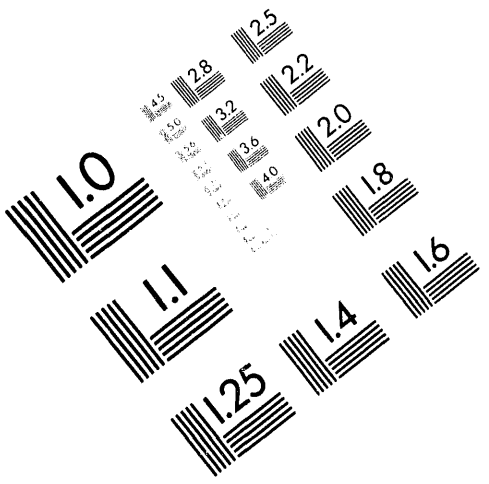

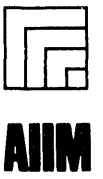

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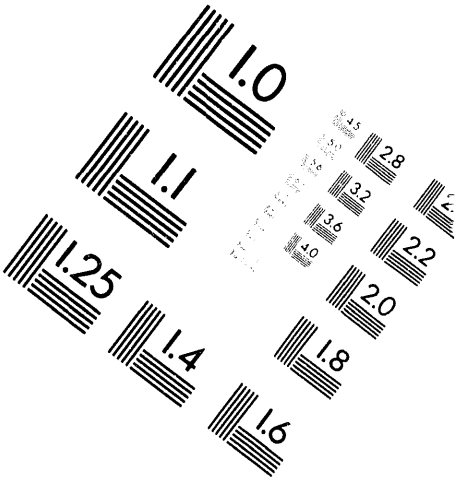

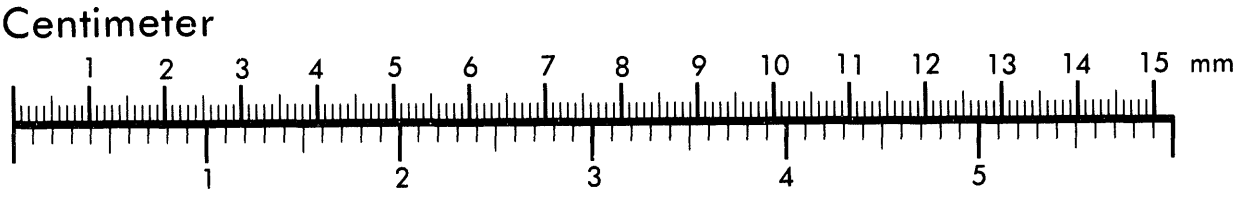

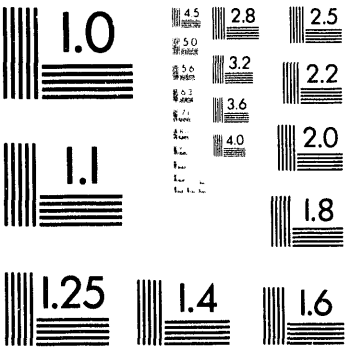

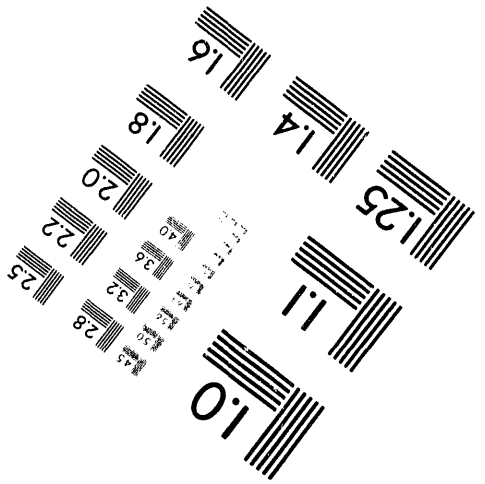

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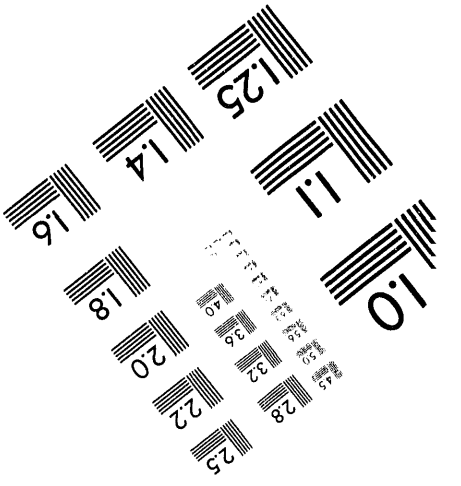

