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## The Decline of Activism in Political Parties: Adaptation Strategies and New Technologies

Political parties continue to fulfil the functions of selecting political leaders, formulating policies and mobilizing voters and thus remain key actors in the democratic process. They have been the subject of a great many critiques, though. Some observers have discussed the prospect of their disappearing as parties of activists (Katz & Mair, 1995) (Bardi et al., 2014) (van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014). Others have seen the political party becoming just one of several vehicles for representing interests as democracy undergoes a profound transformation. (Diamond & Gunther, 2001). Parties would still, however, retain the essential democratic functions of selecting leaders, structuring electoral alternatives and organizing the government. Clearly, though, changes are taking place within parties that affect not only their internal democracy but the role and place accorded to activism, as well.

Neither Canadian federal nor Quebec provincial parties have been immune to these trends. For many years now, they have been undergoing significant internal change as activism has declined and new technologies have emerged to offset this shift. These changes have had a major impact, particularly on the parties' internal democratic life, on the way they are financed and on the way they organize election campaigns. In light of these developments, one might well ask whether the traditional political activist is an endangered species.

The decline in activism is due to a number of factors. First, there is a natural tendency to centralization within parties. Second, parties must contend with a prevailing climate of distrust towards the political class and partisan activity. Third, parties have to deal with new competition from other types of engagement; many people prefer to advance their convictions through different organizations that better reflect their ideals, such as interest groups promoting specific issues or social movements. While the species is thus in decline, transformations are taking place in the role activists play within parties and in the factors that motivate them.

Our objective here is not so much to explain the precise causes of this decline as to outline its consequences for the way parties operate. The change tends to favour greater centralization of power in the hands of the leadership, but it also presents parties with a number of organizational challenges: How are they to achieve the same partisan ends with fewer activists? How are they to mobilize voters with fewer volunteers? What are the effects on relations between the party leadership and the activists?

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To answer these questions, we shall start by describing the different forms party activism currently takes and the decline that has been observed. With this contextual information, we shall draw up an inventory of the adaptation strategies that parties have adopted to court the electorate, mobilize sympathizers, obtain financing, and maintain or develop their organization.

As political staffs have become professionalized, new technologies have become crucially important adaptation strategies for parties. We shall accordingly attempt to identify the new technological means parties use to mobilize voters, communicate with their sympathizers and raise funds. We shall conclude with a brief discussion of the strengths and limitations of these tools.

## 1 The decline of activism and the shift to new forms of engagement

For some years now, numerous studies have sought to explain the decline in voter participation (Gélineau & Teyssier, 2012). Far less research has been conducted on the decline in traditional activism in political parties. Yet, it seems logical to connect the two phenomena. In Canada, investigators have noted a decline in party identification (Crête & Blais, 2013). Clearly, there should be association between the downward trend in participation and a major drop in the propensity of voters to belong to a political family. Logically, if the pool of voters shrinks and the number of people identifying with a party falls, a smaller pool of voters will be available – and interested enough in political life – to get actively involved in or join a party. Given that young people vote less than their elders, the problem of recruiting a new generation of activists becomes critical, too.

Is this phenomenon a reflection of a crisis of confidence in political institutions? In a 2012 Quebec poll<sup>2</sup>, more than half the respondents felt that political parties are all alike and there is really nothing to choose among them. Another study found that trust in political parties has also fallen (Pelletier & Couture, 2012). Federally, it dropped from 34.3 % in 2005 to 26.1 % in 2010. In Quebec, the change was even more marked with a decline of 43.1 % to 28.6 %. Political parties have tried to adapt to this growing cynicism, notably by more specifically targeting their potential voters and using negative advertising more.

