

Essay:

Challenge and promise of e-democracy

Authors:

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In May 2001, Mark Latham, then a Labor backbencher in the Commonwealth House of Representatives, set up a website for his Werriwa constituents that he said was the first example of internet-based direct democracy. Latham argued that Australian politics was so dominated by secretive, powerful elites that it was effectively “broken”. He was, therefore, seeking a way “of restoring the public’s faith in democracy”. His “contract” with his Werriwa constituents was to post questions upon which they could vote by email, with the understanding that he would act on the majority view. Latham promised to advance the electorate’s decision in Commonwealth parliamentary debates, in the Labor Caucus and in the media. He also undertook to publish all actions and results on the site to ensure his accountability. This would be, he claimed, real democracy in action, the triumph of the people’s will and a “logical consequence of Information Age politics”.

The experiment was Latham’s response to the radical challenge of e-democracy. Advocates of e-democracy argue that modern communication technologies may profoundly affect political processes and policies by making our institutions more “democratic.” Over the past decade, e-democracy websites have popped up all over the world to explore and exploit this assumed potential.

But what exactly is e-democracy and what real promise does it hold? The first problem to which e-democracy offers itself as a solution is, as Latham’s remarks indicate, the allegedly unhealthy state of our current representative system. Our democracy, so it is claimed, is not nearly democratic enough. “The people”, the foundation of democratic legitimacy, really matter only at election times when governing elites pay them brief, if ardent, attention. During the campaigning season electorates are relentlessly wooed, flattered and bribed by competing parties desperate to attain or retain political power. Once the vote is in and counted, however, the electors have nothing more to do. They are expected to retire from the public arena, leaving the demanding business

of policy and government to professional politicians, who too often seem impervious to people's real interests and opinions.

The consequences of such exclusion can be severe, especially during periods of rapid economic change and social dislocation. Radically populist leaders and parties may appear, revealing the extent of popular alienation from the political system and profoundly alarming the existing "establishment". When that happens, previously complacent governments suddenly become anxious to address the "democratic deficit". Their rhetoric begins to emphasise more strongly the virtues of wider public consultation and participation. New institutions, such as regional community forums and community cabinet meetings, are devised to establish visible links with the community and to give the impression that government is genuinely "listening". Governments also begin to investigate the potential of the new communications technology for strengthening links and enhancing public access. Programs are inaugurated in "e-government" (broadly speaking, using the internet to serve traditional governmental functions). Governments even begin to flirt with the larger concept of e-democracy, pioneered by civic-minded tech-enthusiasts around the world.

This can be taken as a sketch of recent Australian history, but the pattern of governmental concern with increased public participation is, in fact, universal among developed democracies. A turn to e-democracy has been a common feature and it is easy enough to see the attractiveness of the idea to governments trying to bridge the democratic divide between citizens and themselves. Yet the term itself tells us nothing about what e-democracy really implies for current democratic practices and its superficial attractiveness may, in fact, mask real dangers for practitioners of representative government.

The truth is that e-democratic experiments have mushroomed around the world far in advance of any thoughtful theoretical analysis. Search engines now return 163,000 pages relating to e-democracy. Some of these promote discussion on political issues, public policy or current affairs, some conduct polling, some facilitate contact with elected representatives, some offer "self-help" for would-be e-democrats. Some sites have been initiated by citizen groups but many are run by governments, including all Australian state governments. A representative survey reveals, however, no single meaning or common ideological ground. There is no consensus on what e-democracy's proper goals should be, on how or by whom it should be inaugurated and sustained, and on the effect it is likely to have on citizens and politics. Most importantly, the implications of e-democracy for existing forms and processes of representative government have either not been addressed or are simply assumed.

There is, in other words, considerable confusion surrounding the exact definition of e-democracy. The one offered by Steven Clift, probably the world's foremost e-democracy advocate, is indicative. Clift originated www.e-democracy.org in 1994 to inform citizens of Minnesota on issues of local and state politics, and involve them in policy formation. Clift says that e-democracy is any use of the internet for political purposes either by governments, politicians, media, political parties, civil society organisations or citizens - a definition too broad to be very useful. We may learn more, however, by looking at what Clift regards as good e-democratic practice. In a recent survey of the Australian e-democratic scene he warmly endorsed a range of government initiatives, particularly those of Queensland (http://www.electronicgov.net/pubs/research_papers/index.shtml). Yet a glance at Queensland's e-democracy program merely reveals more starkly the problem of definition.

