	15.6	9.8	4.5
Italian-speaking	71.1	13.8	5.4	5.9	3.8
Total	63.7	13.6	9.7	8.0	5.0

Table 2: Horizontal E-Mail use in local political parties: Percentage of party officials regularly communicating with each other via E-mail, by language region of Switzerland (percentage of local parties)

<i>Language region:</i>	Percentage of party executive members using Email					
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	81-99	100
German-speaking	18.5	10.4	12.7	14.8	7.9	35.6
French-speaking	35.3	16.3	14.1	13.5	8.6	12.3
Italian-speaking	56.3	11.3	8.3	10.8	5.0	8.3
Total	24.7	11.3	12.4	14.2	7.7	29.6

Thus it appears that in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, many local political groups are characterized by an imbalanced constellation, in the sense that party leaders practice very modern internal communication within the party executive committee, while external communication is still conducted largely by conventional means.

To determine *internal party power structure*, the informants in both surveys were asked how much influence the party assembly, active membership, party executive committee, and president have on decision-making on

- a) policy issues
- b) personal issues (e.g. candidacies).

Adding together the responses pertaining to both (a) and (b) yields a summative index for each actor or entity in the party, which varies from 0 (=exerts no influence in either area) to 100 (=exerts great influence in both areas).

As one of the most astonishing regularities, it is found that the survey results of 1989 and 2002 are extremely similar in all important respects. From a methodological perspective this may be seen as a convincing proof for the high reliability of the measurements, and with regard to reality, it is an indication that for the period observed, we have to assume generally high temporal stability in internal party power structures.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of local political parties as to influence exerted by different party entities on decisions on policy issues and human resources (1989 and 2002) (percentage values and means)

Party entity:	Year	Sum index of internal party influence						(N =)
		0	25	50	75	100	Mean	
Party assembly	1989	1	6	30	29	34	72.2	2184
	2002	2	8	32	30	28	68.5	2164
Active party members	1989	0	3	20	32	45	79.7	2067
	2002	1	3	20	31	45	79.0	2152
Part executive committee	1989	1	2	12	24	61	85.5	2133
	2002	0	2	10	25	63	86.8	2078
Party president	1989	3	6	36	23	32	69.1	2023
	2002	2	6	33	25	33	70.3	2068

In 2002, we asked party presidents about the direction of shifts in the (policy-making) influence of the party assembly, the party executive committee, and the party president in the previous ten years (that is, since 1992).

While comparison of the influence index of both surveys reveals no shifts (see Table 3), in the perception of the party presidents the influence of the party executive committee has increased in 40% of the parties (and decreased in only 10% of all parties) (Table 4). A possible, at least partial, explanation for this discrepancy is that the presidents were asked only about shifts in influence on policy decision-making, whereas the sum index includes with equal weight influence on decisions pertaining to human resources.

Table 4: Frequency distribution of local political parties as to shifts in influence on policy decision-making of party assembly, party executive committee, and party president from 1992 to 2002 (in percent)

Party entity:	Shifts in influence since 1992			(N =)
	increased	no change	decreased	
Party assembly	15	60	25	2234
Party executive	41	49	10	2136
Party president	15	60	25	2234

4. Contextual and internal party determinants of E-mail use

In the present transition phase, despite rapid expansion of Internet use, only about half of the population of Switzerland has Internet connections, and different segments of the population use the new electronic media in the most highly different ways. Internet use by local political parties also depends on all sorts of cultural and social factors.

First, E-mail communication will tend to be used more if the political group in a region or municipality is situated within a population that has a particularly positive attitude towards the Internet. Apart from language region, the significance of which was men-

tioned in section 3 above, to be considered here is above all the occupational and education structure of the population. Just as important, the size of the population is also expected to have a positive causal influence, because political internal communication in small municipalities can be conducted much more easily through the primary medium of face-to-face interaction than in cities, where assemblies are costly and members of the party executive committee may live far apart.