Researchers have sought to determine the profile of political activists who join a Canadian federal party. It turns out that few people actually do join. A few years ago, 16 % of Canadians said they had already worked actively for a federal party,

but fewer than 2 % said they had joined one (Howe & Northrup, 2002). The vast majority thus tend not to be active within the political party they support. Nor are activists representative of the population as a whole. According to Cross and Young (2004), the standard profile is as follows: male, older, university educated, and Canadian born. Very few young people are thus involved. All in all, people devote little time to activism, and new members devote even less. In addition, most members do not think their engagement has a decisive impact on party policies (Cross & Young, 2004). In this light, party renewal and the future of traditional party activism face challenges of great complexity and significance.

Quénart and Jacques (2001) found traditional party activism to be changing into a sort of “multi-activism.” The data they gathered from young, politically active women in Quebec point to new forms of engagement. Their activism tends focus on supporting a particular cause rather than the full range of ideas espoused by a political party. The implication, then, is that party loyalty is much more tenuous and based primarily on a specific issue. Moreover, involvement is thus not limited to a party but extends as well to interest groups and movements concerned with the issue.

In Quebec, changes in the Parti Québécois (PQ) illustrate the same trend. The PQ, which was originally seen as a party of ideas, has gradually changed into a party concerned with power. This transformation was reflected in the evolving motivations of PQ activists (Montigny, 2011). By 2003, more than two out of three were working primarily to have their party form the government. Barely 16 % were involved because of their ideas. Similarly, in the British Labour Party, “[w]hilst in the past experienced activists were keen to attend conference to participate in negotiations about composites and then debates on an activist-driven agenda, places were increasingly taken by those members happy to play a more passive role” (Russell, 2005: 204).

It should be noted that political parties are generally reluctant to provide a full description of their activist base. It is therefore hard to come to an accurate assessment of the decline they have experienced. In Quebec, though, two indicators in the data provided by the Chief Electoral Officer (*Directeur général des élections*) can be used to track changes in activism over time: number of donations and income from membership dues<sup>3</sup>. Thus, from 1994 to 2012, the number of donations received by the Parti Québécois, a party with a well-known tradition of broad-based fundraising, fell markedly from 83,000 to 23,000. Contributions to the Parti Libéral du Québec also fell, but not as sharply.

<sup>2</sup> CROP poll conducted for the *Indice citoyen des institutions* of Université Laval’s Chaire de recher-

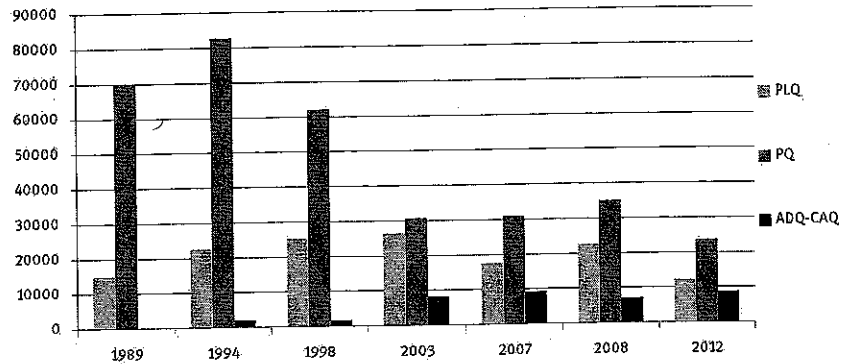


Figure 1: Changes in number of donations – PLQ, PQ & ADQ-CAQ  
[Source: Annual reports of the DGEQ]

Membership dues have also fallen, though less steeply. The PQ peaked in 1981 with \$1.4 million, and the PLQ topped out in 1985 at close to \$1 million. In 2012, the PQ collected \$326,000 and the PLQ \$473,000.

