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About 3000 words

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

by

Steven Harry

Here's stand-up comedian Jay Leno after the Hands
Across America event last May:

Do I really have to stand in a ditch with
water up to my neck holding hands with Robert
Blake to effect social change in this country?
Doesn't anybody vote?

Using the democratic process to get the government to do
something about hunger in America would seem a better way
to go about it than forming a 4152-mile human chain across
the country. But our democratic process really isn't very
democratic. The people have very little control over the
government. The official instrument of democracy is the
vote, but the only voting we do is for our U.S.
representatives (every 2 years), our senators (every 6
years) and the president (every 4 years). We can write
letters and demonstrate and form human chains, but we don't
get to vote very often at all, and then only on leaders -
never on issues.

*Excellent! The
changes are good.
One question at
end.*

*What do you
think the
chances are
of a change?*

The U.S. Constitution established the most democratic political system possible at the time. But that was 200 years ago, back in the horse and buggy days. We've had an industrial revolution since then and more recently, a communications revolution. The technology now exists to make people more active participants in the legislative process. We can come much closer to real democracy than we could back then. Imagine yourself at a community voting station in, say, 2008:

One thing different about the voting booth in the Electronic Democracy is that it's a permanent structure. It is not a collapsible machine set up in a school gym on November 7 and taken down the next day. It's there ready for business every day, Saturday and Sunday included, 24 hours a day.

The booth has a door on it, and to open it, you must insert your Voter Identification Card (VIC) into a slot. You step in, close the door behind you, and sit down before a computer terminal: a screen and a keyboard. The message on the screen says:

INSERT YOUR VOTER IDENTIFICATION CARD

You insert your VIC into a slot next to the keyboard. The screen says:

PLACE YOUR LEFT THUMB ON THE FINGERPRINT PAD

Earlier, when you registered to vote and got your Voter Identification Card, an impression of your left thumb was taken, analyzed electronically, and stored in the central computer along with your name and social security number. Now the computer reads your thumbprint on the pad and compares it with the print on file for the person identified by your Voter Identification Card. Convinced that the card is yours, the computer asks what level of government business you want to attend to:

INDICATE LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT:

- NATIONAL
- STATE
- LOCAL

Today you want to take care of some national government matters, so you indicate NATIONAL. The computer responds with the national voting options:

** UNITED STATES **

- SWITCH REPRESENTATIVES
- NAME REPRESENTATIVE CANDIDATE
- NAME CHOICE FOR PRESIDENT
- VOTE ON PENDING LEGISLATION
- SUPPORT PROPOSED LEGISLATION
- TERMINATE SESSION

The House and Senate have been replaced with a body of 50 U.S. representatives whose main function is to vote. The task of writing legislation is open to the public.

The 50 representatives are the 50 people who the most voters have chosen to represent them. Voters can switch

their support whenever they want. Since representatives do not serve geographical districts, pork barrel politics is a thing of the past.

A representative's voting power is in proportion to the number of voters he represents. If a voter prefers someone who is not among the current 50 representatives, he can name that person as his preferred candidate. To be registered as a candidate, a person must meet age and citizenship requirements, pay a small registration fee, and present the signatures of 1000 voters who support his candidacy. If a candidate accumulates more support than a current representative who has served at least one year, the candidate takes his place and becomes the representative of all who supported him. The election process is continual.

The representatives do their work with the aid of a computer system that is tied in with the public voting network. They can use the community stations or their own portable terminals, which can be plugged in to a telephone line anywhere in the country. They need not set foot on Capitol Hill, or for that matter, in Washington, D.C.

Back to the screen. You select SWITCH REPRESENTATIVES and the computer responds:

YOUR CURRENT U.S. REPRESENTATIVE IS:

#1052 - RODNEY S. RUSSELL

ENTER THE NUMBER OF THE REPRESENTATIVE
YOU WANT TO SWITCH TO:

[]

Representative number? Yes, you must be prepared when you step into the booth. You have brought with you the Voting Form, a daily publication that gives the identification numbers of the 50 representatives, of the candidates for representative and president, and of pending and proposed legislation. Dozens of other publications on the newsstands provide analyses of proposals and bills and assessments of representatives and candidates. They encompass a wide American range of point-of-view and objectivity.

You look up Judith Ripley's number, type it in on the screen, and press the ENTER key. The computer reponds:

YOU HAVE CHOSEN

JUDITH R. RIPLEY

AS YOUR U.S. REPRESENTATIVE. CONFIRM,
REJECT, OR CHANGE NUMBER:

[] CONFIRM [] REJECT

REPRESENTATIVE #: [7013]

You confirm. Ripley's voting power has just increased by one and Russell's has decreased by one. That doesn't make a bit of difference when you yourself vote on a bill, but if you don't, whichever way Ripley votes is how your vote is counted, and it's a majority of citizen votes - direct or through representatives - that determines whether a bill

passes or fails.

The system allows you to participate as much as you desire. You can choose a representative, stick with him, and let him do all your voting for you. Or you can study the speeches and voting records of all 50 representatives and switch whenever you find one you like better than your current one. You can vote directly on some legislation and leave the rest to your representative, or vote directly exclusively and not even name a representative. You can even write legislation.

The national menu returns:

** UNITED STATES **

[] SWITCH REPRESENTATIVES
[] NAME REPRESENTATIVE CANDIDATE
[] NAME CHOICE FOR PRESIDENT
[] VOTE ON PENDING LEGISLATION
[] SUPPORT PROPOSED LEGISLATION
[] TERMINATE SESSION

This time you indicate SUPPORT PROPOSED LEGISLATION. The computer responds:

ENTER PROPOSAL NUMBER: []

You look up the number in the Voting Form and type it in. The computer responds with a synopsis of the proposal - just enough so you can see if you have the right one - and a place for you to indicate your support.