Table 5: Contextual and intra-party factors influencing the percentage of party members that are regularly reachable by E-mail by the party executive committee (Multivariate Regression Analyses, BETA-Coefficients)

	Model I	Model II	Model III
Contextual factors:			
Size of population (log)	+ .18***	-	+ .18***
French-speaking region	+ .09**	-	+ .15***
Italian-speaking region	+ .04	-	+ .02
% unskilled laborers / salaried workers	- .05	-	- .10**
% skilled manual occupations	.00	-	+ .06
% skilled non-manual occupations	- .03	-	- .04
% intermediary occupations	+ .12**	-	+ .13***
% academic/management occupations	- .04	-	- .03
Internal party factors:			
% members under age 40	-	+ .08**	+ .08**
% women	-	+ .03	+ .02
% farmers	-	- .11***	- .07*
% tradespersons / entrepreneurs	-	- .08**	- .08*
% laborers	-	- .07*	- .07*
% salaried employees / civil servants	-	+ .02	+ .01
% professional/ managerial occupations	-	+ .13***	+ .13***
% teachers	-	+ .10***	+ .10**
% students	-	+ .04	+ .04
R-squared for overall model	.047	.064	.111
(N =)	(2418)	(1182)	(1175)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Secondly, the probability of use of the new communications media is certainly determined by the social composition of the party membership (especially active members). Favorable conditions for Internet use exist if a high percentage of the membership stems from younger age groups, more highly educated groups, and white-collar

office occupations, while a membership coming largely from the working class or the rural and tradesperson milieu is likely to slow down the adoption of the communication technology.

In order to uncover the specific causal influences of contextual and internal party factors, we conducted multivariate regression analyses separately for the two variables. Tables 5 and 6 show summaries of the results.

Table 6: Contextual and intraparty factors influencing the percentage of executive committee members that regularly communicate with each other via E-mail (Multivariate regression analyses, BETA coefficients).

	Model I	Model II	Model III
Contextual factors:			
Size of population (log)	+0.32***	-	+0.27***
French-speaking region	-0.16***	-	-0.16***
Italian-speaking region	-0.15***	-	-0.08**
% unskilled laborers / salaried workers	-0.02	-	-0.04
% skilled manual occupations	-0.09**	-	-0.05
% skilled non-manual occupations	-0.02	-	-0.12**
% intermediary occupations	+0.13***	-	+0.15***
% academic/management occupations	-0.03	-	-0.05
Internal party factors:			
% members under age 40	-	+0.01	+0.03
% women	-	+0.08**	+0.05
% farmers	-	-0.18***	-0.14***
% entrepreneurs	-	-0.06*	-0.04
% laborers	-	-0.12***	-0.09*
% salaried employees / civil servants	-	+0.05	+0.08**
% professional/ managerial occupations	-	+0.19***	+0.17***
% teachers	-	+0.02	-0.01
% students	-	+0.04	+0.02
R-squared for overall model	.224	.105	.221
(N =)	(2367)	(1148)	(1141)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

In the case of *vertical E-mail use* (between executive committee and the membership), the results show that all of the predictors account for only 11% of the variance, whereby the explanatory power of the context variables (4.7%) and the internal party factors (6.4%) exert additive effects.

Looking at the contextual variables (disregarding the positive influence of the French-speaking region), it is immediately apparent that population size, as expected, is the most important causal factor, followed by the percentage of the employed that can be assigned to the "intermediary" occupations category. Persons with "Intermediary" occupations are members of middle management as found frequently in larger companies and administrative offices: employees with line functions (such as department heads) and professionals (such as technicians) that usually have further training beyond vocational apprenticeship but not a university education.

Evidently, these intermediary occupational groups, which usually use computers at their workplace, play a greater role in the spread of political communication via computer than do members of the academic professions and upper management, which in the present surveys contribute a slightly negative percentage to explanation of variance. Consistent with expectations, however, is the negative influence of unskilled laborers and salaried employees, but the effect reaches statistical significance only when the internal party variables are controlled.

The influences stemming from party membership structure are also largely consistent with theoretical expectations – the positive effect of younger members (below age 40) as well as the negative impact of farmers, laborers, and entrepreneurs as opposed to the positive effects of independent professionals, managerial occupations, and teachers. On the other hand, there seem to be no effects stemming from large numbers of middle and lower salaried employees and civil servants (that make up the largest group of party members).

Looking at *horizontal E-mail use* (within the party executive committee) in comparison, we can see that a much higher percentage of variance (over 22%) is explained by our predictors (Table 6).

This high cumulative explanation of variance is generated by the contextual variables alone, among which population size is found to be by far the most dominant explanatory factor, even more so than in the case for vertical E-mail communication.

The dummy variables representing French-speaking and Italian-speaking regions follow in second place with a negative impact, and only in the third place do we find the "intermediary occupations," whose beta weights actually increase somewhat when internal party factors are controlled.

Here it appears that the percentages of skilled occupations (manual and non-manual) rather than the ratio of unskilled laborers are crucial, whereas the proportion of academic professions and upper management is once again of no importance.