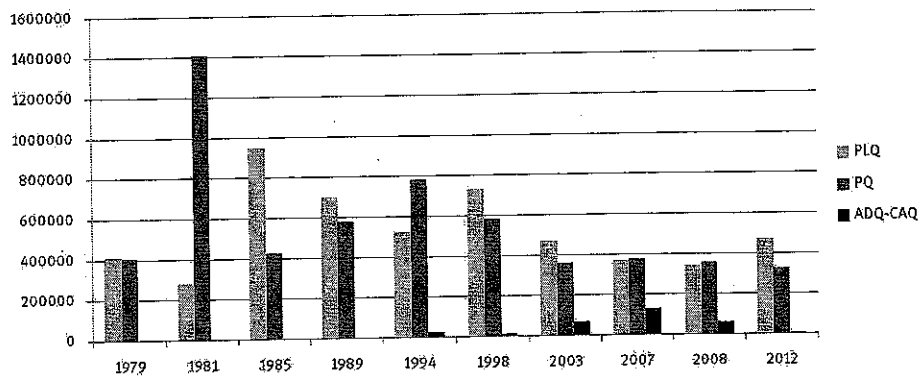


Figure 2: Changes in income from membership dues – PLQ, PQ and ADQ-CAQ  
[Source: Annual reports of the DGEQ]

The decline in activism has been accompanied by a change in the very nature of political engagement. The motivations driving activism in the established parties have been becoming rather more pragmatic than ideological. The duties assigned to activists are changing, too, and assuming new forms. These changes have had somewhat paradoxical results internally for the parties. All the federal and Quebec provincial parties have changed their statutes to provide for the leader to be selected by the members, thus giving activists greater prominence. This trend towards open

leadership selection is by no means insignificant. Selection procedures, once the preserve of party elites and then of convention delegates, are evolving into a system of primaries. While votes have generally been closed and restricted to members, the Liberal Party of Canada opened up the process more in 2013, when Justin Trudeau was chosen, by allowing sympathizers who were not members to take part. The Liberals thus opened the door wider to eventually holding American-style primaries.

Several indicators thus point to a decline in traditional party activism and a shift towards new forms of engagement. Meanwhile, parties are trying to develop new ways of operating to mask this decline, particularly with respect to the selection of the leader. When all is said and done, though, parties have been left with fewer members, fewer activists and fewer donors. The members they do have are also older and so, in the final analysis, less available to carry out tasks that used to be performed by volunteers; it is simply harder for older people to go canvassing door to door or to hang posters.

## 2 Adaptation strategies

Political parties are trying to adapt to this new reality. There is even discussion of them as “franchise systems,” on the model of commercial enterprises, with the centre offering local organizations the tools and services they need to conduct campaigns (Carty, 2004). To win elections, parties and candidates require several different types of resources that in the past were essentially provided by volunteers. The three principal ones are: 1) financing, 2) advertising and 3) identifying potential voters for election day. Changes have occurred on all three of these fronts.

Paradoxically, while the number of donors has declined, election campaigns have become increasingly professionalized and, consequently, increasingly costly. Professionalization involves both a greater role for communications specialists and intensive use of survey and research data. These changes, taken together with a background discourse about the need to fight corruption, can result in increased state funding. Thus in Quebec, the passage of Bill 2 in 2012 reduced the maximum allowable contribution by a voter to a party to \$100. To compensate for this decrease, the legislation substantially raised state funding based on the number of votes a party receives. Federally, though, the Conservative Party in power has traditionally been able to raise more funds from donors than its main opponents. It therefore sees a comparative advantage in reducing state funding for political parties and in 2011 accordingly passed a law to provide for its gradual abolition.

Changes have taken place with regard to election advertising as well. The larger parties now employ professional firms to put up election posters, a task previously performed by volunteers. They have also centralized the supply of advertising. Depending on their budgets, candidates, like franchisees, can select from publicity

options provided by head office. They can access a range of advertising products and adapt them to their means. This practice has existed since the 1970s and so is hardly new. Over time, it has helped centralize campaigns and promote a unified message. In this regard, social media constitute a new space affording activists a measure of freedom of action.

