

Participation is Both Enhanced and Transformed in *The Electronic Republic*

by Lawrence K. Grossman

The transformation to a modern-day extension of Jeffersonian participatory democracy is accelerating rapidly. The increasing speed of information, the growing commitment to political inclusiveness and equality, and the public's rising frustration at the poor performance of the so-called professional politicians are all playing a role. but as we have seen, it is a trend that, in some respects, has been evolving in fits and starts since the nation was born. It began with the very first act of the first congress,

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to create a citizens' bill of rights, which went into effect in 1791. Efforts to broaden public participation continued with the end of property ownership as a requirement for voting in 1860; adoption of the secret ballot in the 1870s; adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment extending the vote to African-Americans in 1870; direct election of U.S. senators in 1913; granting women the right to vote in 1920; allowing residents of the District of Columbia to vote for president in 1961; banning poll taxes in federal elections in 1964; lowering the voting age to eighteen in 1971; adopting civil rights laws abolishing literacy and state poll tax requirements through the years, and in 1994, starting to ease the process for voter registration through “motor-voter” registration and mail ballot laws.

The transformation to participatory democracy has also been helped by the remarkable increase in the speed of information, pushed along by the invention of the rotary press and mechanical typesetting, then the spread of the telegraph, underseas cable, telephone, radio, television, cable television, satellite transmission, computerization, and now, digital convergence. As long as weeks, months, and at times a year or more were needed for news to travel from one end of the country to the other, the public could not readily get involved in making day-to-day decisions of government. Citizens had no choice but to delegate that job to their elected representatives and rely on them to use their best judgment in conducting the public's business.

Today, however, information travels with the speed of light, distance is no longer a significant barrier, and citizens' voices not only at a rate of 15 percent a month.” Along with a good many other Democrats, Speaker Foley lost the election in a close race against a less-well-known opponent. Mr. Hartman's nationwide cyberpolitical blitz undoubtedly contributed to his defeat.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum is “PeaceNet, a liberal computer network, [which] was started in 1985 and now connects 3,000 progressive groups worldwide. ‘I can have an issue alert faxed to 900 people overnight,’ says Ann Lewis, a Democratic activist who works with Planned Parenthood. ‘You no longer have to drag people to meetings.’ She says the ‘democratization’ of political knowledge ‘makes it harder and harder to be an insider.’” The conclusion: “Voters...have come to believe they have just as much right to propose solutions as do Beltway policy wonks and experts.” The information superhighway has put America on the road to the electronic republic...

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In addition to Ross Perot, a growing number of politicians on both sides of the aisle now advocate the use of federal referenda and initiatives to vote on new taxes, prayer in the schools, and other highly controversial issues. When the ballot initiative process first was introduced in California in the early 20th century, the belief was that it would act only as a safety valve, enabling citizens “to supplement the work of the legislature by initiating those measures which the legislature either viciously or negligently fails or refuses to enact.” during the past two decades, however, the California legislature has taken a back seat to the initiative process, which has escalated into “a major if not the principal generator of important state policy, while state government often sits as an understudy responding...in a supplemental and reactive fashion.” as a result, the legislative process has been put directly into the hands of the people. Referenda have turned into what Republican Jack Kemp calls “the cutting edge of the effort to enact conservative reforms such as school choice and tax limitation.” Opponents, on the other hand, now view referenda and ballot initiatives not as populist measures, but mostly as vehicles for private interests with large political war chests...

New Forms of...

As we have seen, the increasing use of direct popular votes to displace legislative and executive powers has it detractors as well as supporters. Problems include the difficulty of framing suitable referendum questions about complex issues; the inadequacy of the public's knowledge and experience involving many of the issues to be decided; concern over encouraging narrowly focused, single-issue politics; fear of one-sided, high spending, distorting campaigns; lack of opportunity for suitable deliberation and compromise under a system in which the only choices are a vote for or against; and the worrisome potential for the exercise of excessive influence by special interests or precipitant action by an unchecked majority....

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Distance no longer acts as an obstacle to forming political alliances and organizing political leverage. Today, electronic messages sent across the street or across the world are transmitted via satellite and arrive simultaneously, with equal clarity and timeliness. Using the Internet and other on-line services, people interact with others thousands of miles away who share their same interests as easily as they interact with their neighbors next door. The cost disparities between local and long distance communications are fast disappearing. "Location, location, location" means almost everything in real estate, but almost nothing in telecommunications, and therefore, less than it once did in politics. Many candidates running for local and statewide office receive more campaign contributions from outside their election districts than from within.

One consequence of this trend: The balance of power between the states and the federal government, so carefully specified in the Constitution, has been turned upside down. The dominance of national media means that most members of the electorate know far more about the activities of the president, the

cabinet, and the Congress in Washington, than about the close-to-home activities of their own precinct leaders, district representatives, county officials, and state governors and legislators. Few states have state wide C-SPANs or news channels of their own. Proponents of the California Channel cite its need because "most Californians see their state government as only an occasional 15-second television news blip sandwiched between the latest murder and most recent fire."

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the federal government cuts back. The idea is to bring these programs closer to home, where the people who use them can control them, and where presumably they will be more responsive to people's needs. But can a political system that has grown so dependent on national and even global telecommunications, which perversely perform at their worst in transmitting intelligent information about local governance, actually reverse course and "go home" again? Neighborhood and suburban weeklies and local newspapers offer significant local news coverage, of course. But state and local governments urgently need to build new channels of electronic communication to their own constitu-

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what goes on far afield in national politics. Electronics makes the distant seem remarkably clear and familiar, while the local seems strangely opaque and faraway. This is exactly the opposite of what the Federalist founders intended. The multi-state federal nation, whose very size and complexity, Madison argued, would serve as the ultimate barrier against a tyranny of the majority, can be traversed with the speed of light in the telecommunications age.

The early 1980s saw a new movement, the "New Federalism," start to shift government programs away from Washington, D.C., and devolve them back to state and local jurisdictions. In the 1990s that movement picked up speed to such an extent that today it is one of the dominant trends in government. As the Founders intended, the states once again are taking the initiative in dealing with major domestic problems, while

ents. Modern local video links are essential to transmit local activities and initiatives into citizens' homes. The national information infrastructure must be designed with a strong and complex web of local telecommunications arteries that will carry local traffic and support the exercise of effective local citizenship.



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