Televoting in the United States

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Televote is a new method of interactive and deliberative public opinion polling that has been tested at the local level (San Jose, Los Angeles, and Waimanalo), state level (Hawaii), and national level (New Zealand). It is designed to measure public opinion, but unlike conventional public opinion surveying, it also stimulates citizen interaction, deliberation, and participation in the democratic process.

Although the Televote method utilizes standard scientific random sampling methods to select participants, it has a number of features that distinguish it from traditional telephone and/or personal interview surveys. First, it provides information to respondents, which includes undisputed facts, a number of alternatives from which to choose, and pro and con arguments for the various options. Second, it encourages the respondents to discuss the facts, opinions, & issues with neighbors, family, friends, and co-workers. Third, it allows time for deliberation before respondents reply. And finally, it is designed to be used simultaneously with Electronic Town Meetings.

1.0 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TELEVOTE: CLARIFICATION OF FALSE DICHOTOMIES

The Televote design arises from a participatory democratic theory. The original designer of Televote, Vincent Campbell, classifies himself as a "democratist," who seeks to maximize direct public influence on the policy-making process. The primary goal of his 1973 Televote project, funded by the National

Science Foundation, was to create an innovative system of "civic communication" that could lead to the implementation of effective methods of citizen participation. (Campbell, 1974).

The Televote researchers that followed Campbell shared a similar participatory democratic theory. Participatory democracy, however, runs counter to the theoretical base of the American constitutional framework. Since the earliest days of the United States, there have been strong proponents of increased citizen participation and more accountability of government officials. Yet this perspective has always been met with intense opposition of those who warn of the dangers of "ochlocracy," "majority faction," or "tyranny of the majority."

False Dichotomy No. 1: Tyranny of the Majority vs. Enlightened Rule of the Few

Those who wrote our constitution, cloaked in secrecy behind closed doors, demonstrated their fears and/or contempt of the masses through the means by which they wrote the constitution and rushed the ratification process. They excluded all press and citizens from the convention while drafting the constitution and kept no formal record of the proceedings. Their process has often been repeated throughout our history as administrators and representatives seek to develop polices and laws with no input or oversight from the citizenry at large.[1]

Such isolated behavior arouses the suspicion of those who share Thomas Jefferson's warning to citizens to stay informed or the "wolves" (representatives) will surely devour the "sheep" (citizens). (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 879-881) Yet the theoretical dichotomy is hardly as distinct as the rhetoric often is. The choices are not wolves vs. sheep; poor vs. rich; tyranny of the majority vs. enlightened rule by the few; or saints vs. sinners. While it may appear useful to win an argument by only addressing the strengths of one's position and the weaknesses of the other or by depicting one's opponent as an extremist opposed to moderation, such a dichotomy is not useful for understanding the theory and practice of Televote.

Indeed, the philosophical disagreement that divided John Adams from Thomas Jefferson and that continues to classify theorists, researchers, and practitioners today is often misstated. Adams, who believed good government arose out of taking power from the many and giving it to a few of the most wise and good, also argued that a representative body "should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them...[To] do strict justice at all times, it should be an equal representation, or in other words, equal interests among people should have equal interest in it." (Adams, 1989, p. 65)

Adams' ideal constitution established annual elections and divided government to keep government officials acting in the public interests rather than personal interests. His description of the dangers of a single assembly recognized that the virtues of the "wise" were not assured without checks. He warned that a single assembly is: "apt to be avaricious and in time will not scruple to exempt itself from burdens which it will lay without compunction on its constituents...apt to grow ambitious and after a time will not hesitate to vote itself perpetual...(and) would make arbitrary laws for their own interest, execute all laws arbitrarily for their own interest, and adjudge all controversies in their own favor." (Adams, 1989, p. 66)

Jefferson, whom some saw as a Shayite or Leveller, shared Adams' conviction that decisions made exclusively by an unchecked elite would lead to self-serving actions of those in power. On the other hand, Jefferson believed aristocracy was a vital component of government. He called his aristocracy a meritocracy (based on talent and merit) and distinguished it from Adams' preference for an aristocracy based on wealth and refinement. (Jefferson, 1989, p. 193) His fundamental disagreement with Adams was over the degree to which citizens should have power in government and the mechanisms by which representatives should be held accountable. He recognized that the citizens could sometimes be fooled or corrupted by wealth, but believed that the failings of citizens were not as great a danger as the self-serving corruption of an uncontrolled elite.

Both Adams and Jefferson believed that the success of the American representative system rested to a large degree on an educated citizenry. Adams stated: "Laws for liberal education of youth, especially for the lower classes of people, are so extremely wise and useful that to a humane and generous mind no expense for this purpose would be thought extravagant." (Adams, 1989, p. 68) Jefferson, who devised a grand scheme for public education and identifying those with the most merit, argued that the key to good government was to "Enlighten the People generally, and tyranny and oppression of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of the day." (Jefferson, 1989, p. 197) He recognized that education would certainly not end all pain and vice in the world but posited that through an enlightened public, there would be improvement in the human condition and "most of all in matters of government and religion." (Jefferson, 1989, p. 197)

Jefferson's views most closely parallel former American Political Science Association President Carl Friedrich's criticism that distrust of public opinion has resulted in putting "the experts on top, rather than on tap." (Friedrich, 1943, p. 216) Friedrich, who recognized the fallibility of citizens, nonetheless held the position that citizens ought to be plugged directly into the policy-making process of elected officials as well as career bureaucrats. He argued that the "common man collectively is a better judge as to what is good for him than any self-appointed elite." (Friedrich, 1943, p. 113) In addition, he contended that the average person is much likelier than the political partisan to recognize and adhere to a "working scheme of cooperation among men of different views." (Friedrich, 1943, p. 123)

John Dewey, democratic theorist and educator, also believed in the potentiality of citizens to exercise power wisely on their road to self-determination and fulfillment. He saw the state's role as being a facilitator and enricher of human contacts human beings have with one another. (Dewey, 1957, pp. 187-213)

The common threads among the participatory theorists is the advocacy of greater direct involvement of the citizenry and more accountability of government officials and a firm belief in the capability and willingness of citizens to exercise power wisely most of the time. None of them share a naive notion of public perfection. None of them advocate abolition of representative systems in favor of full-time, direct democracy. And none of them believe that the American political system is sufficiently democratic. The Televote researchers developed their hypotheses and experiments in the participatory democratic framework of Jefferson, Friedrich, Dewey and others who do not imagine exaggerated vices in citizens and magnified virtues in government officials.