Meanwhile, the identification of potential voters remains a crucial element in political parties' election efforts, especially in a context of falling voter participation. Indeed, the need to canvass and identify supporters and to get out the vote on election day can only be greater since each vote weighs more and can make a real difference in the final outcome. However, political parties no longer have the human resources they used to have to accomplish this work.

When party identification was stronger, local organizations could rely on back-of-the-envelope calculations by their canvassers, especially in rural areas. Village and neighbourhood organizers knew the local population and could be asked how they thought people would vote. Twenty years ago, when there were enough volunteers to accomplish the task, parties favoured systematic door-to-door canvassing. Such an exercise depends on having a large number of volunteers criss-crossing a constituency to contact the voters in person in their home. This approach is considered to be most effective because it allows canvassers to gauge voters' nonverbal reactions. About ten years ago, ageing memberships led parties to start turning to telephone canvassing with volunteers calling each voter on the electoral list to find out whom he or she supports. This strategy has the advantage of requiring fewer workers than going door-to-door while enabling older people to participate. The constant decline in the number of activists has meant that even this task has become harder to carry out, though, leading parties to adopt automated tools to perform it.

In short, in terms of human resources, parties are trying to make do without activists but achieve the same results. Unable to raise enough money from donors, they have turned to the state. For visibility, publicity and communication, they have turned to professionals. To canvass voters, they have turned to automated tools. Parties are increasingly trying to make up for the decline in traditional activism by the targeted use of new technologies. These changes have had an impact, particularly on the internal life of political organizations.

### 3 The effects of new technologies

The decline of traditional activism has changed the way parties operate on both the organizational and communications levels. New technologies have been enlisted to make up in part for the lack of volunteers. However, the technologies can in turn substantially change the internal dynamics of parties, the role reserved to activists

and, consequently, what motivates people to become activist members. More specifically, we can discern four processes at work in relation to the new technologies: 1) the growth of Web strategies, 2) the use of databases (big data) in more targeted political operations, 3) the redefinition of the concept of the member, and 4) the changing role of local organizations.

**Web strategies.** With every election, parties further refine their Web strategies and increasingly incorporate social media into their national strategies. The range of Web strategies is still rather limited in Canada, though, and parties use them primarily for information, recruitment and fundraising purposes (Giasson et al, 2013). Originally, Canadian and Quebec political parties saw the Web as a tool for making information accessible to voters. This more passive approach left it to voters to take the first step and visit a website or make a donation online if they wished. For a number of years now, parties have been utilizing the Web in a much more proactive fashion: for example, by using social media for political positioning and connecting with supporters.

There are several advantages to using social media such as Facebook and Twitter for political purposes. Messages can be disseminated unfiltered by traditional media, undistorted by any intermediary. Large numbers of voters can be contacted at less cost than through traditional advertising campaigns. In addition, messages can be targeted to specific categories of voters, for example, with original content that may go viral on the Internet. Lastly, social media allow parties to create a true virtual community of supporters; they may ultimately even become a true instrument for mobilization. Still, social networks suffer from certain limitations and pose certain risks. To begin with, it is important not to confuse the virtual world with the real world. Few voters are comfortable with social media, and the ones who are are not representative of society as a whole. One sometimes has the impression that a social network is a sort of bubble, an enclosed world all its own in which party supporters engage in discussions with each other, and no one's opinion is changed. In addition, and paradoxically, while parties are increasing their efforts to centralize and control the message, the advent of social media has heightened the risk that gaffes will occur. Indeed, a single click can drastically change the dynamics of a day on the campaign. Moreover, social media accelerate political debate and the pace of attacks. They also increase the number of actors involved: candidates, activists and members of the political staff. In Quebec, the advent of more intensive Web strategies has substantively affected parties in three ways.

First, parties tend to use social networks to frame issues in order to define both themselves and their opponents. Although this strategy has limited reach among voters, it connects parties with opinion leaders, especially journalists. The exercise is even more effective when party leaders engage in it directly; it helps shape their image while they hammer home the core themes of their political message. The hope is, of course, that the traditional media will pass the message on.

