

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY DEMANDS PARTICIPATION

Michael Turk

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It's 8 o'clock on Wednesday night. Millions of American homes are tuned in to the most popular TV show on the air. For 16 weeks, the contestants have been jockeying for position and it is finally down to two. Trying to break into this business used to be a grueling ordeal characterized by endless hours spent honing your craft. Now an audition process vets contestants and determines who is most qualified for the top position. Tonight's finale will determine the winner. Fingers are poised to speed dial all across America.

The program's website is noticeably slower tonight than it was this afternoon. The traffic has spiked as millions of people across the nation express their opinions. The competition has been grueling, but it has also been more immediate and arguably fairer than in the past. When

all the votes are tallied, the winner will be announced—and someone will be elected the next American president.

In this scenario, our political process has been reduced to merely another offering in the crowded world of celebutainment, with our top leaders chosen from afar by telephone calls and Internet voting. Let's call it politainment.

It is a vision with a certain appeal. Trading in the quadrennial display of ego and fundraising prowess in favor of a sixteen-week debate series weeding out one competitor at a time would certainly have its supporters. Imagine the possibilities of having weekly political debates on proposed legislation, followed by 24 hours of Internet voting. True direct democracy would be at our fingertips. But would that be a good thing?

When the Framers of our Constitution built our representative democracy, they understood one thing: most people are not informed on issues. In 1776, it was lack of access to education. Today it is due to a combination of too much information and not enough curiosity.

In June of 2007, the Bureau of Labor Statistics released its American Time Use Survey. It found that Americans between the ages of 15 and 55 spend only 6 to 20 minutes a day reading.¹ They spent less than half an hour a day on educational activities, but 2.5 hours watching TV.² In an age of always-on communications and our insatiable need for entertainment, we, as a society, are not greatly concerned with studying the issues.

As practitioners of Internet campaigns march toward a Utopian vision of direct democracy and virtual town halls, there must be a corresponding effort to educate Americans beyond our current ninth-grade civics class level. Without an informed electorate participating

1 American Time Use Survey, US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. July 19, 2007, Accessed 3/18/2008 at Statistics <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.t11.htm>

2 American Time Use Survey, US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. July 19, 2007, Accessed 3/18/2008 at Statistics <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.t01.htm>

directly, our politics of the future will never live up to their promise.

In January 2007, Gallup questioned Americans on their attitudes toward Iraq. Under a “four alternatives” question, respondents were asked if the US should a) withdraw immediately, b) set a timeline for withdrawal, c) stay as long as needed or d) increase troop strength. Only 12% favored an increase in troop strength. In the same survey, asked of the same people, the surge option was described, and 36% supported it.³

Within the same survey, almost a quarter of respondents shifted position based on variations in descriptions of policy ideas. Applying that sort of variation to instant voting on policy decisions or elections would subject the American political system to swings in opinion more extreme than even our current partisan structure. An electorate so easily swayed by simple arguments and disinclined to look for more information, with easy access to voting on policy decisions or elections, is more destructive than an apathetic electorate that chooses not to vote.

As another example, on February 27, 2003, the Associated Press reported that 59% of the American people favored the invasion of Iraq.⁴ War detractors would argue this was due to the Administration’s “misleading” of the American people. One week later, however, the Gallup News Service reported that number had remained largely unchanged from ten years prior⁵:

“Our basic numbers on public support for invading Iraq have stayed roughly the same for month after month ... The level of sup-

3 *Public Opposes Troop Surge by 61% to 36% Margin*, Gallup News Service, January 9, 2007. Accessed 3/21/08 at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/26080/Public-Opposes-Troop-Surge-61-36-Margin.aspx>

4 *Poll suggests public support for invasion of Iraq would drop if Saddam destroys missiles*. Associated Press, February 27, 2003. Accessed 3/30/08 at <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/world/iraq/20030227-2009-iraq-poll.html>

5 *Iraq, Bush Approval, Celebrity Opinions on Iraq, The Economy, Religion and Politics*, Gallup News Service, January 9, 2007. Accessed 3/21/08 at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/7927/Iraq-Bush-Approval-Celebrity-Opinions-Iraq-Economy-Religion.aspx>

port has changed a little here and there, but when all is said and done, we are consistently finding that between 55% to 60% of Americans favor U.S. military action against Iraq to bring about a change in that country's leadership. That's not far from what we found 10 years ago."

The narrative on Iraq that was cemented following the 1991 invasion of Kuwait held sway over the electorate for more than a decade—creating an environment where making a case to go to war against them was relatively easy. More informed and rigorous public debate was not possible within the existing paradigm of politainment.

As a final example, the following text message from Twitter was received as this was being written, "[J]ust voted in a run-off election that I only became aware of when the ballot showed up in my mailbox." The sender is politically engaged and active. Yet the message demonstrates the difficulty of staying informed of every political discussion, debate and election.

None of this is to say that direct democracy is not a desirable goal. But its implementation must be in tandem with a more informed electorate. We must challenge ourselves to create a renewed personal attention to matters of public concern.

Fortunately, while the Internet is reshaping the way we participate in campaigns and interact with our government, it is also opening doors to new educational opportunities. A Pew Internet and American Life Project study following the 2004 election found dramatic increases in the use of the Web to research candidates and issues—with more than 75 million Americans using the Web for information and news about politics.⁶ Nearly a quarter of Americans (24%) say they regularly learn something about the presidential campaign from the Internet, almost double the percentage from a comparable point in the 2004 campaign (13%). Compared with the 2000 campaign, far fewer Americans now

6 *The Internet and Campaign 2004*. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. March 6, 2005. Accessed 4/3/2008 at http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_2004_Campaign.pdf

say they regularly learn about the campaign from local TV news (down eight points), nightly network news (down 13 points) and daily newspapers (down nine points).⁷

With more Americans turning to the Internet for information, the potential for a new era of citizen involvement exists. The wealth of information available, together with a diverse variety of opinion to interpret and frame that information, creates a rich and fertile learning environment. The power of social networks to bring people together, paired with the Internet, can create a modern political state that invites civic participation. If the Internet is able to bring “We the People” back to our political process, the concept of direct democracy may become a reality.

About the Author

Michael Turk is Vice President of Industry Grassroots for the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, where he is working to build a robust grassroots activist base for the cable industry. Before joining NCTA, Turk served as the eCampaign Director for the Republican National Committee. Prior to his position at the Committee, Turk was the eCampaign Director for Bush-Cheney '04.

7 *Social Networking and Online Videos Take Off: Internet's Broader Role in Campaign 2008*. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. January 11, 2008. Accessed 4/3/2008 at http://pewInternet.org/pdfs/Pew_MediaSources_jan08.pdf