False Dichotomy No. 2: Representatives Can and Will Protect Minority Rights - The People Will Oppress Minorities

It is also frequently assumed and asserted that proponents of increased powers for citizens are indifferent to minority rights and that to more fully empower citizens would lead to tyranny of the majority over the minority. Yet that supposes that majorities will tyrannize while minorities will not. In fact, Jefferson. who always maintained a faith in the basic morality, compassion, and generosity of humans, recognized no less than James Madison (who held a less favorable view of human nature) that minority rights needed to be protected in society. In fact, his concern for a national bill of rights predated Madison's, whose obsession with majority faction led him to underestimate elite abuse of power. Jefferson was a strong proponent of religious freedom and tolerance for political differences. His first inaugural address was a critique of the exploitation of power demonstrated by the Federalists (who feared the masses) and a call for minority rights. Indeed it was the Antifederalists and those who favored more democracy that demanded a Bill of Rights be added to the U.S. Constitution to assure freedom of religion, press, speech, and assembly, rights of the accused, and other protections. It was the Federalists that argued against such restraints on government and who sought to suppress dissent and punish opponents through the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Friedrich and Dewey also were strong proponents of rights and civil liberties. Friedrich's presidential address to the 1963 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, entitled "Rights, Liberties, Freedoms: A Reappraisal," forcefully documented the legitimacy of those who asserted their civil rights and liberties. He also lamented the "misleading oratory" of *Congressmen* who called the exercise of rights "Communist" or "Unamerican." (Friedrich, 1963) John Dewey wrote that the primary challenge of democracy was how to maximize the common good and personal liberty at the same time. (Dewey, 1932, pp. 377-414)

The Televote researchers are no less concerned about protections of civil liberties and minority rights. Indeed, a vital goal of the Televote process is to give voice to minorities who are unheard or silenced within the current political framework. 2. EXPERIMENTS OF TELEVOTE: EDUCATING AND ENCOURAGING DISCUSSION AND DELIBERATION[2]

Televote Prototype

The original Televote experiment took place in 1973 under the direction of psychologist Vincent Campbell. The purpose of the San Jose project was to provide a means for involving parents and students in the determination of public school policy in the district. Parents, students, and public officials worked with the Televote researchers from the outset to set the agenda, in other words, to select the issues for the Televote. Campbell's design sought to encourage self-initiated participation of those who were traditionally non-involved by conducting an extensive outreach campaign through newspapers, cable television programming, commercial television spots, and radio announcements that solicited participation in the Televote. All information was prepared in Spanish, as well as English, to reach the large Mexican-American residents in the area.

The prototype Televote worked as follows. After citizens learned of the project and the issues through the media, anyone in the district could register to participate. Once registered, each Televoter received a personalized registration number and detailed information on each issue, which included relevant undisputed facts and pro and con arguments for various options. Televoters were given several days to think about the responses before casting their tele-ballots. The actual voting process was a technologically sophisticated system designed to minimize the inconvenience and maximize the time efficiency for both the Televoters and Televote staff.

Over 5,500 individuals registered as Televoters. Only about 15% of the registrants actually voted in the process. The low turn out was a disappointment to Campbell, but the experiment nevertheless produced some interesting findings and raised new questions for testing.

Follow-up surveys indicated that the level of public awareness could be increased during the Televote period. This increase in awareness, however, tended to be heavily correlated along ethnic and socioeconomic lines. The self-selected feature of Televote resulted in a demographic disparity with ethnic minorities greatly underrepresented.

The research also revealed a pervasive feeling of powerlessness in having an impact in government or on government officials. Even among the respondents (15% of those registered), a majority indicated on follow-up surveys that they felt government officials do not care what people think or that government is too complicated for them to understand. (Campbell, 1974, pp. 31-32) Impact analysis of Televote tended to legitimize these attitudes. The analysis of Televote revealed that if the issue was already on the policy agenda of the San

Jose school district officials, it had a much greater chance of being dealt with. It was determined that out of seven issues already on the agenda, the results of four of the Televotes appeared to have some impact on the policy-making process. However, if the issue was initiated by students, parents, or the Televote staff, Campbell concluded there was no "tangible impact on district policy or decisions as a result of those Televotes." (Campbell, 1974, p. 17)

Post-test surveys of Televote also revealed that 95% of the Televoters would be interested in participating again and expanding the project to include other governmental bodies as well as the school district. Most of the Televoters (73%) additionally expressed a willingness to pay for the Televote system of participation.[3]

Televote Revised

In 1978 political scientists at the University of Hawaii, Theodore Becker, Richard Chadwick, and Christa Slaton, hypothesized that Televote would be a useful mechanism to better inform citizens and engage them in dialogue on constitutional issues that were being raised prior to Hawaii's third constitutional convention. They chose to revise the Campbell Televote method in the following ways:

(1) *Utilization of scientific random sampling.* The researchers believed that Campbell's self-selected scheme relied too much on self-initiated action that would not be reflective of the diversity of Hawaii's citizenry. They chose to rely on

probability theory of scientific random sampling to select participants in order for the responses to be views of citizens more representative of the population at large.

(2) *Encouragement of interaction.* Based on the theoretical premise that one's views become more refined and enlightened through discussion of the issues with others, the social scientists encouraged the Televoters to discuss the issue with family, co-workers, neighbors, and friends.

(3) *Implementation of call-back system.* Campbell's 15% response rate was consistent with the norm for self-initiated responses to surveys. The Televote researchers concluded that a 15% response rate would be unacceptable, but probable, if the Televote staff made no attempts to solicit participation beyond the initial call. From the outset, they decided to call Televoters after the initial deliberation period to solicit input, to assure that the information was received, to discover if more time was needed, and to stress the importance of their participation to assure a representative picture of Hawaii's population.[4]

(4) *Development of Multi-Stage Review Process for Televote Information.* The Hawaii researchers, who had conducted conventional surveys, were aware that one of the greatest dangers in all forms of polling is the tainting effect of bias. Following the Campbell model to minimize design bias, they also added several steps to the process to incorporate outside review of the Televote information & questionnaire. The multi-stage

process included extensive research to obtain undisputed, objective information. This information also included historical facts and comparative data. The next step would be to provide Televoters with a number of alternatives from which to choose rather than provide a simplistic either-or choice. The alternatives would be supplemented with pro and con arguments. During this phase of Televote design, the researchers attempted to be very broad-based. Alternatives and arguments were gleaned from social science literature, editorials, campaign materials, and letters to the editor. Politicians, organized groups, professors, and interested citizens were solicited for input to offer Televoters diverse political perspectives.

Utilizing their best scientific expertise, the researchers carefully edited to rid the information of any prejudice in favor of one viewpoint over another. They also took drafts of the Televote to individuals who were advocates for various alternatives to be sure they had accurately conveyed their positions and to confirm that the facts presented were undisputable. After pre-testing conducted by students with relatives and friends to identify overlooked problems with confusing or overly complex verbiage on questions, the final step in the process was to take the Televote questionnaire to a major, respectable professional polling firm for a final check.