Secondly, since the costs are low, the use of the Web makes it easier for parties to engage in more negative advertising. At the federal level, since the middle of the last decade, the Conservative Party has employed negative advertising on the Internet to attack its rivals without having to incur high costs. The Conservatives use the Web aggressively, particularly in English, to ascribe negative traits to leaders of other parties. In the 2012 Quebec elections, the PLQ notably adopted this strategy against the PQ leader, portraying her as a street demonstrator and thus in no way a head of government. Because it costs so little and because, when properly executed, it is so effective in defining an adversary, negative advertising is liable to become an increasingly prominent feature of the Canadian political landscape.

Thirdly, the use of the Web raises the issue of party activists on social media. Social networks provide activists with a much larger arena for discussing issues than formal party structures do. The following question then arises: Does tweeting constitute activism? There is as yet no obvious answer. Activist engagement on Twitter and Facebook has so far had only a marginal impact on partisan mobilization and policy development. One often has the impression that social-media activities essentially involve passing on information to people who have already made up their mind or are already supporters. In any event, parties cannot ignore social networks, and they plan to use activists to develop an increasingly structured and concerted presence on them.

**More targeted political action.** Parties must rely on new technologies in their internal operations in order to mobilize their members. They will accordingly build up substantial databases to allow them to reach out to particular categories of voters with more targeted messages. These databases must include information about individuals' socio-economic characteristics and political preferences. Currently, very little use is made of such instruments on the Quebec scene; however, some federal parties, particularly the Conservative Party of Canada, do employ them.

Internal communications instruments have been developed to connect exclusively with members and sympathizers in order to share organizational information and election-campaign tools, such as policy arguments. These instruments also enable parties to conduct targeted fundraising in relation to specific issues that can galvanize segments of the membership. In the Conservative Party of Canada, for example, selected members might receive a request based on their support for a specific policy. Endeavours of this sort imply, of course, that parties use the Web to poll their members and keep their preferences on file in their database.

In elections, the technology makes it possible for parties to target voters, contact particular segments of the population more easily, and design their advertising and electoral commitments accordingly. To do so, parties must do what commercial enterprises do and, again, acquire large databases. In the long run, this practice threatens the traditional role of activists in determining policy.

Parties run the risk, though, of reinforcing a long-standing trend for their conventions to become mere stages from which they broadcast their policies rather than forums for democratic debate. The traditional role of activists in drawing up the party program is thus being transformed. Instead of contributing on different levels to the formulation of policy, activists are becoming "extras" who more likely to be called upon to fill a hall and applaud their leader than to share their ideas.

**Redefinition of the concept of the member.** The technology makes it possible to open up the candidate-selection process, especially in leadership contests. Indeed, new ways of handling these matters over the Internet or by telephone are spreading in Canada, firstly, because they are less expensive than traditional conventions and, secondly, because in democratic terms, they give the maximum number of people an opportunity to vote for the candidate of their choice. At the same time, however, they are making the very concept of membership more porous.

Traditionally, individuals could join a political party for a minimal fee every year and then exercise a member's privileges in its internal democratic life. They could play a role in selecting the candidate in their constituency, hold office in various party bodies, participate directly or indirectly in electing the leader, and put their own name forward as candidates. Members could also take part in policy conventions to draw up the party program and receive information through internal communications.

However, in Quebec and elsewhere, party membership is in definite decline. As we have seen from the data compiled by Quebec's Chief Electoral Officer, income from membership dues is falling. Some parties have adopted strategies to reverse the trend. In the middle of the last decade, the Parti Québécois sought to renew itself by offering free membership cards to young people. In the Coalition Avenir Québec, membership cards are free and are sent to applicants over the Web for them to print. None of these tactics can compare, though, to the British Conservative Party's ploy of creating a "loyalty program" that entitles members who present their card to discounts in certain stores.

