Information and American Democracy
Technology in the Evolution of Political Power

This book assesses the consequences of new information technologies for American democracy in a way that is theoretical and also historically grounded. The author argues that new technologies have produced the fourth in a series of “information revolutions” in the United States, stretching back to the founding. Each of these, he argues, led to important structural changes in politics. After reinterpreting historical American political development from the perspective of evolving characteristics of information and political communication, the author evaluates effects of the Internet and related new media. The analysis shows that the use of new technologies is contributing to “postbureaucratic” political organization and fundamental changes in the structure of political interests. The author’s conclusions tie together scholarship on parties, interest groups, bureaucracy, collective action, and political behavior with new theory and evidence about politics in the information age.

Bruce Bimber is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Information Technology and Society at the University of California in Santa Barbara. He formerly held positions at RAND and Hewlett-Packard. He is author of The Politics of Expertise in Congress and numerous articles dealing with technology and politics. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from MIT and a B.S. in electrical engineering from Stanford.
Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – between news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. Communication, Society and Politics probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspective.
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For Laura
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Acknowledgments

The origins of this volume lie in the interplay between research and teaching that constitutes the central theory of the modern university. Several years ago, a student in my course on technology and politics prepared an exceptionally good term paper about a new subject, the Internet and political equality. When I had designed the course earlier that year, 1995, the Internet had struck me as no more than one of several potentially important sociotechnical phenomena relevant to politics and social issues, along with genetic engineering, industrial competitiveness, and defense conversion following the end of the Cold War. Although the student’s paper did not venture far from material that I had covered in the course, it prompted me to think further about the subject and eventually to launch my own inquiry into theoretical aspects of technology and information in American democracy. This book is one result. I have since lost track of the student who wrote that paper, but I acknowledge here her contribution to the direction of my research.

Students of business history will recall that 1995 was the year when Netscape Communications Corporation announced it would become a publicly held firm. That stock offering remains perhaps the most powerful symbol of the evolution of the Internet from a limited, government-sponsored, academically oriented enterprise into an economic and social phenomenon of vast scale. I managed to turn a tiny investment into a somewhat larger one on the first day of the Netscape public offering, but I do not write as a technology booster. My orientation toward technology as a force for social and political change, as well as for the production of wealth, rests on only a skeptical optimism. I grew up in what came during my youth to be called “Silicon Valley” and I picked up the local trade by earning a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering after high school. Having learned to design semiconductor circuits in the early 1980s is
something akin to knowing Latin. It is hardly irrelevant to contemporary discourse and language but is far from sufficient for getting by on the street. I bring from that experience an abiding interest in technology as a motor for social and political change of all kinds. My study of information technology in recent years has been motivated in large part by an interest in the linkages between technological development and political change.

In academic volumes such as this one, recognition of assistance from others typically follows a particular order, beginning with professional colleagues, then moving on to students and assistants, and then finally family. I depart from that tradition. My greatest debt in the preparation of this work, as in all my undertakings, is to my partner and wife, Laura Mancuso. Her support was not simply in the manner of wifely forbearance during my hours at the computer. It combined professional wisdom and intellectual advice, as well as being a true life partner – that and putting up with my writing and the trying procedures of academia, such as pursuing tenure. My gratitude to her is deepest and comes first.

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Bruce Bimber
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