

VIRTUAL DEMOCRACY AT THE CLINTON WHITE HOUSE: AN EXPERIMENT IN ELECTRONIC DEMOCRATISATION

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Conceptualising Electronic Democratisation

Essentially, electronic democratisation is the expansion of democracy and citizen participation in governance with computer-mediated communication (CMC) and affiliated new technologies of communication. Related concepts are “cyberdemocracy” and “virtual democracy.” We derive our conceptualisation of democratisation from theoretical approaches to democracy which have two foundational assumptions: first, democracy involves continuous responsiveness of government and leaders to the concerns and preferences of its citizens; second, that leaders and citizens are political equals; and third, that citizen preferences are weighted with no discrimination by content or source of preference (Dahl 1971).

Efforts to create democratisation through CMC or other kinds of new communication technologies assume that the development of public policies are dependent upon communication processes such as debating issues, clarify the meanings of issues, and persuading people to take various political actions. As London (1994) argues, politics begins with a free exchange of ideas. Certainly, democracy depends on free discussion, whether in houses, pubs, streetcorners, TV shows, classrooms, or computer conferences. The town hall meeting is the chief metaphor of what is touted as more democratic political communication. One key aspect of the old-fashioned town hall meeting was purportedly a continuous dialogue between citizens and leaders (London 1994). As-

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suming this, advocates of electronic democracy generally argue that representative democracy alone leaves citizens out of contact with leaders.

What we will refer to here as electronic democratisation should be distinguished from the concept of electronic democracy. Advocates of electronic democracy generally argue that representative democracy, as opposed to direct democracy, leaves citizens out of contact with their leaders. Electronic democracy signifies a system of participation in which direct electronic expression and voting are seen as replacements for democracy by representation (elected representatives). Electronic democratisation, in contrast, is defined here as the enhancement of a democracy, already assumed to be initiated, with new communication technologies in ways that increase the political power of those whose role in key political processes is usually minimised. We assume that such democratisation brings more people into power rather than granting more power to those who already have it.

The Development of Democracy in the United States

As it was for Aristotle and Plutarch, democracy was only one part of a democratic political system for the Americans and English of the 1700s (Wood 1992). Something like Aristotle's polity was most accepted: a mixture of democracy with monarchy or aristocracy or both. The faith in polity was grounded in the Greeks' teachings that argued that monarchy could be perverted into the extreme of despotism and democracy could be perverted into the extreme of anarchy. A polity counterbalances these forces toward perversion and the result is stability (Wood 1992). Britain manifested the ancient Greek ideal with the king (monarchy), House of Lords (monarchy), and House of Commons (democracy). Even Montesquieu admired this system. According to Wood, the early American leaders also liked this architecture and created another form of one-few-many political systems, this time with governors, senates and houses of representatives (Wood 1992). Some colonials who were opposed to the single legislative body argued that they did not want a house of lords, but rather a body that will bring to government the wisdom of society's natural elite. Later, they shifted their rhetoric to one of bicameral government — that is, double representation of the people (Wood 1992).

The early political culture of the United States assumed that senates would be just another form of representing the people, and by implication, that other forms of government such as governors and judges, would also be representatives of the people, thus ending a practical distinction between republics where power is given to leaders by the people and democracies where people rule themselves (Wood 1992). Thus, the political system of American became a republic.

Elections were seen as part of a system of representation, not the starting point of representation. Consequently, when interests between the representatives and people are common or mutual, a good measure of representation is assumed. This was similar to the argument made by the English that the Americans were represented virtually in the House of Commons and therefore consented to the taxation that they were protesting (Wood 1992).

Virtual representation made sense to those who approved of a hierarchical society (Wood 1992) wherein those on the top sufficiently speak for those below them. Leaders thought the elites could transcend different interests and promote the common good. Still, there were opponents who argued for the need for actual representation.