There are two types of strategies that parties may follow in trying to adapt to the decline in membership and maintain their legitimacy. The first aims to make joining more accessible. The second seeks to graft the concept of sympathizer onto the notion of member in order to boost the number of people on its voters' list, for the number is always made public during party leadership races.

In the Liberal Party of Canada, sympathizers who registered online acquired the same right to vote as members have. This development is liable to be imitated by other political parties and would tend to lead to the introduction of open primaries. Whether one is or is not a member thus becomes less and less important for an activity that lies at the very heart of democratic life in a party. At the same time, though, opening up the party in this way allows it to claim greater democratic legitimacy.

**The changing role of local organizations.** In elections, the advent of robocalls and computerized electoral lists is bringing about significant changes in the organization of election committees. At election time the main duty of party activists used to be identifying supporters; similar tasks can now be executed with increasingly effective automated systems. In addition, the technology makes it possible to establish national databases that parties can use to develop targeted strategies for different electoral clienteles.

The shortage of activists and the advent of reasonably priced technologies provide ample reason to believe that robocalls are here to stay. They are being utilized more and more by local and national party organizations and are having effects in a number of areas.

These effects are being felt in terms of election regulations. As with all new technologies, there is always a risk they will be used improperly, particularly when they first start out. At the federal level in 2011 and the municipal level in Montreal in 2013, a number of candidates consequently landed in hot water. Regulatory authorities have had to adapt in order to manage the expanding use of digital devices for mass telephone calls. Parties now hire specialized companies to handle the work; in the municipal elections in Montreal in 2013, one company worked for two different parties.

In terms of party membership, the new technologies mean that parties have less and less need of activists for their grassroots work. Internally, a new dynamic is emerging. The fall in activist numbers means parties must employ new technologies, and the new technologies mean parties rely less on activists to perform vital duties. This spiraling trend reinforces tendencies to greater internal centralization in parties and to the professionalization of election campaigns.

In policy terms, increased recourse to robocalls makes it possible for parties to build up more databases with more accurate information on issues that concern voters with particular socio-demographic profiles. These databases allow parties to target segments of the electorate in relation to specific policies. The question that now comes to mind is: What use will members then be in organizing elections?

## 4 Discussion

Is the decline in traditional activism spurring the shift to technological tools? Is activists' lack of interest attributable in part to their being restricted to less essential roles? One thing is certain: political parties are eminently adaptable organizations. Activism and the political roles activists may assume are changing. Will activists now become more involved in social media than in the various bodies of the party? In theoretical terms, the question then is whether tweeting constitutes activism. To find out, one would have to measure whether exchanges on social media have any persuasive power or are limited to party supporters engaged in a dialogue of the

deaf. Meanwhile, people seeking to get involved in order to advance their ideas are liable to turn to other organizations, such as interest groups, social movements and the non-established parties. Political activists will be then be left playing walk-on roles at party events or relaying information on behalf of the party.

In Quebec and in Canada as a whole, activists have been crucial to party operations since the middle of the last century. We now have to ask what role they can actually play inside the organization. For example, they used to participate effectively in developing policy in the Parti Québécois, but now they are much less involved. At the same time, there is a general trend under way to open up the leadership-selection process, a trend related, most notably, to the use of social media and the development of technologies that simplify voting procedures.

In terms of party financing, Quebec has chosen to increase state funding while restricting funding by the membership. The decline of activism combined with the advent of new technological methods is liable to reinforce the trend noted earlier towards greater centralization of power in the hands of the leaders. This development too will have an impact on the profile of activists in established parties, who will more likely choose to get involved in a party for reasons other than ideological commitment.