Astonishingly, the composition of party membership explains a rather small portion of the variance (10%). Only the percentage of the independent professionals and managerial occupations exerts a positive effect, as opposed to the negative influences of farmers and entrepreneurs. The fact that the percentage of younger members (below age 40) is irrelevant can probably be explained by the regularity that only people older than 40 are promoted to the executive committee.

Thus, online interaction among party officials is determined to an astonishingly high degree by exogenous influences (foremost language region and size of the municipality), and these effects are largely independent of the internal party membership composition.

5. Prevalence of E-mail communication and patterns of influence within the party

In a first step to clear up this issue, it is simply asked whether and in what sense the extent of vertical and horizontal E-mail usage correlates with the actual distribution of influence within the party at the same point of time (2002).

As mentioned above (see section 2), no certain predictions can be formulated regarding the effect of vertical E-mail communication (between party officials and rank and file members), because the same means of communication can be used for both top-down and bottom-up communications. And indeed, the findings reveal only relatively weak correlations. Taken altogether, however, they suggest strongly that E-mail use has an enhancing effect on democratization rather than on centralization. The influence of both the party assembly and active party members, for example, increases sharply when more than 80% of the members participate in the radial E-mail communication, whereas the power positions of the president and members of the executive committee remain unaffected (see Table 7). Significantly, the position of power of active members increases especially strongly, because they can, after all, use the new media to make their influence felt informally (also) outside of the formal party assembly.

Table 7: Influence of different party entities on decision-making (policy issues and human resources related), by prevalence of "vertical" E-mail communication between executive committee and the membership base

Entity:	Percentage of party members reachable by E-mail					F	Significance	Eta
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	>80			
General assembly	68	70	67	68	76	2.875	.022	.07
Active members	78	80	81	81	88	6.559	.000	.11
Party executive	86	89	86	88	87	1.693	.149	.06
Party president	69	72	72	71	72	.996	.408	.04

In contrast, the results shown in Table 8 support the hypothesis that by means of internal horizontal E-mail communication, party board members (as well as the party president) can increase their influence to a considerable degree. It is remarkable that this gain in authority is already realized when only a minority of the party executive members make use the new digital channels. "Active members" also appear to benefit from internal E-mail use by party leadership, but the party assembly does not.

It would of course be precocious to interpret these empirical regularities as a causal effect of communication technology on organizational structure. It is just as conceivable, for example, that active members that have already participated intensively and effectively in the party are also more disposed to adopt these new communication

opportunities, or that executive committees that have already played a very dominant role in the party due to a high level of collective activity and group cohesion see particularly fruitful opportunities for the including online media in their intensive flows of communication.

Table 8: Influence of different party entities on decision-making (policy issues and human resources related), by prevalence of "horizontal" E-mail communication within the executive committee

Entity:	Percentage of members of party executive committee communicating with each other via E-mail						F	Significance	Eta
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	81-99	100			
General assembly	69	70	66	68	64	70	1.813	.107	.07
Active members	75	78	81	81	79	81	3.919	.002	.10
Party executive	79	87	87	88	89	90	18.895	.000	.21
Party president	64	71	72	70	74	74	8.434	.000	.14

It is also conceivable in this second case that the computer-mediated communications media could have at least a conditioning (or amplifying) effect, in that they provide a tool for power-striving individuals (or boards) for achieving more effectively their ambitions.

Just as in the case direct causality, such a mediating effect would imply that current patterns of influence within the party did not already exist previously, but have instead developed only within recent years.

In that case, it would have to be shown that parties with lively *vertical* E-mail use have undergone a process of democratization more frequently than other parties, and similarly: that parties with extensive *horizontal* E-mail use have experienced more frequently recent processes of oligarchization.

The results suggest strongly that at least these latter developments have occurred to a considerable degree. Local party presidents from groupings with extensive intra-board Email usage report more frequently that the party executive committee has increased its authority over the last ten years (Table 10). On the other hand, the party assembly that has evidently profited from the introduction of vertical E-mail communication (Table 9).

Table 9: Percentage of local parties where the influence of different party entities has increased in the last ten years (as reported by the party president), by prevalence of "vertical" E-mail communication between executive committee and the rank-and-file members

Entity:	Percentage of party members reachable via E-mail					Chi-square	Significance
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	>80		
Party assembly	14	14	21	16	19	13.335	.101
Party executive	38	45	46	46	49	19.893	.011
Party president	14	14	21	16	19	13.335	.102

Surprisingly, vertical online communication is also boosting the power of executive boards, even when only a minority of the rank and file members is hooked up to the Net.