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THE EMERGENCE OF ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY AS AN AUXILIARY TO REPRESENTATIONAL DEMOCRACY

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Prepared by the
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managed by
Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc.
for the
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY
under Contract No. DE-AC05-84OR21400

ABSTRACT

Electronic democracy as a system is defined, and the ways in which it may affect current systems of government is addressed. Electronic democracy's achievements thus far in the United States at the community level are surveyed, and prospects for its expansion to state, national, and international systems are summarized. Central problems of electronic democracy are described, and its feasibility assessed (including safeguards against, and vulnerabilities to sabotage and abuse); the ways in which new and ongoing methods for information dissemination pose risks to current systems of government are discussed. One of electronic democracy's underlying assumptions is challenged, namely that its direct, instant polling capability necessarily improves or refines governance. Further support is offered for the assertion that computer systems/networks should be used primarily to educate citizens and enhance awareness of issues, rather than as frameworks for direct decision making. Keywords: Community, computer, democracy, government, political system, social system, telecommunications.

Introduction

The broad idea of an Electronic Democracy has been around for several years and has come to mean anything from the most basic automated voting process, to mass discoursive computational democracy.[1] This discussion focuses particularly on the prospects for home computers first transforming, then supporting a new system of democracy. Computers may do this by offering a widespread interactive medium for educating, debating, polling, and harnessing collective opinion. It is no longer sufficient to say that computers are merely a convenience - as they become more sophisticated and easily integrated into daily life, their influence on basic systems of government deserves careful attention. These ideas have been discussed in theory for several years; only in the past five years have electronic democracy experiments been taking place. General discussions about revitalizing citizen-based democracy spawned during the 1992 presidential election; many attribute this movement to increasing voter alienation from politics and general discontent with elected officials (e.g. U. S. House of Representatives banking scandal in 1993, and the apparent rise in power of lobbyists and special interest groups over the power of constituents).

With a topic such as this, it is important to point out up front that this is not a persuasive paper in any sense. It does not support one political party, nor does it suggest

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any one party has cornered the market on electronic democracy. Insofar as possible, this is an attempt to provide an unbiased, descriptive analysis of the prospects for electronic democracy in the future. Secondly, this is not an introduction on how to tamper with a system of government, nor is it recommended that the system be changed. It is an effort to track and describe what already seems to be occurring.

Local Level System

Representational democracy is a viable system because it allows government to work for a large number of people spread out over large areas. It emerged because it demonstrated that it could overcome the physical conditions that would ordinarily prohibit the formation and propagation of a public opinion. This system presumes public opinion will manifest itself through state legislatures and the U. S. House of Representatives.

Networked computers can potentially enable citizens to participate in a plebiscitary or direct-vote democracy on an enormous scale. On the other hand, it is estimated that only 15% of all U.S. households own a computer[2], and only a fraction of those have a modem or access to a network. Therefore, if a truly democratic electronic system rests on citizens owning computers, it will not get off the ground on a national scale any time soon. The alternative to the requirement that all homes be capable of connecting to the network is the idea of using public kiosks or various information centers capable of displaying information on issues, routing messages, tallying votes, etc. Will this result in better government?

Several local level or city electronic democracies have already been established in the United States. Their success has been mixed. One of the earlier and more notable systems is Santa Barbara's Public Electronic Network (PEN). Santa Barbara's unique characteristics made it a likely test area for this type of experiment. For example, in 1987 it was estimated that a third of the community households already owned personal computers (double what the national percentage is today).

The Santa Barbara system is designed to allow citizens access to city council agendas, staff reports, public safety tips, and the public library's online catalog. It also allows citizens to interact with each other and city bureaucrats over various issues. Over time, however, some believed that the system stagnated and no longer supported its intended mission. "...a relatively small group of Santa Monicans dominates the conferences, which often degenerate into mean-spirited verbal duels. The system also suffers from the lack of participation by most local officials."[3] These are serious charges that call into question the utility of the system. If it is unable to serve the community as anything more than a toy or temporary distraction, then it ought to be characterized as such and not falsely claim that it supports the formation of public policy. A truly useful system would involve the representatives from the start. They would set the tone for discussions, participate, and lead in the development and resolution of problems and issues. One of

the main problems, however, is that elected officials lack a clear motive for getting onto a system in the first place. Presumably it would allow them to understand what their constituents want; but with that comes the obligation to respond in some way, or at least invest time in reading all the new mail. The officials in Santa Barbara that did make an investment summarize the experience as having little payoff (at times even exacerbating frustrations of both citizens and officials).