The new technologies also present political parties with a number of opportunities in relation to the electorate. In the face of increasing cynicism and decreasing participation in elections, parties have the ability to understand the socio-demographic profile of their voters more fully and easily. Parties can thus better reach out to them with messages that are adapted to their real-life concerns with the evident hope of rallying their support. In other words, the new technologies allow political parties to target an electorate more effectively and to adapt their campaign, budgets and advertising strategies accordingly. The technology also have the advantage of allowing parties to circumvent the filter of the traditional media and reach voters without incurring high advertising costs.

Still, the new technologies present challenges and even pose the risk of gaffes. They make politics much more impersonal. Direct contact with voters and the experience of campaign offices as places where supporters can meet and talk are fading from political life. The elimination of volunteer engagement and the human dimension from election campaigns undercuts the social interaction that encourages political debate. While social media enable parties to frame debates and share information, they also increase the possibility that mistakes and gaffes will be made because so many more people are involved. For the time being, though, the Twittersphere is more of a closed system that allows already-convinced party supporters to quarrel with each other. The new media are also liable to spur an increase in negative advertising over the Web.

Activists are generally individuals who commit their ideas, their time as volunteers and their financial resources to further a political cause. For a number of years now their role within parties has been changing. They are ageing and their num-

bers are falling. Parties are having difficulty replacing them and attracting younger generations. There is an apparent shift occurring: activists are giving way to supporters. Being a supporter does not entail engaging in any activist work; it primarily involves simply taking a subordinate role and circulating a party's views.

With new technologies and state funding, in future the main political parties operating on the Quebec and Canadian scenes will have less need for committed activists. In return for their voluntary labours, activists could rightfully claim a say in setting policy and selecting local candidates. Parties still need supporters to relay their messages and to secure their leaders' legitimacy, though. If the trend continues, a major structural change will occur in the organization of election campaigns and in internal party democracy. Studying these changes will surely entail a more in-depth, dedicated research program.

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## Isabelle Gusse<sup>1</sup> Party Activists and Partisan Communication in Quebec

Since the 1960s, the combination of television and political marketing has contributed to the emergence of “new” political leaders possessed of on-screen charisma and a “telepresence” separate from that of their party. Political communication has become a space for the production of political personalities and the personalization of politics; the outcome, reflecting the now-dominant norm in entertainment and news programming, may be termed “politics as entertainment.” The direct access to voters that leaders now enjoy through television is a corollary of the growing involvement of communications professionals in politics. Political parties have been de-politicized and even de-ideologized, political activism has declined, and the role of the party activist has withered. Today, though, it is widely maintained that the development of social media will allow citizens to communicate and disseminate snapshots of their political moods and so sustain a renaissance in party activism. Given these activists' local (professional, friendship, family, and business) communications relationships, they are able to send messages over the Internet and, it is argued, effectively cut into the politicians' monopoly over the media. Political parties are accordingly deemed to be in a position to rebuild their social and political relationships, for with the Web they can be present both at the centre of political and public space – through the mass media – and on the periphery – through networks of local activists transmitting their own messages.

In light of these developments and contentions, we set out to examine communications activity by Parti Québécois (PQ) and Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ) activists on the local level (the periphery) and the national<sup>2</sup> level (the centre)<sup>3</sup> in 2013. We had the following questions in mind: Could local party activists of the “new breed” who use the Internet and traditional media be considered producers and transmitters of communications in their own right and thus to be breaking the politicians' long-

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2 Translator's notes: 1) In keeping with common usage in this context, the term “nation” and its derivatives refer to Quebec institutions and issues. 2) Where possible, the English version of Manin's book on representative government has been used, and the parenthetical references appear as Manin, 1997. Phrases and sentences quoted by the author from the French version that are not in the English publication have been translated here, and the parenthetical references appear as Manin, 1996. 3) Quotations from Albouy, Fillieule & Mayer, Gaxie, Legavre, Manin (1996), Matonti & Poupeau, Subileau, the party websites and the interview subjects are translated from French.

3 In Quebec, only the wealthier parties that can afford the services of political marketing and communications agencies and to hire professionals in the field are able to occupy a communication hub and influence the periphery.