

An iPhone democracy is not far off



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COMMENTARY

How long before government and politics is conducted solely through new media?

When will direct mail, 30-second spots, and retail politics become obsolete?

How long until representative democracy morphs into pure democracy?

The answers may not be far off.

Visible Vote, a new computer application for smartphones, allows citizens to vote on issues before Congress and then measure their positions against the votes of their representatives.

Two individuals from Chicago came up with the idea. According to Kiki Ryan in Politico, anyone with "an iPhone, BlackBerry or Android can take advantage of democracy in just a few seconds."

Thirty United States Senators and Representatives have signed on to Visible Vote, enabling them to have direct contact with their constituents.

All, or most, members of Congress will surely succumb to the pressure to sign up for the service. Before long Visible Vote will revolutionize the life of state legislators as well.

Visible Vote is the latest incantation to be cast over a public longing to be in touch with members of Congress — and to have them respond to their needs.

This software joins with the telephone (almost obsolete), fax machines, email, facebook, and twitter, in allowing constituents

to communicate with public officials.

It also is another tool lobbyists can use to mobilize the public in grassroots efforts to influence public policy.

Visible Vote represents another step in using new media to engage the citizenry in a perpetual ongoing town meeting. But it is not the only use of new media that bears mentioning.

John Zogby, President and CEO of the polling firm Zogby International, has been experimenting with using the Internet to do interactive polling for over a decade.

In Campaigns and Elections, Zogby writes "we believe the future of polling lies with the Internet and establishing online panels both large and diverse enough to give reliable samples and results."

New media is also gaining influence in the world of campaigns. Internet targeting is so advanced that it can mobilize voters by communicating precisely the right message to the right group of voters.

Known as attitudinal targeting, online technology permits candidates to reach voters that historically have been hard to reach with a message that directly appeals to them.

In this impassioned political season, with the very future of public policy hanging in the balance, it's hard to quarrel with the importance of the public being engaged in the debate.

The fact that over the last few years there has been activism on both sides of the ideological spectrum demonstrates that democracy still thrives.

And new media certainly has had something to do with this.

But as politics and government is increasingly at the mercy of new media, it's important to breathe deeply, step back, and think about the system of government our founding fathers established.

The framers established a republic, or representative democracy, not a pure democracy.

They organized government to protect against the tyranny of the majority, or in other words, to provide protection for the minority, which at that time may have been property owners, but in modern times constitutes any group holding minority

opinions or minority needs.

They wanted Congress to be deliberative and not automatically swayed by the passions of the people. Moreover, the framers never envisioned a scenario where attitudinal targeting could use individually tailored messages to manipulate voters.

The new media is opening up avenues of possibilities for governing, lobbying, and campaigning. It is driving ordinary citizens to get involved. And this is to the good.

However, along with the possibilities it is important to be mindful of the pitfalls.

As part of this new media driven civic engagement, careful thought must be given to guarding against the arrival of a time when public policy is made, not in a deliberative way, but in a reactive way.

Representatives should be responsive but they should also heed their responsibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of the public; decisions that may not always square with the majority view.

Finally, because of the inevitable dominance of the new media over governing, campaigning, and lobbying it is important to begin considering how, if at all, it should be regulated.

Because transparency will always be in the public interest, this question is an important one for regulators to consider, particularly those whose mission is disclosure.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission.

The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.