Over an eight year period (1978-1985) members of the Hawaii research team conducted or consulted on twelve research projects: seven state Televotes in Hawaii, two county Televotes in

Honolulu, a community Televote in Waimanalo, Hawaii, and Televotes as a major component of electronic town meetings at the county level in Honolulu and Los Angeles and at the national level in New Zealand. Each project was designed to test different hypotheses and to address a wide array of issues--state constitutional issues; agenda setting for Televote and the state legislature; legislative issues; public budgeting; transportation planning; health care planning; futures planning; and initiative education. Seven of the projects were funded and/or conducted in cooperation with government officials (mayor of Honolulu, Hawaii State Health Department administrator, New Zealand Commission for the Future, and Southern California Association of Governments). Others were conducted independent of government officials to whom results were delivered at the conclusion.

Randomly selected participants in the Televote projects ranged from approximately 400-1,000. When multiple avenues of participation were open through the use of electronic town meetings (ETMs) and other citizens were asked to join in the discussion and voting, the recorded participation reached as high as 35,000. It is impossible to judge the actual number of citizens who tried to participate but were unable to get through jammed telephone lines. This was particularly a problem in the low budget, high volunteer Hawaii projects, which had only four line available. Participants in Hawaii frequently had to call 9-10 times to get an open line. Televote projects were normally conducted within a 3-4 week time frame, but as projects expanded to incorporate a variety of electronic and print media through ETMs, project times doubled and tripled to allow citizens a multiplicity of information sources and formats.

From the results of the twelve experiments, researchers reached several conclusions, which have spurred the next phase of Televote design--incorporation into more extensive ETMs.

Televote conclusions leading to design of electronic town meetings:

(1) A representative sample of citizens (equivalent to that of conventional surveys) will participate in projects that involve reading material, discussing it, and deliberating about it before responding.

(2) The more complex the information and the greater the number of options provided the citizens, the more sophisticated and refined the responses.

(3) Given a wide range of alternatives, citizens tend to reject unlimited power to the people in favor of more accountability of representatives.

(4) The public agenda was frequently found to be significantly different from the agenda of the media and elected officials.

(5) Administrators concerned about policy implementation often embraced Televote whereas policy makers often ignored it.

(6) A significant number of citizens usually discussed the issues with others before voting in Televote.

(7) Level of citizen awareness increases with Televote.

(8) Randomly selected Televote results are significantly different from responses to self-selected polls, such as votes placed to 800 and 900 numbers both in terms of demographics (self-selected samples are usually heavily skewed to be male, Caucasian, conservative) and opinions.

(9) Response rate was not affected to any significant degree by sponsorship of government.

(10) Televotes could increase participation of the lower educated substantially if the issue is one in which they held some knowledge from personal experience, such as responding to questions about a community health center.

(11) When Televotes were heavily concentrated in a small area, such as a community compared to a state, the level of citizen interaction on the issue increased.

Having gleaned valuable information from the Televote projects and experimenting with Televotes as a key component of electronic town meetings in Los Angeles, Hawaii, and New Zealand, the researchers turned their attention to placing Televote into a broader context of engaging citizens in a democratic polity.

3. THE NEXT PHASE OF TELEVOTE EXPERIMENTATION - ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETINGS

The Televote projects were only one of a myriad of experiments conducted in the last two decades by academics, administrators, and media specialists have been experimenting with electronic media and modern communications technology in attempts to expand citizen participation, increase public education, and encourage citizen dialogue and deliberation. (Slaton, 1992; Abramson,Arterton, and Orren, 1988; Arterton, 1987). They were examples several other early demonstrations in ETM design that developed across the nation, including Alternatives for Washington (1974), Berks County Community Television (1976), Alaska Television Town Meeting (1980), Choosing Our Future (1984-88), and Savannah Electronic Town Meeting (1990). Each model produced in dissimilar locations found receptive audiences of citizens eager to participate. Results of the projects tended to contradict the portrayal of the apathetic American citizen, one who demonstrated little interest in public policy discussions. Yet each project encountered resistance and sometimes even open hostility from elected representatives who dismissed public opinion as the uninformed views of self-interested citizens who had failed to develop their views through deliberation. Dire warnings of mob rule, mass anarchy, counter-elite manipulation, unenlightened choices, and abolition of minority rights accompanied the dismissal of proposals to institutionalize teledemocratic processes designed to increase citizen participation in government.

In the 1990s researchers find that the electronic media, ever eager to exploit opportunities to enlarge audiences, also balk at actually turning over power to citizens via two-way interaction and lateral communication. They too claim an expertise that ordinary citizens lack and they offer poorly substantiated arguments that their programming decisions were merely a reflection of public sentiment.

Media, government officials, and even some academics bandy the term "electronic town meeting" indiscriminately to label any call-in show or meeting between a politicians and citizens (regardless of level of interaction) while they ignore projects conducted by researchers and democratic system designers that seek to empower citizens through education, interaction, and deliberation. Of course, those who hold power, whether political or economic or both, often understand their self-interests. It is frequently better to silence your critics by ignoring them--particularly if those who oppose your self-interests have few resources to get their message out without your aid. Indeed, to address critics tends to give them legitimacy that calls attention to their position and which may even lend them credibility (power). When one clearly has the upper hand in a situation, why should one even acknowledge those who recommend changes in the situation that would more fairly distribute the power?

One answer to that question is provided in conflict resolution theory. The "powerless" often have another kind of power, the power to undermine, stall or even stymie the goals of the "powerful." Thus, if legitimate means of access to power (which can produce constructive results) are closed off to the "powerless" or ignored segments of a populace, it is not uncommon that they will eventually resort to illegitimate or illegal means (often leading to destructive results). Ignoring dissatisfaction does not make it go away, it makes it simmer. If it simmers long enough, it can reach a boiling point.

The 1992 Presidential Election: Elite Control of Information and Electronic Town Meetings

The 1992 presidential election produced several change-oriented candidates, including mainstreamer Bill Clinton, citizen advocate Ralph Nader, former counter-culture icon Jerry Brown, and billionaire "populist" Ross Perot. The only two nontraditional candidates to receive much national media coverage were Brown and Perot. Brown, who pledged to accept no more than $20 per person in order to develop a genuine grassroots campaign, never missed an opportunity to disseminate his 800-number to encourage new supporters and contributors to his campaign. Perot, on the other hand, volunteered to spend up to $100 million of his *own* money to run for office if voters demonstrated enough interest in him to organize and place his name on the ballot in all fifty states.