Table 10: Percentage of local parties in which the influence of different party entities has increased in the last ten years (as reported by the party president), by prevalence of "horizontal" E-Mail communication within the executive committee

Entity:	Percentage of members of party executive communicating with each other via E-mail						Chi-square	Significance
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	81-99	100		
Party assembly	13	21	15	14	13	15	12.488	.254
Party executive	26	39	43	46	57	45	104.088	.011
Party president	13	21	15	14	13	15	11.981	.294

A third way of testing our hypotheses is to compare the internal party patterns of influence (as perceived by the party presidents) at the two points of time when the surveys were conducted (1989 and 2002). Of course, this analysis is restricted to the approximately 1,000 local parties that have participated in both studies.

The results of this longitudinal comparison are highly consistent with those of the first two empirical approaches. Thus, the figures in Table 11 clearly demonstrate that the spread of vertical online communication tends to be associated with democratizing effects, for the percentage of local parties where the party assembly has gained in influence increases considerably with more extensive vertical E-mail use.

Table 11: Changes in the influence of the party assembly and the executive committee between the two surveys (1989 and 2002), by prevalence of "vertical" E-mail communication between executive committee and the membership base

Change in the influence of party assembly:	Percentage of party members reachable via E-mail					Chi-square	Significance
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	>80		
increased	26	30	33	38	43	17.785	.025
no change	36	31	27	15	24		
decreased	38	39	40	47	33		
Change in the influence of the party executive						Chi-square	Significance
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	>80		
increased	27	24	27	32	19	5.170	.739
no change	50	57	53	49	52		
decreased	23	20	20	18	29		

Similarly, the results in Table 12 show that party leadership has profited from horizontal, internal E-mail use at least in the sense that it has prevented a decline in its authority position. On the other hand, there are again no indications that as a consequence of this, the influence of the party assembly is symmetrically decreased.

Table 12: Changes in the influence of the party assembly and the executive committee between the points in time of the two surveys (1989 and 2002), by prevalence of "horizontal" E-Mail communication within the executive committee

Change in the influence of party assembly:	Percentage of members of party executive communicating with each other via E-mail						Chi-square	Significance
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	80-99	100		
increased	24	22	29	30	35	31	7.190	.707
no change	35	33	31	35	27	31		
decreased	41	45	41	35	38	38		
Change in the influence of party executive committee:							Chi-square	Significance
	0	1-40	41-60	61-80	80-99	100		
increased	23	29	25	31	22	26	25.464	.005
no change	41	47	52	48	58	58		
decreased	37	24	23	21	20	16		

6. Electronic communication and conventional party assembly activity

In an earlier study it could be demonstrated that influence patterns in local political parties are correlated with the frequency of assemblies and meetings. As expected, the party assembly exerts the more authority the more frequently it convenes, and the weight of the party executive committee as a leadership body is highest when it meets every two weeks or even weekly (as opposed to monthly or even less) (Geser et. al, 1994, p. 189ff).

How are these conventional patterns modified by computer-mediated communication? Is E-mail communication primarily entering as a substitute that may compensate for the decline of conventional gatherings – or even contribute to this thinning out of primary interactions? Or is it a complementary factor that amplifies the meeting effects by increasing their reach and effectiveness?

Some insights are gained by comparing the explanatory effects of offline meeting in 1989 and 2002, and from separating offline and online effects in the later survey of 2002.

Looking at the *party assembly*, it is evident that its influence is determined predominantly by the number of yearly sessions, and that this effect has even increased during the 13-year interval. In contrast, the negative effect stemming from the frequency of executive board meetings in 1989 has disappeared. While vertical E-mail communication between executive committee and the membership base is without significance here, horizontal E-mail use by the executive committee seems to have a slightly negative effect (which is, however, only visible when the frequency of assemblies and meetings is controlled) (see Table 13).

The influence of *active party members* also rises when party assemblies gather frequently, but in addition, it also increases when extensive E-mail communication between the executive committee and the membership takes place. (Table 14).

Table 13: Influence of meeting frequency and E-mail communication on the power and influence of the party assembly (Multivariate Regression Models, BETA coefficients).

