

RESEARCH REPORTS

Reviews of new research at public agencies and private institutions

“Creating a Digital Democracy: The Impact of the Internet on Public Policy-Making.”

Foundation for Public Affairs, 2033 K St., N.W., Ste. 700, Washington, D.C. 20006.

28 pp. \$30. Author: Tom Price

Will the Internet prove to have as profound a political impact as television? Price, who covered politics in Washington and Ohio for 20 years for Cox Newspapers, interviewed 41 “opinion leaders” from Congress and elsewhere to get a preliminary picture.

“The most dramatic evidence to date of the Internet’s power to shape public policy,” he writes, is supplied by the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines, which in only five years persuaded more than 100 governments to sign a comprehensive anti-mine treaty. Faster than mail, more efficient than the telephone, e-mail served as the communications link for 1,400 activist groups in more than 90 countries. But the main work—persuading governments—was done by “old-fashioned, person-to-person lobbying,” Price notes.

“The Internet clearly boosts the effectiveness of activist groups...,” he writes, “because it enables them to mobilize their members and sympathizers much more efficiently.” Last March, in the face of more than 250,000 adverse comments, most via e-mail generated by the Libertarian Party’s Web site, federal regulators withdrew a proposed banking rule some considered intrusive. [More recently, e-mail helped activists organize protests at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in late 1999.]

“If you have an abiding interest in a narrow problem, you now have a much greater capacity to track what’s being said about the problem or what’s going on with regard to the problem than you ever had before,” observes Andrew Kohut, who directs the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. “People are now bonded together in communities that were very loosely knit or did not exist at all 10 years ago.”

This is not only for the better, in his view. “It’s [also] for the worse in that 10 years ago, if you were a screwball who believed a whole set of wacky ideas, you felt relatively isolated—you now have the means of connecting

with hundreds if not thousands of like-minded screwballs.”

While the increased “diversity of voices . . . seems quite appealing, it may contribute to gridlock,” notes Bruce Bimber, a political scientist at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Though all U.S. senators and, at last count, 94 percent of House members have Web sites, most of the legislators, Price says, believe the ease of e-mail encourages constituents to send “poorly thought-out, dashed-off notes that aren’t worth the electrons they’re written on.” Consequently, e-mails do not rank as high in their eyes as phone calls, letters, or personal visits. The Internet revolution is touching them, he says, chiefly through their aides, who spend less time “trudging from office to office in search of documents and to deliver communications.” A wealth of governmental information is available online, including the *Congressional Record*, bills, and roll call votes, as well as vast amounts of material from the executive branch.

The “grassroots power” of the Internet makes it a potentially useful tool for candidates, as it clearly was, Price notes, in Jesse Ventura’s successful gubernatorial bid in Minnesota in 1998. Nearly all major-party statewide candidates that year had Web sites, as did 57 percent of candidates in competitive U.S. House races. However, one study found that the congressional winners that year were only slightly more likely to have Web sites than the losers.

Though the Internet increases citizens’ opportunities to influence public policy, it is not prompting the average American to become more politically active, Kohut told Price. As more Americans go online, the proportion of Internet users interested in politics is going down. The Internet’s impact may be, Price concludes, to heighten political activity—“but only [among] the minority who truly care about politics.”

"The Ladd Report"

Free Press, 1230 Ave. of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. 315 pp. \$25.

Author: *Everett Carll Ladd*

Is America a victim of civic rot? Are Americans "bowling alone" in political scientist Robert Putnam's famous phrase? Not according to Ladd, who, until his recent death, was head of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut. "Civic America is being renewed and extended, not diminished."

Yes, PTA membership, for instance, fell from a high of 12.1 million in 1962 to a low of 5.3 million in 1981, but it has since climbed by about 1.7 million; more important, the PTA decline was *not* due to any lessened parental involvement in school affairs. Rather, large numbers of local parent-teacher groups, many wanting to keep the dues for local use, left the national PTA during the 1960s and 1970s.

Levels of church membership and participation remain high. In a 1997 Gallup survey, 67 percent said they belonged to a church or synagogue. In another survey that year, 58 per-

cent said they did volunteer work, up from 44 percent in 1984. Philanthropy has also increased.

Many older civic organizations, such as the Elks and the Lions Clubs, have lost ground, Ladd acknowledges. "But groups have always come and gone, for many reasons." Lots of new ones have emerged. Environmental organizations, for example. And contrary to Putnam's conclusions, Ladd says, membership in such groups does not mean merely writing checks. On just one weekend in 1996, Sierra Club members in the Los Angeles area were taking part in 23 hikes, three bicycle trips, a bird-watching walk, two two-day camping trips, and various other activities.

"All sorts of contemporary developments . . . rightly trouble us," concludes Ladd. "Nonetheless, the argument that national confidence and social trust are in retreat simply finds no support in any body of systematic data."

"Speed Doesn't Kill: The Repeal of the 55-MPH Speed Limit."

Cato Institute, 1000 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001. 24 pp. \$6.

Author: *Stephen Moore*

When Congress repealed the mandatory 55 mph federal speed limit in December 1995, consumer advocates, the insurance industry, and federal officials made dire predictions about the loss of lives that would result: 6,400 additional highway deaths a year were widely projected. The actual results have been far different, reports Moore, director of fiscal policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Although 33 states raised their speed limits in the ensuing months, the number of U.S. highway fatalities in 1997 was only 150 higher than in 1995. More significant, says Moore, the traffic death rate fell to a record low: 1.6 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. Moreover, injuries were down 66,000, from 3,465,000 in 1995. The injury rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled dropped from 143 in 1995 to 133 in 1997, the lowest rate ever recorded.

"Some attribute the decline in injuries and fatalities to air bags, increased use of seatbelts,

better roads, and safer cars," Moore notes. But the number of crashes, while rising in absolute terms between 1995 and 1997, fell as a percentage of miles traveled. Also, 277 fewer pedestrians were killed, suggesting that drivers did not become more inclined to drive recklessly.

The 33 states that raised their speed limit had a 0.4 percent increase in fatalities between 1995 and 1997—not much larger, Moore says, than the 0.2 percent increase in the other 17 states.

Though the insurance industry had argued that repeal of the nationwide limit would lead to more accidents and higher insurance rates, says Moore, claims and insurance premiums dramatically *declined* in 1997 and 1998.

In isolated cases, he acknowledges, higher speed limits have led to more deaths and injuries. Texas, for example, upped the 55 mph limit on 59,000 miles of noninterstate roads, and the number of crashes soared by 45 percent. But that only suggests that speed limits should be lowered on certain roads, Moore says, not nationwide.