Those candidates who utilized nonconventional campaign tactics and remained independent of established powerful interests, however, were either ignored by the mainstream media or ridiculed. They were often dismissed as irrelevant, crackpot, nonsensical, and/or egomaniacal.

Yet the American public would not allow them to be dismissed. Jerry Brown kept demonstrating significant support across the country throughout the entire primary season by receiving four million votes in the Democratic primaries and ranking first in Colorado and Connecticut, and a close second in Minnesota, Utah, Wisconsin, and California. (Baker, 1993, p. 49) Ross Perot, running an explicit change-the-system campaign managed to obtain 19% of the vote in the presidential election--more than any third party candidate since Teddy Roosevelt in 1912. He received enough votes to be a spoiler, if not a winner. His campaign is testimony to the view that the disaffected can have effect.

Prior to the 1992 election, most major candidates avoided direct communication with citizens via the electronic media. Instead citizens were treated as passive observers in programming that relied on media and political elites to determine the issues worthy of discussion and the appropriate questions and answers to be presented to the public. It was considered demeaning for a major candidate, particularly a sitting president, to stoop to engage in a give-and-take with ignorant citizens asking superficial questions.

In 1992 citizens were ready to reject such passive roles and the elite judgment that they were unwilling and/or incompetent to be more engaged. The new era of interactive electronic campaigning began with Jerry Brown's success at raising millions in small contributions through his telemarketing techniques and Ross Perot's campaign being started on a live, call-in TV show. While some candidates remained as aloof as long as possible, all candidates who remained until the final balloting eventually accepted--and often solicited--invitations to radio talk shows, morning television news programs, and televised "town meetings" to respond directly to questions posed by citizens. Whenever programs built in viewer call-ins and/or voting, the demand greatly exceeded capacity. Voter interest in issues was so high that for the first time a televised debate among presidential candidates featured ordinary citizens, rather than media elites, in the role of questioners. And most viewers believed that was the best of the debates.

Displaced reporters asserted their superior ability to ask the key questions to force the candidates to be more specific and to uncover inaccuracies in the "facts" presented by the campaign rhetoric and literature. Yet the public, for the most part, saw the media's focus on personal issues such as youthful pot-smoking and extramarital affairs, as irrelevant to the major issue of the campaign--the economy. Audiences often showed impatience and irritation when reporters asked one more time whether Bill Clinton had really committed adultery. "Hard news" reporters often in recent elections seem to have a fascination with sleazy stories that they zealously pursue as "character" issues. In 1992 citizens were much more concerned about whether politicians had betrayed the public trust than whether they had betrayed a spouse. (Such was the attitude once held by the media when Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy were presidents.) Moreover, citizens were curious to learn the degree to which the candidates (two of whom were enormously wealthy) were in touch with the daily lives of ordinary Americans and how they were affected by national policies. While several of the media elite scoffed at questions citizens posed about whether the candidates knew the cost of a loaf of bread or a pair of jeans, Americans across the country understood the simple answer to such a simple question spoke volumes about a candidate's awareness of the impact of economic policies on the average citizen.

Clinton himself, a skilled and accomplished politician with impressive academic credentials, fared best on national TV in settings where he met face-to-face with voters. His command of facts was obvious in long drawn out speeches that conveyed a bureaucratic detachment and concealed his compassion. His greatest strengths were obvious when he meshed the heady details of policy issues with a "real-world" understanding of policy implications. When he demonstrated a spontaneous knowledge of supermarket prices, many voters were persuaded that he was a politician who had not lost touch with reality.

It was Perot, though, who promised the greatest change in how presidential candidates and government leaders communicate with or represent the citizenry. Long an advocate of "electronic town meetings," Perot appeared on talk show after talk show championing national public dialogue by way of television, telephone call-ins, and polling. He wanted to use these TV town halls not only to determine public sentiment, but to follow it as well. Citizens generally seemed intrigued by the idea, but media and political elites loudly and frequently condemned it. George

Will called it a "crackpot" idea and Walter Cronkite called it "dangerous."

Perot, himself, did little to endear himself to academics through his promotion of simplistic measures to decide complex issues. Even serious researchers, who had actually designed, tested and analyzed electronic town meetings, were critical of Perot's version. Unfortunately, reporters and editors of major newspapers and newsmagazines (the allegedly "hard news" researchers who supposedly do their homework and ask complex questions) ignored two decades of research on electronic town meetings and rarely acknowledged or cited any scholar who had participated in constructing, conducting, and/or evaluating such processes. The billionaire businessman, spending his own money, was allowed to define TV electronic town meetings for the country and the media let him get away with it.

Perot's Electronic Town Meeting Model

Perot clearly understood the broad public dissatisfaction and deep desire for change better than most other candidates. Were he not in the campaign as an unquestioned American patriot with all the money he needed to get his message across, many issues of concern to most American voters would have probably been swept aside. When reporters showed more interest in Clinton's personal life and Jerry Brown's past peccadilloes than in their public records, Perot raised questions about the Iran-Contra fiasco, the savings and loan scandal, the domination of Congress by domestic and foreign lobbyists, and the $4 trillion national debt. Perot refused to let major public issues be lost in negative personal attacks on candidates. The public responded in a very positive way. Much to the amazement of powerful nay-sayers, Perot drew large (record) audiences for his electronic infomercials that featured him holding visually boring charts to make his points. There was nothing sexy or sleazy or exciting about the straight-forward Perot data-heavy presentations, although they were liberally sprinkled with folksy homilies that produced the catchy "sound-bites," which Perot claimed he sought to avoid.

On the other hand, Perot's TV teleconferences, call-in shows and lectures, combined with the media's ignorance of research in the field, produced little more citizen empowerment than traditional campaign manipulations. The "free press" allowed a wealthy businessman to define for them and the rest of the country what he wanted to call the "electronic town meeting" process. This consisted of information being collected, distilled and disseminated by one source (Perot) with a personal political agenda. It was a model diametrically opposed to the Televote researchers' model in that: it was one-sided and biased; it allowed no time for discussion or deliberation or scientific random sample polling to determine the views of representative samples of the population; and it allowed for no alternative options than those that comprised his own political platform.

Consequently, the criticisms were fierce, but the uninformed media failed to educate the public (which was screaming to be heard) about previous experiments that could truly engage citizens in genuine public discussion and deliberation. If the public's enthusiastic embracing of Perot's spurious electronic town meetings was the naive action of an ignorant citizenry, the media's one-sided attack on the process with little knowledge of sophisticated experiments in electronic town meetings was no less so.