Christopher Allen, a regular participant on the Cypherwonks listserv, presents some interesting ideas on electronic democracy. Cypherwonks is an online discussion group dedicated to formulating applications and discussing problems related to electronic democracy. Allen's version of referendum voting, best explained using politics at the local level, is a system based on the idea of a peer network. "Imagine waking up in the year 2001, sitting down at your computer, and amid your daily mail and news it let's you know that the price for water in your district may be increased." In order to participate or be allocated a vote on this issue, one must first prove that he is directly affected by the issue (i.e. he lives in the area). "Once the vote is allocated, one may participate in the decision-making leading up to the final vote. The citizen then may either participate in the negotiations and educate himself about the issue, or delegate his vote to someone else who may be more knowledgeable about that topic. Though it may conjure up images of Big Brother, voting records and personal profiles would be available online for these purposes.

Allen also suggested that "rating" agencies exist that would evaluate not only how one voted, but also how one participated in the entire process. The mission of the rating agency would be to track voter's records, analyze decision-making trends of each individual, and ultimately rate voter's political effectiveness based on his predictions and accuracy over time. It is a system where each individual, based on their interests and knowledge, is capable of developing his own mini-political career.

Allen does not address the major practical problem of who oversees the entire system. For example, who or what determines that the price of water may increase in the district in the first place? And once that is determined, what prevents that person or group from craftily framing the issue in a misleading or biased way? Who sets the agenda? Allen, however, goes on to acknowledge the limitations of his model. "Democratic "voting" without active participation in the process that leads up to the issues to be voted on is a threat to good government, rather than an advantage."

National System

The following is the outline for a system by which government representatives could begin to handle communication by e-mail with their constituents. This was recently advanced by Putnam Barber, a regular participant on the electronic democracy listserv.

In order to manage the e-mail and occasional flood situations, officials would need to

install some sort of automated response that would not attempt to respond to the content of the message, but merely acknowledge its receipt (i.e. a built in read-receipt). This receipt, however, could be modified to instruct constituents to use a standardized method for interacting with their representative. For example, it could read: "There are some things you can do to help me and my staff respond to your mail quickly and intelligently. If you would like to receive a copy of the guidelines for preparing mail in ways that would help us, please send a message to <ADDRESS@ETC> with a subject line saying "info correspondence". This allows each representative the freedom to choose how they will begin to manage their information based on the unique characteristics of their constituents.

The guidelines for efficient handling of e-mail correspondence by representatives might include the following: "1) Use a separate e-mail communication for each issue or topic you would like to raise with the representative. Identify the topic succinctly on the subject line. 2) Identify yourself fully and include information that will help the representative understand the issue you want to raise. 3) When you want to register support for a specific proposal in Congress, put "yes" in body of message with the bill number in the subject line (same standard for "no"). Barber offers similar instructions on how to obtain information on bills, offer comments, and suggest amendments. These are useful only insofar as the representative receives them in good faith and is convinced of their utility.

It is important to move cautiously into this uncharted area; the U. S. has already faced legal and practical problems in this transition. For example, in the summer of 1993, it was announced that the first online Congressional Session would be held. The goal was to try to hold a democratic forum to debate a broad issue of information policy. Public comments were welcome. It turned out that private companies were to furnish representatives the hardware needed to access this forum. This was immediately seen as a potential for conflict of interest and the experiment was cancelled.

At this point a formal "Constituent Electronic Mail System" has been established. Sixteen House members have publicized their e-mail addresses. In order to participate, constituents must first send a postcard or letter by U. S. mail verifying their home address. The instructions for participating also explain that Representatives may answer by regular mail to ensure confidentiality.[4] The results of this six month pilot program have been encouraging, but technical, budgetary, and staffing constraints may inhibit the rapid expansion of this project.

A New Paradigm for Democracy

The collapse of the Soviet Union marks the beginning of a liberal democratic plateau in the world's political evolution. Because information is a political, economic, and social force, democracy must continue to reconcile itself with the changing faces of this eternal power.

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

Large political parties across the globe seem to be staggering. The mass parties of Cold War Europe are dissolving into smaller groupings: libertarians, Greens, separatists like the Lombard League in Italy, and also racist groups in France and Germany. In America, more attention seems to be going to Independents, Communitarians, environmentalists (both liberal and conservative), and the religious right, to name a few. Perot may be credited with the idea of widening active participation in government to the broadest number at the grassroots level, irrespective of political affiliation; though Perot himself may have botched the presentation of the body politic as political class, this idea suggests a new systems paradigm for democracy. Gianni de Michelis, former Foreign minister of Italy and professor of industrial chemistry, calls this a shift from Newtonian democracy to Prigoginian democracy (named for Ilya Prigogene, physical chemist credited with a new theory of thermodynamic systems that challenged the classical science model).