U.S. PROPOSAL #0810506

REGISTERED 03/02/08

AUTHOR: ANTHONY F. THOMPSON

SHIFTS RESPONSIBILITY FOR LICENSING AUTOMOBILES
AND OTHER HIGHWAY VEHICLES FROM THE STATES TO
THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT.

TOTAL REGISTERED VOTERS:	103,380,251
SUPPORTING VOTES TO DATE:	5,581,534
PERCENT OF TOTAL:	5.4

DO YOU SUPPORT THIS PROPOSAL? [] YES [] NO

Although it must be registered in the name of an individual, legislation may be written by corporations, churches, organizations, universities - any group with a cause. Representatives are also allowed to propose legislation, and each is given a staff of 20 to write legislation and study other proposals and bills. Unless a proposal is written or sponsored by a representative, it must be accompanied by the signatures of 1000 registered voters in order to be entered into the system.

Once registered, a proposal can be voted on by the public. A proposal does not become a bill until it gains the support of 20% of the voters, voting directly or through representatives. If a proposal fails to gain the required support within one year, it is dropped and its promoters must start the process over. Until a proposal has the support necessary to make it a bill, its author has the right to withdraw it.

You indicate your support for the automobile licensing proposal and the national menu returns. This time you indicate VOTE ON PENDING LEGISLATION. The computer responds:

ENTER BILL NUMBER: []

You've already looked up the bill number in your Voting Form and you type it in. The computer responds:

U.S. BILL #0803166 VOTING DEADLINE: 11/15/08

AUTHOR: FREDERICK M. SINGLETON
SPONSORED BY REPRESENTATIVE JOHN V. KNOLL

REPLACES EXISTING LABOR LAWS WITH A "WORKERS'
BILL OF RIGHTS".

[] FOR [] AGAINST

Once a proposal becomes a bill, voting starts over, with a deadline 30 days later. The 30-day deadline is standard, but a motion for a quick vote can be made by any representative, and if the motion is supported by 20% of the representatives, the bill can be voted on immediately or any time before the normal deadline, as specified in the motion. No quick votes are permitted on amendments to the Constitution; otherwise, Constitutional amendments are handled the same as other legislation.

No amendments can be made to proposals or bills; however, a proposal can be registered as a variation of another proposal or bill and, with the consent of 50% of the representatives, is scheduled to be voted on at the same time as the original.

The new Constitution requires a balanced budget, so each bill must be accompanied by an analysis which predicts costs or savings over the next few years. The new income

tax taxes all income at the same rate, and the rate "floats" - it adjusts immediately, upward or downward, to offset the effect on expenditures of each bill that passes. It's a biofeedback-like method of teaching us to control national spending.

There wouldn't be any point in voting directly on the labor bill unless you didn't think Ripley was going to vote the way you would. But although you agree with her on most everything else, she has announced that she will vote for this bill. You are not going along with Ripley on this one. You indicate AGAINST.

The final outcome on this bill won't be known until midnight November 15, the voting deadline. During the preceding 30-day voting period, however, a running count of direct votes is available to the public.

The national menu returns:

** UNITED STATES **

- SWITCH REPRESENTATIVES
- NAME REPRESENTATIVE CANDIDATE
- NAME CHOICE FOR PRESIDENT
- VOTE ON PENDING LEGISLATION
- SUPPORT PROPOSED LEGISLATION
- TERMINATE SESSION

You select NAME CHOICE FOR PRESIDENT. The computer responds:

INDICATE SUPPORT FOR THE PRESIDENT OR ENTER
NUMBER OF PREFERRED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE:

- PRESIDENT JOAN W. FERGUSON

[] # OF PREFERRED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

Two presidential candidates have been accumulating enough votes to pose a threat to the President, whom you like, so you make sure you are counted among her supporters.

The president is replaced 60 days after the votes - direct and through representatives - for a registered presidential candidate exceed the votes for the president, but no earlier than 2 years after he or she takes office.

You are finished for today. You indicate TERMINATE SESSION. The screen says:

DO YOU WANT PRINTED CONFIRMATION?

[] YES [] NO

You indicate YES. The machine returns your Voter Identification Card and gives you a printed record of the votes you made:

CONFIRMATION OF VOTES CAST

VOTER: HARRY S. BURMAN
SS#: ~~671-47-3808~~

DATE: 11/10/08

U.S. REPRESENTATIVE:
#7013, JUDITH R. RIPLEY

U.S. PROPOSAL #0810506:
FOR

U.S. BILL #0803166:
AGAINST

PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE:
PRESIDENT JOAN W. FERGUSON

As you leave the booth, you remember how the voting system worked in the so-called democracy of the pre-21st Century U.S. and you shake your head in wonder.

Implementation of this system would require some changes to the Constitution. Article V provides two ways for an amendment to be proposed. One is by a two-thirds vote of both houses. I would not expect the sitting members of Congress to initiate such an amendment, but who knows? Chances are we will have to rely on the other way: a constitutional convention. Congress must call a special convention for purposes of amending the Constitution if requested to do so by two thirds of the states' legislatures.

Amendments may be ratified by one of two methods: "by the legislatures of three-fourths of the several states, or by conventions in three-fourths thereof..." Article V gives Congress the power to choose which method is used.

The only changes needed are to the sections that describe the structure of Congress and the election process. Any other amendments, like a balanced budget requirement, should be discouraged unless they are essential to the new legislative system. We don't want separate issues to jeopardize the achievement of the primary goal: a nation that is actively ruled by the majority. Once the new system is in place, other

amendments can be disposed of in a far more efficient and democratic manner.

"All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy."

--Alfred E. Smith

Question:

If not many people vote now (see memo), why do you think they will with this more complicated system?