Perot's "electronic town meeting" process was a worst-case scenario come true: a simplistic and gross distortion of a potentially empowering process for citizens that Televote researchers and other teledemocrats had been cautioning against for years. Several of the early advocates and experimenters with electronic town meetings (ETMs) had sought to counsel Perot and the media on the previous ETM experiments conducted at the state and local level across the country. Hazel Henderson (an early visionary), Alan Kay (developer of scientific polling to measure deliberated opinion), Duane Elgin (co-organizer of the San Francisco Bay Voice project), and Televote researchers were among the many who made attempts to update Perot and the media on the extensive research in the field. Neither showed much interest in being informed. Both proceeded, for the most part, to keep the American public misinformed about ETM processes. Perot, paying for what <u>he</u> wanted, dictated the agenda and format of his so-called ETM. He offered facts and opinions based on one analysis-

-his--with no debate or discussion of the issues. The media, political commentators, and some noted academics responded as though Perot were actually conducting an ETM. Rather than criticize Perot's corruption of the process, they treated his crude version as the definitive version of ETMs, thereby setting up a straw man that could easily be deconstructed.

Their extensive misrepresentation of the term "electronic town meeting" led several researchers from different parts of the country to commiserate about all the misrepresentation occurring in the mass media and to begin to plan how they could pool their talents and knowledge in order to counter the exclusive control Perot and the media were exercising in defining ETMs. All of their visions and experiments were much more imaginative and complex than anything presented by any politician seeking to use ETMs to get elected and well beyond the critique of the mass media. And none of their experiments cost millions.

The 1993 Meridian International Institute Conference: Designing Democratically Controlled Electronic Town Meetings

Televote researchers Theodore Becker and Christa Slaton worked with Robert Horn, Director of the Electronic Democracy Project for the Meridian International Institute, to organize a two-day conference in San Francisco in March 1993. Their mutual goal was to discuss how to develop the next generation of electronic town meetings. It was agreed that there had already been sufficient ETM experimentation at the state and local level to provide the foundation to build the next level of a national electronic town meeting process that would include interfaces with regional and local electronic town meetings. The organizers were distressed that Perot and the media largely ignored the experience and data gained from numerous ETM projects across the U.S. (Hawaii, Alaska, Georgia, New York, and California) so they were determined to utilize the expertise of many of those innovators to help evaluate the process and to help create an empirically-based, incremental model for a national ETM.

Thus, this meeting was a working conference in which those attending were specifically invited on the basis of their previous experience or interest in ETMs. Invitees were a mixture of practitioners (who had developed and conducted ETMs), academics (who had studied them), foundation representatives (who were sponsoring ETM projects), cable and business executives and entrepreneurs, professional facilitators, and computer specialists. The goal was to ground the conference in theory, which would then guide the designing of a model or models that could be used for further experimentation at the national level.

Attendees at the conference held diverse theoretical views that led them to an interest in electronic town meetings. Some were participatory democrats, who study, design, and/or operate ETMs, and see great value in participation. In their view, as citizens are engaged, they build a sense of community and develop a feeling of ownership in the decisions that then become easier to implement.

Other attendees tended to distrust the public and placed more confidence in elite decision-makers. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that even wise decisions made by elites can be overturned or obstructed by citizens who have been excluded from discussions and who are suspicious of the closed process. Other advocates of ETMs favored them because the American representative system is so unrepresentative of the diversity in the United States. Their view is that regardless of the possible good intentions of a representative trying to represent diverse constituents, one's life experience serves as a filter that blocks or screens information to fit one's own perceptions. When representatives are predominately wealthy, white men, they often "don't get it" in trying to represent the disadvantaged, minorities, or women.

Many of the ETM designers shared concerns espoused by Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey and envisioned ETMs as a means of educating citizens, teaching responsibility, and creating democrats. Some of them were also influenced by Abraham Maslow's process of self-actualization and viewed ETMs as mechanisms to be utilized in the process of self-growth and fulfillment.

Clearly the purposes of ETMs are largely based on one's theoretical and/or value-based starting point. But despite the great variety in value preferences of the participants in the 1993 conference, a general consensus emerged on the purposes and core values of ETMs. While there may have been disagreement on the ranking of importance of the purposes, there was little to no dissent on the purposes that fall under four major categories:

(1) Community-Development

  (a) To expand the public space

  (b) To enable people to effectively and collaboratively address common social, political, environmental, economic, and community issues

  (c) To create new or reinvigorate old communities

(2) Expand the Democratic Franchise

  (a) To enfranchise the powerless and apathetic

  (b) To be accessible and user-friendly to all groups of people and their capabilities

  (c) To enable and encourage new leaders to emerge

(3) Enhance the Democratic Process

  (a) To expand the deliberative capability

  (b) To facilitate informed dialogue

  (c) To increase the capacity for dealing with complexity

  (d) To maintain a <u>neutral</u> facilitation process

  (e) To enhance learning and listening

  (f) To present a wide range of balanced information and opinions from a broad base of resources

  (g) To be interesting, engaging, and entertaining

  (h) To involve citizens in agenda-setting

  (i) To discourage demagoguery

(4) Improved Public Outcomes

  (a) To enable individuals to have influence over their lives and circumstances and to participate in developing a more inclusive polity which will yield more equitable results

  (b) Creating more stakeholders in policies will reduce resistance to implementation

(c) To lead to political leaders responding to citizen input

Many of the participants in the working group on Local-Metropolitan Town Meeting Design had experience with conducting city-wide or state-wide electronic town meetings: Mike Hollinshead (Alberta, Canada); Christa Slaton (Hawaii Televote and Honolulu Electronic Town Meeting); Ronald Thomas (VISION 20/20, Savannah, Georgia); and Kirk Bergstrom (Los Angeles Televote). The group was assisted by professional mediator Geoff Ball, who facilitated various interest groups in arriving at a consensus agreement in the San Francisco Estuary Project. Based on the experience of the practitioners and the probing of the theorists and visionaries, the group identified a complex set of variables that need attention in the design of local electronic town meetings:

(1) Scenario Selection - What will be the subjects of electronic town meetings or which issues will be appropriate for the scripting of ETMs? There are a multitude of potential scenarios for local ETMs. Subjects of various ETMs that have been conducted by the participants included planning, health care reform, budgeting, and transportation. Various avenues for selecting ETM scenarios or subjects for discussion include:

(a) Conduct a public opinion poll to determine public sentiment and find out what the citizens want to discuss.

(b) Select a dominant single issue, one that has been discussed for a long time and remains unresolved.

(c) Engage the citizens in futures planning or in exercises that establish public priorities.

(d) Use ETMs as an educational tool to increase knowledge on selected issues and then ask for a prioritization.

(2) Stakeholders - Who may be the major stakeholders in ETMs?

