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# Some Reflections on Technology and Politics

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by Heather MacIvor

*This article looks at two specific areas of politics where computer and communication technologies are playing an increasing role: party leadership selection and communication between party organizations and their members. It argues that these technologies do have some applications in politics, when they work properly, but they are not a panacea for apathy, disaffection, ignorance and prejudice. Indeed, on those scores, they probably do more harm than good.*

Much of my recent work has been devoted to explaining why, to date, nineteen of Canada's major federal and provincial parties have stopped using the traditional leadership convention to choose their leaders and switched to various forms of universal membership voting (UMV).<sup>1</sup> There are five forms of UMV, of which the most relevant here is telephone UMV. It allows all registered party members to vote directly for the leadership candidate of their choice, either at a central party gathering or at home. The first Canadian party to use telephone UMV was the Nova Scotia Liberal Party. It has since been followed by the Liberals in British Columbia and Alberta, and by the Progressive Conservatives in Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia.

Four of the five parties just mentioned used the tele-voting system developed by Maritime Tel and Tel, which was later spun off into a tele-voting subsidiary called MT&T Technologies. The tele-voting system is rather complicated, because it has to guarantee both tight security and a secret vote.

The voter dials the 1-800 or 1-900 MT&T number, and hears a recorded message asking her to enter a PIN (personal identification number). The PINs are eight-digit numbers randomly generated by computer.

One is assigned to each party member who has registered and paid a fee to vote for the leader. If an incorrect PIN is entered, the voter is asked to try again. A correctly entered PIN gives access to the voting system. The voter is asked to enter the three-digit number corresponding to the preferred candidate. The list of candidate names and numbers is included in the PIN package mailed to the registered voter's home, or given to her at the convention registration desk. The voter enters the number, presses the star (\*) button on the telephone, and hears a recorded message in the voice of the candidate whose number has been entered. The message thanks the caller for her vote, and asks her to confirm by pressing star (\*) again. If the voter has made a mistake, she can press the number sign (#) button and return to the first message. If the vote was correct, she confirms the vote and hears another brief message from the candidate. Then the system plays a message thanking the voter, confirming that the vote has been registered, and the call is automatically disconnected.

MT&T created the first tele-voting system for the Nova Scotia Liberals in 1992. At least three characteristics of telephone UMV became apparent on the June weekend when hundreds of Liberals lined up at telephone kiosks in the Halifax Metro Centre and thousands more tried to vote from their homes. First, the party had to rely on television to broadcast the candidates' speeches, so party members at home could see them. CBC Nova Scotia agreed to cover the voting gavel-to-gavel, but the event lacked the drama of a traditional delegated convention and there was not much for the reporters to talk about –

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until the second problem cropped up. This second problem was technological: the computer system was overwhelmed by the number of calls and it shut down. This failure embarrassed both the party and the phone company, who were made to look foolish on live television.

There were also concerns about the security of the computer and telephone systems. The CBC scanners picked up a cell-phone call to MT&T which appeared to report the numbers of votes for each candidate. In fact, the numbers were the totals of people *trying* to vote for each candidate, not the actual vote totals. But the third-place candidate was furious that the CBC had announced the numbers on the air, and argued that the outcome had been skewed. Equally as damaging, a party member later claimed he had bought and voted hundred of PINs himself, using a list of phony names and addresses. There is no proof that this actually happened, but the claim rattled the party and made some observers question the security of telephone UMV.

Two weeks later, the technological problems were fixed and the party elected Dr. John Savage as its leader without further difficulty. But at this stage a fourth characteristic of tele-voting became apparent. Only 41 percent of party members bothered to dial in.<sup>2</sup> Here is a paradox of technology and its relationship to democracy. The ostensible purpose of technology is to allow *more* people direct access to the political process, but *fewer* people are taking advantage of it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a majority of party members participated in the selection of delegates to traditional leadership conventions. But parties which have used telephone UMV – and indeed, *all* forms of UMV – have experienced much lower turnout rates: from a high of 49 percent for the BC Liberals<sup>3</sup> to a low of 20 percent for the Alberta Liberals.<sup>4</sup>

***Perhaps party members cannot be bothered to perform a duty which does not require a get-together with their friends.***

The low turnout in a process explicitly designed to permit the greatest possible participation is an example of what Edward Tenner calls a "revenge effect".<sup>5</sup> It happens when a new technology creates an effect opposite to that which its makers intended. One example is the computer and its associated gadgets – the printer, the fax modem and the scanner – which had been expected to create a paperless office. Instead, as Tenner points out in his book, these gadgets have encouraged us to write more, to print out entire documents so we can

fix one mistake, to make more and more photocopies in case the computer breaks down. We create more and more paper, swamping our offices and denuding forests at an alarming rate. Revenge effects occur because new structures, devices and organisms react with real people in real situations in ways we could not foresee. But it seems to me that the people in charge of running a political party, who know full well that socializing is a prime motivator for political involvement, should have foreseen how little appeal a technology which left party members isolated in their homes might have.