	Model I 1989	Model I 2002	Model II 2002	Model III 2002
Number of party assemblies per year	+.14***	+20***	-	+.20***
Number of party executive committee meetings per year	-.07**	-.04	-	-.04
E-mail use between party executive committee and membership		-	+.05	+.03
E-mail use within the party executive committee		-	-.02	-.06*
<i>R-squared of overall model:</i>	.016	.038	.010	.040

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 14: Influence of meeting frequency and E-mail communication on the power and influence of active party members (Multivariate regression models, BETA coefficients)

	Model I 1989	Model I 2002	Model II 2002	Model III 2002
Number of party assemblies per year	+.17***	+.11***	-	+.10***
Number of party executive committee meetings per year	-.05*	+.02	-	+.01
E-mail use between party executive committee and membership	-	-	+.08**	+.06*
E-mail use within the party executive committee	-	-	-.05*	+.03
<i>R-squared of overall model:</i>	.024	.013	.012	+.018

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 15: Influence of meeting frequency and E-mail communication on the power and influence of the party executive committee (Multivariate Regression Models, BETA coefficients)

	Model I 1989	Model I 2002	Model II 2002	Model III 2002
Number of party assemblies per year	-.14***	-.06**	-	-.08***
Number of party executive committee meetings per year	+.13***	+.14***	-	+.12***
E-mail use between party executive committee and membership	-	-	-.05*	-.04
E-mail use within the party executive committee	-	-	+.21***	+.18***
<i>R-squared of overall model:</i>	.023	.021	.040	.048

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

The influence of the *executive committee* is most heavily determined by the overall internal party patterns of communication. Evidently, the board can autonomously strengthen its position by meeting more frequently and by intensifying E-mail communication among its members. On the other hand, it becomes less influential when the party assembly asserts itself by convening more frequently. Including the membership base in vertical E-mail communication also has a slightly negative impact on its authority, but this effect is not statistically significant when meeting frequency is controlled. (Table 15). As opposed to the party assembly and active party members, the causal influences of offline and online communications are cumulative and not substitutive. In other words: online media provide party officials with a widened spectrum of tools for strengthening their position of authority.

To a much lesser extent, the party president – whose position in the party does not appear to be affected by the frequency of assemblies and meetings – also seems to benefit from the new media (Table 16). Electronic communication within the party executive committee possibly gives the president increased opportunities to put forward his own initiatives to the committee at any point in time and to take on a coordinating function in the multilateral exchange. As online groups are known to tend towards greater dissent (and therefore require a greater amount of time for decision-making processes), the authoritative leadership role of the president is possibly in greater demand nowadays than in the nonwired past.

Table 16 : Influence of meeting frequency and E-mail communication on the power and influence of the party president (Multivariate regression models; BETA coefficients)

	Model I 1989	Model I 2002	Model II 2002	Model III 2002
Number of party assemblies per year	-.08**	-.02	-	-.03
Number of party executive committee meetings per year	.00	+.03	-	.00
E-mail use between party executive committee and membership	-	-	-.01	+.01
E-mail use within the party executive committee	-	-	+.13***	+.10***
<i>R-squared of overall model:</i>	.006	.002	.015	.011

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

7. Conclusions

The new digital information and communications media are already in astonishingly wide use by local political parties in Switzerland. For more than 76 percent of the local parties, E-mail has become established as a new medium of communication. E-mail is used by the party executive committee primarily as a task-oriented instrument for facilitating intra-board communication, and secondarily as a device of vertical integration (between party leadership and the rank-and-file).

However, it will take many years before all local political parties will be in a technical position to utilize online communication in a comprehensive way. And it will take even longer for members to develop stable patterns of Internet use. Once that occurs, we can then answer the questions of how computer-mediated communication changes

internal party structures and processes, how it changes the external behavior of local political parties, and what functions Internet communication takes on in the framework of the totality of internal party communications processes that were previously based almost exclusively on primary face-to-face interactions.

This means that the results reported here can be considered as a flash from which no very certain conclusions concerning future developments can be drawn.

At least, the results indicate that the new communications media could be one of the factors affecting patterns of influence within the parties – just as intraparty power relationships have always been affected by traditional communication processes (such as meeting and assembly activity). It appears that collective leadership bodies like party executive boards are particularly disposed to utilize E-mail communication for boosting their advising and decision-making capacities (and thus to raise their position of authority) – without necessarily reducing the influence exerted by other bodies within the party.

It is thus plausible to assume that communicating via E-mail does not bring with it merely a redistribution of existing quanta of influence, but going beyond that, it also increases that total amount of influence available for distribution, because all members and adherents profit from the new technical opportunities to express their views and - if they are sufficiently motivated - to make their influence felt.

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