(a) Government (Local planning bodies, representatives, mayors, administrative agencies, etc.)

(b) Citizens impacted by the issue

(c) Resource owners (large landholders, manufacturers, etc.)

(d) The media providers (newspaper, radio, television, cable companies)

(e) Private organizations (businesses, service clubs, etc)

(f) Non-partisan public interest groups (ex. League of Women Voters)

(g) Schools and universities

(h) Technology providers (computer companies, telephone companies)

(i) Under-represented groups (poor, minorities)

(3) **Components** - What are the elements of the ETM that are necessary to make them work as intended?

(a) Random polling (Televote)

(b) Public agenda-setting

(c) Issue framing

(d) Multiple channels for participant input

(e) Linking face-to-face meetings with electronic meetings

(f) Facilitation

(g) Publicity, education and entertainment to draw people in

(h) Readily accessible information

(i) Trained volunteers

(j) Feedback process

(k) Evaluation of process and content

(l) Coordination of a-k

(4) **Dimensions** - What are the dimensions of ETMs that vary from case to case?

(a) Cost

(b) Time-frame

(c) Sophistication of production (depends somewhat on issue complexity)

(d) Cultural differences

(e) Language

(f) Available technology

(g) Expertise

(h) Political support

(5) **Technologies** - What are the available and desirable technologies to incorporate in ETMs?

(a) Television (commercial broadcast, public, CATV, public access)

(b) Radio (network, local)

(c) Newspapers and magazines

(d) Newspaper issue balloting

(e) Talk and call-in shows

(f) Multi-site hook-ups

(g) Graphics (computer and otherwise)

(h) New Bellcore signaling system for high-capacity, call counting

(i) Interactive electronic technologies (consensors, keypads)

(j) Two-way television teleconference and teleconferencing satellite

(k) Computer bulletin board

(l) Structured telephone and/or computer conferencing for issue framing

(m) Computer programs that facilitate interaction

(n) Computer networking

(o) Interactive and continual polling (random, 900 number, 800 number)

(p) Public electronic meeting rooms

(q) Bubble scan--public screen

(r) Video programs,minidocs, infomercials and slide shows

(s) Community production facility and support

(t) Facilitation and mediation

(u) Fax machines

(v) Anonymity option

(6) **Constraints** - What are the barriers or other obstacles that designers of ETMs have faced in regards to technological boundaries, financial limitations, or political constraints?

Technology

(a) Limitations on the number of people who can talk on one channel at a time

(b) Access to process by people who are not comfortable with technology or do not have it

(c) Technological resources have previously been incapable of meeting the demand for input (System overload)

Financial

(a) Budget constraints often limit options

(b) Funding sources may want to control the agenda, information, and questions or utilize certain technologies for their own economic or political gain

Political

(a) Power imbalances must be recognized and addressed so that the ETM does not reinforce existing power imbalances

(b) Resistance from those who currently hold power and want to retain it

(c) Professionals want to control too much

(d) Media resists change in present one-way, non-lateral political communication system

(e) Politicians ignore information gathered through the ETMs

(f) People who are anxious about experimenting with new communication technologies, i.e., feel they are incompatible with traditional town meetings

(7) **Successful Elements of Design** - What are the features of ETM that have been conducted that practitioners and researchers have concluded are successful features that need to be included in future ETMs?

(a) Random sample surveys for participants to frame the issues, determine the agendas and develop the questions

(b) Providing feedback loops that involve continuous input by participants

(c) Attractive visuals and graphics (logos, ads, PSAs)

(d) Maximize variety in media (ex: combining newspapers, TV, radio, telephones, etc. in the ETM)

(e) Maximizing channels of communication of participants (ex: combining TV and radio call-in shows, face-to-face meetings, delphi questionnaires, letters to the editor, etc.)

(f) Allowing a wide variety of times and places for input

(g) Inclusion of simulations, "what if" games, acting groups, computer simulations

(h) Role-playing - presenting "step into others' shoes" scenarios

(i) Including local cultural flavor

(j) Entertainment, political satire, music, rap

(k) Facilitator who is sensitive to all voices and willing to be surprised

(l) Moderators who can move conversation forward and piece together elements of consensus

(m) Anonymous input on selecting options, particularly on sensitive issues

(n) Composite video presentation of various voices/stories at the beginning of the program

(o) Diversity in programming (ex: documentaries, expert panels, debates, animation, computergraphics, cartoons, call-in shows, etc.)

(p) Real life stories (person-on-the-street interviews; at-home interviews, etc.)

(8) **Unresolved Design Issues** - What are remaining problems to be improved or resolved in ETM design or which features of ETMs have had mixed success?

(a) How to avoid "ballot" stuffing - Fail-safe voter registration and voting system and how to assure that vocal minority does not dominate

(b) How to increase community and diminish isolation

(c) How to better sustain interest and participation over the long haul

(d) How to aggregate, distill and distribute all the information gathered from ETMs in the best ways possible

(e) How to further increase people's thinking capabilities and understanding of the complexities of issues

(f) How to involve even larger numbers of people in a deliberative process that involves an exchange of ideas, not just numeric or yes/no responses

(g) How to improve advertising and promotion of ETMs so as to maximize diversity and broad-based input

(h) How to move towards consensus and how to determine what is the "best consensus possible"

(i) What is the proper relationship between random samples and self-selected samples?

(j) Who sets the agenda and how?

(k) What are the best ways to insure the integrity and credibility of the organizers and operators of the ETM

(l) How to avoid public attention diverted from issue discussion by "personalities" and slick public speakers

(m) What are the preferred methods to train and select moderators and/or facilitators

(n) How to deal with censorship - who decides what gets on the air

(o) How to deal with advocacy groups or individuals who want to use the ETM process to attain personal goals

(p) How to ensure the funders do not control the process--unless the public funds the process directly

(q) What are the best strategies to make ETMs a meaningful component of representative democracy and/or to enhance the initiative and referendum processes

There are several books and articles that address these issues in some depth and propose a number of solutions to some of these problems. (Barber, 1984; Elgin, 1991; Slaton, 1992; Becker, 1993) Furthermore, there is considerable data from individual ETM experiments that provide guides for how these various unresolved issues have been handled for better and for worse in the past. Many of these issues, however, are dependent upon larger questions, such as, who is sponsoring, funding, and designing the project. Some options will be discussed later in the chapter.