After the second, successful round of tele-voting in Halifax, telephone UMV was a fad for about two years. The British Columbia Liberals chose a new leader by phone in July 1993, and a more sophisticated MT&T system worked perfectly. The third experience with telephone UMV, not counting the leadership vote by the defunct National Party, was the Alberta Liberal leadership vote in November 1994. This episode was more problematic, and may have been the harbinger of the fad's demise. The system crashed, and hundred of party members could not be sure that their votes had been recorded. MT&T Technologies fixed the system quickly, and two rounds of voting were concluded on the same day, but the party was left bitterly divided.

I was privileged to observe the vote from inside the MT&T Technologies "bunker" in Halifax, where I served as the Deputy Returning Officer. From where I sat, there were three reasons for the Alberta Liberal fiasco. First, the constitution of the Alberta Liberal Party was incompatible with the technology of tele-voting. Tele-voting requires a period of several days between the registration of the voters and the start of voting so that the PINs can be assigned and mailed out to the people who will vote from their homes. But the Alberta Liberals had rewritten their constitution to permit new members to join the party as late as the evening before the vote. This did not permit sufficient time to get the PINs out to all registered voters. Once again, "techno-democracy" was revealed to be an oxymoron.

Second, one candidate consistently abused the rules and, in so doing, threw the voting system into chaos, by signing up thousands of instant members, most of them from the immigrant and visible minority communities of Edmonton and Calgary. The media predicted that 2000 of these delegates would be ruled ineligible to vote, because the candidate had paid their \$10 registration fees in contravention of the rules. But the Chief Returning Officer, decided to be lenient, which ultimately led to disaster. The candidate in question asked the Chief Returning Officer to cast some proxy votes on his behalf, explaining that some of his supporters did not speak English well enough to use the tele-voting system. To the

shock of the organizers, the candidate turned up the evening before the vote with 3600 proxies. There was no way for the Chief Electoral Officer to enter that many votes individually. This last-minute submission of the proxy votes, and the delays in processing his new members, caused massive problems for the tele-voting system, and particularly for the technicians and auditors in Halifax.

Third, the MT&T technicians underestimated the volume of votes which would be cast in the last half-hour of the first voting period, and the hardware could not process them quickly enough. This miscalculation, combined with the mass confusion caused by the proxies, caused the system to break down. Once again, a party and MT&T were embarrassed on live television as pundits, with nothing else to talk about, ridiculed tele-voting and joked about a party which could not even choose its own leader. Not surprisingly, when the system worked perfectly one week later in Saskatchewan, the media ignored it.

The Nova Scotia Progressive Conservatives improvised their own telephone voting system in 1995, when they decided that they could not afford MT&T's \$100,000 project management fee.<sup>6</sup> This was another sign of things to come.

The high cost of the tele-voting system, together with the bad publicity arising from the Alberta Liberal contest, have tarnished telephone UMV. The tele-democracy activities at MT&T have been scaled back, and the company is now focusing on corporate applications. The tele-voting technology may be adopted by Elections Canada for enumeration, but that is not yet certain.

*So the technophiles who applauded telephone UMV as the democratic wave of the future may have been routed by the cost and the limitations of the technology.*

### Technology and Democracy Within Parties

The second area I wish to discuss is the growing use of computer technology by political parties. In an era when party leaders perceive a need for better communication with the grassroots, 1-800 numbers and computer links appear to be the perfect way to keep in touch. In 1995 the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada introduced the National Membership System (NMS), a computerized 1-888 telephone system which distributes information to members and allows new members to sign up electronically.

All of the major parties now have home pages on the World Wide Web, some of which are state-of-the-art. I gave the students in my political parties course the URLs for the web sites, so that if they wanted more information about a party they could contact the headquarters directly. As a researcher, I have frequently found the web sites very helpful. The Reform Party site is particularly informative.

However, I am not convinced that these technological links will prove effective. For one thing, only 7.4 percent of Canadian households actually use the Internet, according to Statistics Canada.<sup>7</sup> Angus Reid claims that 18 percent of Canadians have Internet access at work but this is still far from a majority.<sup>8</sup> One might argue that party members have a higher degree of computer access and sophistication than other people, given their higher than average levels of education and income, and the likelihood that white-collar workers will have access to computer networks at the office. However, I would be very surprised if even a bare majority of party members are on-line, given the fact that party members tend to be older than the average Canadian and older people are much less likely to use computers. Second, Canadian party membership figures are among the lowest in the Western world – less than 3 percent of the electorate, according to reliable estimates<sup>9</sup> – and there is no reason to expect that a new technology will overcome decades of apathy, let alone the recent upsurge of active hostility toward parties.