Queensland's e-democracy policy framework speaks about strengthening "participative democracy" and gives a quasi-definition of e-democracy as the use of the internet "to enhance our democratic processes and provide increased opportunities for individuals and communities to interact with government". In practice this means three specific programs: e-petitions (an electronic version of the traditional right of citizens to petition government); the broadcasting of parliament on the internet; and online consultation at a website called ConsultQld. Only the last of these might be considered innovative. ConsultQld claims to provide "an opportunity for people to respond online to certain issues being considered by the government", though the issues are few and carefully selected. Some issues involve only limited, specialist participation - for example, a review of the Retail Shop Leases Act 1994 on which retail tenants, landlords and their advisers were invited to air their views. Clearly these forms of participation amount to little more than ordinary policy consultation conducted online. Others - like consideration of the challenges of an ageing Queensland population - seek general public participation. All contributions are vetted by departmental officials who decide whether to post them on a web noticeboard in the hope of furthering discussion. The Government gives no undertaking to take particular notice of any contribution but promises to publish its eventual decision online and to give contributors electronic notification of the availability of the official report.

Such initiatives, given their obvious limitations, can hardly be said to constitute a bold new democratic frontier, and in fact scarcely allow a clear distinction between e-democracy and e-government. (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, for example, puts internet broadcasting of parliament under e-government.) E-government generally tries to improve governmental efficiency, responsiveness and accountability by providing services online, electronically

disseminating information and facilitating public consultation, none of which is very controversial. If e-democracy means something more than these things, of what does the “more” consist?

At the heart of the matter is whether e-democracy promises merely to improve current democratic practices or whether it, in fact, poses a radical, wholesale challenge to current notions of democracy. The very use of the term seems to imply a pledge to make government “more democratic”. The danger in this is of raising public expectations that limited, perhaps tokenistic, programs cannot meet, so increasing rather than diminishing popular cynicism and alienation.

The e-democratic puzzle betrays a certain longstanding ambivalence about whether our representative system should be considered truly democratic. In the past, true democracy was generally taken to mean simple direct democracy, with all citizens voting on every important question. Representation was admitted to be a departure from true democracy, though opinions differed on whether this was a good or a regrettable thing. Some welcomed representation as a system that would moderate and control unruly democratic passions. More genuine democrats regarded it as a compromise made necessary by the fact that true democracy could only conceivably work in a small town where all could participate and vote. The implication of this latter position, however, was that we could and should move to the more perfect form once technology had turned even large states into “virtual” villages.

And herein lies the real promise of e-democracy. But if this promise is to be fulfilled it will have to surmount large obstacles, as the fate of Latham’s Direct Democracy in Werriwa website demonstrates.

Latham’s experiment was not in fact one in direct democracy at all. It was rather a version of “agency representation” in which the representative is expected to act faithfully as an agent of the electorate’s expressed will. Even as such it was intentionally and problematically limited. Latham left large questions, such as managing the economy, to politicians who understood them better and stuck to “moral” issues on which politicians could claim no particular expertise. This was an admission of the need for expertise in at least some areas of politics. It suggested that e-democracy will always at some point confront and limit democratic participation in the name of such expertise. But even thus restricted, Latham’s experiment ran afoul of the realities of a representative system dominated by parties. In the first question posted: “Should the Federal Government ban online gambling?” the results provided a 67 per cent “yes” vote. The fact that the number of respondents was only 213 did not prevent Latham from making a speech in parliament, writing a column for *The Daily Telegraph* and raising the issue with the responsible shadow minister. Unfortunately, this put him on the same side of the

issue as the Howard Government, a fact ironically noted by the then minister for communications, Senator Alston, who invited Latham to cross the floor.

By early 2002 the site was no more, due perhaps to the intractability of these problems and to Latham's promotion to the Shadow Ministry in late 2001.

The point is that any attempt to alter the existing structure of decision-making authority is bound to meet severe resistance. Agency representation, direct participative democracy and our current representative forms are not points on a smooth spectrum along which a polity can simply slide at will. Any attempt to move to a more radical democratic form constitutes not a reform but a revolution. The mere existence of the necessary technology will certainly not accomplish that and there is little sign that the public, despite its alienation, has any great hunger to travel such a road. If e-democrats wish to have real influence, they may need to start with the more modest goal - reconceptualising our representative system as a continual conversation between representatives and represented.

If the new technology can improve the quantity and enrich the quality of this conversation, then there is every cause to welcome it. It is on such foundations that the more ambitious e-democrats may argue for the greater promise of technology and e-democracy. ■