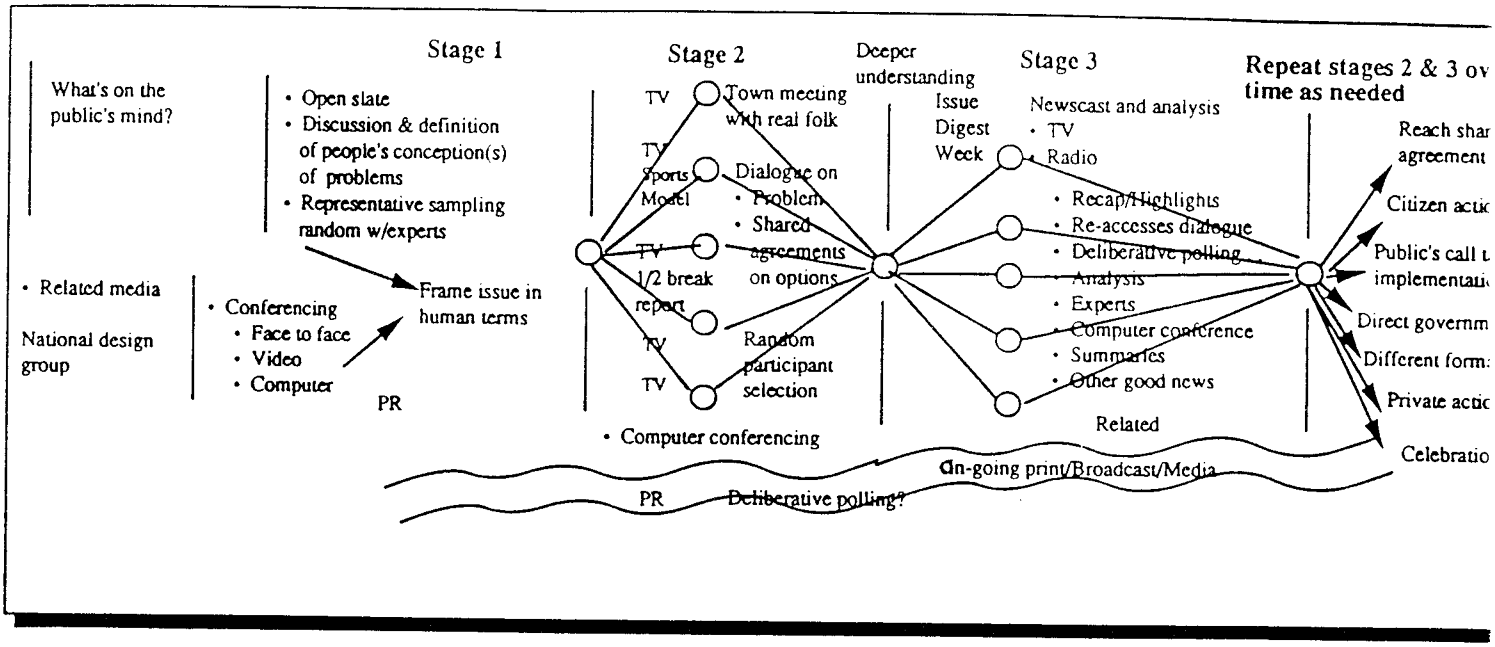
Participants in the National Town Meeting Design Group included several individuals who had experience in local electronic town meetings and professional facilitation, as well as a few teledemocracy visionaries. Their goal was to develop a design for a complex model for a national electronic town meeting, one that would adapt the successful components at micro-levels to the macro-level.

As one can readily visualize from Figure 1, the national ETM model involves a multi-media, multi-tiered, multi-phased process that incorporates multiple, overlapping technologies designed to engage numerous segments of the public in education, thought, discussion, and deliberation of issues. From the first stage and moving into the second, the public is involved in setting the agenda (determining which problems or issues should be discussed and in what order of priority). Electronic meetings are supplemented and enriched by periodic, on-going face-to-face meetings.

As one moves from stage two, which uses a variety of programming formats to present information on the top issue or issues selected from the public's agenda, to stage three, the emphasis is increasingly placed on delving deeper into the complications of the issue(s) and synthesizing input and feedback from participants. A deliberative process is enhanced by a series of assessments, analyses, and reevaluations of previous inputs. Stages two and three can be repeated over and over again at various levels and by way of competing electronic town meetings before moving into the final stage. This phase of the model is the key to success, because it aims at a consensus or a shared agreement on how to best resolve the issue and how to choose the most appropriate action to implement the most popular public policy choices.

FIGURE 1

National Town Meeting Design Group



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Various or all components of the national town meeting process can also be utilized as needed to evaluate the impact of the policy, and to reconsider issues. In addition, the national model is intended to work in conjunction with local ETMs, not to replace them.

Who should sponsor, finance, and conduct the ETMs--Government? Private Commercial Media Companies? Public Television? Public Interest Groups? Universities? Private Foundations? Politicians? Political Action Committees? All of the above? A combination of some of the above? This is much the same question raised by the Gamma Group and Benjamin Barber, e.g., what is the best institutional structure in a modern telecommunication society to support the most independent, unbiased, inclusive system of ETMs?

Figure 2 presents a rudimentary chart drawn up at the San Francisco conference of potential models for a national ETM infrastructure, one that can also serve for local, state or regional ETMs as well. Models are categorized as either private or public and either profit or non-profit.

Designs falling under a private, non-profit infrastructure would be developed by such groups as foundations, public interest groups, or political parties. Public, non-profit ETMs would be sponsored by organizations such as a presidential commission (e.g., Commission on Presidential Debates), a government agency (e.g., Congressional Office of Public Opinion Research and Assessment), public television (e.g., PBS), independent

FIGURE 2

Models
(A tentative sorting)

	Non-profit	Profit
Private	• Foundation (e.g., Kettering) • Common interest group (e.g., For the Children) • Political party campaign (e.g., Democratic National Convention	• Commercial TV station (e.g., KABC) • Corporate sponsor (e.g., Pacific Bell) • Private cable network (e.g., Planet central) • Marketing agency (e.g., Comco
Public	• Presidential commission (e.g., Commission. on Pres. debates • Government agency (e.g., Congressional office of public opinion research & assessment. • Public TV (e.g., KPBS) • Independent community based & controlled (e.g., Bay Voice)	• Quasi-public membership org. (e.g., Perot) • Public ad campaigns to encourage public transit

community-based group (e.g., Bay Voice), or universities (e.g., Honolulu Electronic Town Meeting, New Zealand Televote). Private, profit groups would include organizations such as commercial broadcast television networks or stations, corporate sponsors, private cable networks, and marketing agencies. Finally, public, profit groups developing ETMs might be quasi public membership organizations (e.g., Perot's United We Stand) or public entities, such as public transit, seeking to increase revenues through increased public usage of services.