De Michelis argues that the kinds of checks and balances between executive, judicial, and legislative branches need to be revised for the emergent Prigoginian (electronic) democracy.[5] A good system must not allow the unmediated reign of public opinion to destroy itself. For example, ethically sound decisions have been made in the past *over* the protest of majority opinion, e.g. Truman's order to desegregate the military[6], various spinoffs of separation of church and state, and countless freedom of speech issues. In many cases the majority may have voted based on fear/prejudice, but the classical system of democracy allowed, indeed welcomed, decisions based on principle.

Problems

Michael Sandel, professor of political philosophy at Harvard, cautions against a hasty migration toward electronic democracy. He suggests that Ross Perot's candidacy was a populists campaign that played on the general frustrations of voters. Perot envisioned a plebiscitary democracy that would cut red tape and move America forward. Sandel termed this movement "Electronic Bonapartism - a conception of personalist rule in the name of the masses, reinforced by the most advanced information technologies . . . technology can provide a way of instantaneously obtaining voter preferences or responses to polling questions, but it cannot supply the questions."[7] He argues that an electronic system will not result in a pure democracy, but would likely lead to some form of authoritarianism. It is not enough to have all citizens on the network voting "yes" or "no" on a candidate or issue. That is only the last moment of a democratic process. Sandel rightly explains that the heart of democracy is a deliberative process that allows negotiation, allows time to define the questions and the range of alternatives. Until this central and very complex variable is built into an electronic system, the system will fall short of being truly democratic, and ultimately it will undermine voters by serving only the system operator (or elected official).

Summary

Presently the U. S. and other democracies have only the most rudimentary

framework for an electronic auxiliary to their current systems. It is likely that a growing global network will continue to work its way into existing systems of government. The prospects for an electronic democracy are both exciting and troublesome. Eventually it may involve a fundamental shift in the way representational democracy works, but at this early stage, it seems the most feasible and unobtrusive development relates to increased availability of information (education) to voters. Each level of government must slowly integrate computer use and a new systems approach, balancing the likely headaches with probable rewards. The following table summarizes some of the more important issues.

SYSTEMS FACTORS

	Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects
Access	Potential for better informed voters; ideally no down time, citizens can participate around the clock.	Presently access is low; unlimited access allows irrational debate for an unlimited period of time. Too much information will make prioritization a challenge for both officials and voters.
Speed	Allows faster interaction, debate, and polling of public policy issues.	"Off the cuff" emotional remarks could undermine slow-by-design government. No cycle to receipt of mail, potential for overwhelming official.
Reliability	Emergence of standards and failsafe mechanisms may ensure legitimacy and prevent sabotage.	Standards fuel creative hacking; huge potential for bulk mailings and attempts to mislead representatives.
Information Manage-ment	Electronic based information will be easier for officials to search, assess, and manage. Increased resources available on network could improve official's efficiency in researching issues.	Clumsy software/ "transition phase" could impose additional burden on officials with uncertain benefits.

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

1. For an old model, see E. S. Savas, May 29, 1970, "Cybernetics in City Hall", Science, Vol. 168: 1066-1071; for more recent work, see Stodolsky, David S., 1994, "Computational Democracy: Scientific Communication as a Basis for Governance", ("comp.democ" on ftp.EU.net).

Briefly stated, Computational Democracy would be based on an automated system of information creation, distribution, and integration into policy. Information would be channeled/distributed based on reputations of authors and critics. Automatic negotiating capabilities would guarantee solicitation of alternative viewpoints. Decisions reached discoursively could dominate formal decision making, thus making the existing political infrastructure less important. There would be a greater transparency in decision making; citizen participation could vastly increase.

2. *1994 Information Please Almanac*, "Who Uses Home Computers?", p. 564.

3. Varley, Pamela, November/December 1991, "Electronic Democracy", Technology Review, Vol. 94, #6: pp. 43-51.

4. Instructions located at gopher.house.gov

5. De Michelis, Gianni, Fall 1992, "Beyond Newtonian Democracy", New Perspectives Quarterly, Vol. 9, #4: 9-11.

6. Varn, Richard J., Spring 1993, "Electronic Democracy: Jeffersonian Boom or Teraflop?", Spectrum: The Journal of State Government, Vol. 66, #2: 21-25.

7. Sandel, Michael, Fall 1992, "Post-National Democracy vs. Electronic Bonapartism", New Perspectives Quarterly, Vol. 9, #4: 4-8.

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