Whatever the infrastructure, however, the ETM conference group identified a set of standards by which the ideal model would be judged. It is important to emphasize that these criteria define a preferred prototype. They need not all be present in any experimental model so as to determine whether or not an ETM has been successful or the project organizers have accomplished their goals. For instance, when one criterion for success is "Leads to political results," and that is not achieved, is that a fault of the project designers or might it be indicative that the political system is resistant or closed to citizen input? An effective and fair evaluation of the political success of any ETM model must be done with a sophisticated understanding of the political and social contexts in which they have been conducted. It is critical that a facile application of the criteria is not utilized. Otherwise the analysis could be seriously flawed and ignore larger political issues, thereby placing blame on the powerless rather than the powerful who resist all efforts to more fairly distribute power.

With that caveat in mind, it will be useful to present a list of criteria that could be applied to judge the efficacy of any ETM:

(a) Is the ETM neutral on issues?

(b) Is it dependent on groups wishing to control the agenda, content, and outcome?

(c) Are there adequate resources to enable the ETM to be self-sustaining?

(d) Is the ETM accountable to the public?

(e) Does the ETM honor diversity in its organization, staff, and perspectives?

(f) Does it cover a broad range of issues relevant to the topic?

(g) Is it accessible to all types of citizens?

(h) Does it build in deliberative processes?

(i) Does it educate?

(j) How relevant is the research?

(k) How balanced is the information and opinions provided?

(l) Does it have an overall purpose, strategic plan, and goal?

(m) Does it rely only on self-selected participation or does it find ways to engage the non-initiator?

(n) Does it have competent facilitation?

(o) Does it have continuity and is it ongoing?

(p) Does it have skilled leadership?

(q) Does it lead to political results?

These criteria help highlight some of the potential pitfalls in ETMs. As discussed earlier, there are the obvious dangers of a political manipulator (politician, demagogue) taking control of the agenda and feeding the public incomplete, inaccurate or slanted information. Ross Perot's electronic "referendum" in the spring of 1993 is an excellent example of this kind of chicanery. The content of the ETM may not meet the ideal if: (1) the issues are presented in a superficial form and lack depth in the presentation of complex matters; (2) the focus is on a single issue without addressing its relationship to other issues (e.g., if new education programs are established, must others be dropped in order to have sufficient resources for the new programs); and (3) diverse views are not presented so that participants are forced into a narrow range of pre-determined options.

Lack of adequate funding is one of the major roadblocks that most ETM advocates and/or organizers must overcome. Funders--regardless of political orientation or profit/nonprofit and private/public status--often want to control the process, as well as the outcome. Power holders usually understand the potential threat to their own status by empowering those who want to empower citizens. Many experiments of the past two decades have lacked sufficient funding to produce the quality programming envisioned in their designs. Projects often have relied on volunteers and donated media time and facilities. In addition, no ETM project to date has been able to achieve the financial support, regardless of the level of success on the other variables, to continue as an on-going project to improve on its design and/or to engage the public in further developing public agendas and/or policy.

The Televote experiments also highlight the need to always include the random sampling component of the electronic town meeting. Without it, self-selected participants do not reflect the diversity of the citizenry. In addition, as technology is not readily available, understandable, or affordable to all citizens, project organizers must be particularly responsible to address the power and resource imbalance. It is not sufficient to say that electronic town meetings allow citizens to participate. One should provide the means for representative groups to speak for the public instead of public input being restricted to advantaged, self-selected groups.

Thus, the questions that practitioners, theorists, and researchers grapple with these days have less to do with the technological design or the identification of desired components than with how to get the power holders to share power and to ensure that the owners of the resources do not continue to control agendas and public policies.

Critics of ETMs in the past have focused intensely on the failure of ETM project organizers to achieve various criteria in the ideal model, while ignoring that the designers have operated in much less than an ideal political system, one which was not designed to be receptive to strong citizen-input. However, as James MacGregor Burns and Stewart Burns detail extensively in their book *A People's Charter: The Pursuit of Rights in America* (1991), the American people have an innovative political spirit and the people are often far ahead of political elites. When frustrations reach a certain level in American politics, "moral forces" and "social resources" propel citizens into demanding to be heard and forcing the political leaders and system to respond. As noted earlier, in the 1992 presidential election, modern technology and the electronic media became powerful tools that the public embraced, which forced a response to regain control by the political and media elites.

So, the question at this point is not whether electronic town meetings will exist in the 21st century, but what will be their design, who will conduct and/or control them, and for what political purposes? Unfortunately, too many naysayers, skeptics, academics, and participatory democrats sat on the sidelines mulling the dangers and chafing at innovation while a number of self-serving opportunists forged ahead and used the technology for personal advantage rather than public good. With a whole new generation of interactive electronic information and communication technologies ready to go on-line in the next few years, one can be 100% certain that there will be many kinds of quasi and spurious ETMs foisted on the public--some with truly sinister goals.

The purpose of this chapter has been to elucidate the goals, visions, and experience of Televote experimentors who have joined forces with key practitioners, theorists, and researchers in the field who believe it is possible and desirable to utilize electronic town meetings and Televotes as authentic enhancers of American democracy. It is also intended to serve as a red flag to participatory democrats who cling to a purist 18th century vision of democracy: One should be careful not to let nostalgia for the past obscure the attainable visions and possibilities of the future. And most importantly, one should learn how to turn technology, which is powerful yet potentially dangerous, into a means for a greater public good. If not, it will remain an exclusive resource of those who do not hesitate to use it to gain an advantage over those who fear to use it.

1. Hillary Clinton's health care reform plan is a recent example of the strategies often utilized by government officials who operate in secret and then attempts to "sell" its plan. Much of the resistance comes from suspicion created by the process and a public that has been kept uninvolved until the plan is fully completed and presented for adoption.

   While Hillary Clinton did hold public hearings around the country, she originally refused to identify all the members of her task force and met with them for the most part behind closed doors. Although professional facilitators offered to assist her in developing a public dialogue on health care reform, she rejected that model in preference for minimum public input, believing it would produce a more successful output. Powerful interest groups have taken advantage of the public ignorance and sought to undermine each provision so carefully drafted by experts in isolation.

2. A more extensive description and evaluation of the Televote experiments is detailed in Christa Daryl Slaton, *Televote: Expanding Citizen Participation in the Quantum Age* (New York: Praeger, 1992).

3. It should be made clear that Televote researchers would consider it anathema to participatory democracy to limit participation to only individuals who can pay. The question is posed to determine if citizens would be willing to financially support the Televote system.

4. Some may conclude that if one needs to called back, to be reminded, or to be nudged to return responses, then one is probably not that interested. Those who operate in the professional arena, however, are surely aware of the danger of concluding such about busy colleagues who fail to meet deadlines, renew memberships, respond to correspondence. The lack of prompt attention to responsibilities or commitments often has nothing to do with a lack of interest.

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