Before I return to my overall argument, I want to talk about two harbingers of the future which I observed at the recent Reform Party convention in Vancouver. First, the party's unique process for voting on policy resolutions is entirely dependent on the availability and reliability of electronic technology. The rules are quite unlike anything I have ever seen at a party convention. The voting delegates from each province sit together at specially-designated tables, in groups of 8. One of their number is chosen to be the "poll captain". There is an electronic keypad at each table, wired to a central computer. The poll captain enters a numerical code corresponding to the province represented by the delegates at the table, and the number of delegates whose votes will be registered (up to 8). The party members debate each resolution (very briefly, it must be said), and then the chair calls on the poll captains to poll their delegates. The delegates indicate their support for or against the resolution by raising green or red cards, the poll captain counts the votes, and enters the number of yes votes followed by the number of no votes. The results are displayed instantly on a large video screen, broken down by yes-no votes and by province. The provincial breakdowns are necessary because the Reform

constitution requires that policy resolutions be adopted by a majority of provinces, not just a majority of delegates overall. It is hard to imagine how these numbers could be obtained without the electronic technology.

There was a brief delay at the start of the convention, when it was discovered there were not enough keypads and the room had to be re-wired. But once this glitch was overcome, the system appeared to work beautifully – apart from the frequent necessity of reinitializing the keypads. I was very impressed. However, I was somewhat disillusioned by a chat I had with a poll captain from British Columbia on the second day of policy voting. He told me that he was having serious problems with the keypad. He would press the wrong number key sometimes, but he could not change the number once it had been entered and so the error could not be corrected. He also confessed that he had pushed the wrong numerical code during startup the previous day, so that his table of BC delegates had been included in the vote totals of another region. Finally, he complained that the delegates at his table were not paying attention, were sometimes confused about what they were voting on, and kept coming and going. He did not know what to do in their absence: should he vote as he thought they would have voted? Should he allow a more conscientious delegate to vote twice, because she was there and the absentee was not? He seemed more amused than affronted by the problems, but they did make me wonder about the marvellous new technology.

*If parties want to attract more members, the best thing they could do is to set up National Membership Systems like the PCs and list the 1-888 numbers in every telephone book in the country. It is not cutting-edge, but at the moment it shows a lot more promise than Web pages and Internet chat groups.*

Another problem with the policy-voting system was pointed out to me by Alan Whitehorn, a fellow political scientist and convention observer. He speculated that by having the delegates vote in groups of eight, where everyone could see how everyone else was voting, the system might create group pressure which overwhelmed the private opinions of individuals at the table. In other words, a party member might feel uncomfortable voting against the other seven delegates in his or her group, and might just decide to go along with the consensus instead of expressing his or her true opinion. I have no idea

whether this actually happened or not, but it is an interesting point to consider.

Another thing I noticed about the Reform convention, particularly in the workshop on direct democracy, was a profound concern that public opinion would be allowed to override the policy positions which party members had just spent two days discussing. Several party members took issue with the recommendation that MPs should vote in the House of Commons as a majority of their constituents tell them to, through surveys, electronic town halls and other forms of consultation, instead of following the established wishes of a majority of the party membership. They pointed out that if the party achieved its goal of a breakthrough in urban Ontario in the next federal election, there would be several Reform MPs whose constituents would likely oppose unrestricted gun ownership, a traditional definition of the family, and other key planks in the party's platform. Should such MPs vote against the rest of the caucus, reflecting the wishes of constituents who did not even support the Reform Party? Or should they vote instead for the policies to which the party had committed itself during the election campaign which got those MPs elected to the party had committed itself during the election campaign which got those MPs elected to the House of Commons in the first place? I do not know how this dilemma will be resolved; I suspect that it cannot be. This tension in the party will continue to play out in the future, whatever the result of next year's federal election.

#### **The Future of Techno-Democracy**

To some extent, the potential of techno-democracy depends on improvements in the technology itself. Problems such as those encountered by the Liberals in Nova Scotia and Alberta will not be tolerated, particularly by customers paying a hundred thousand dollars up front. It will take a long time to erase the memories of the technological fiascoes of 1992 and 1994, and only a series of perfect and highly publicized tele-votes could accomplish this.

But the future of techno-democracy depends more crucially on a factor beyond the realm of technology. It depends on the state of democracy itself. Canadians, like the citizens of most Western democracies, are not noted for their high levels of political interest, information, and participation. In order for direct democracy to work, we do not need tele-voting, electronic town halls, or interactive computer networks. We do need several million informed, enthusiastic democrats. I do not mean single-issue fanatics, anti-government cranks, or well-funded lobbyists. I mean people with jobs and

families, taking time away from their television sets and golf games to acquire information and make a meaningful contribution to public discourse in this country. Most Canadians already have the tools to do this. We have a reasonably good system of public education, though it has a lot of room for improvement, and we have vast amounts of information available to us in newspapers, libraries, and public affairs programs, if we would only make the effort to get it and use it. But we choose not to do so. If people refuse to use inexpensive media of communication and information-gathering, why on earth would they invest thousands of dollars in computers just to participate in public deliberation? How can new tools help us to rebuild democracy when most people neither know nor care that the job needs to be done?

No amount of fibre-optic cable can make up for an apathetic, ignorant political culture. The answer to our democratic malaise lies not in a broader distribution of technology; it lies in a revival of public spirit and communal responsibility. And given the isolating and narcotic effects of most new technologies, particularly direct-broadcast satellites, Nintendo, VCRs, and the Internet, public spirit and communal responsibility are the very last things one would expect them to promote. Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that the isolation of CyberHumanity is perfectly suited to the techno-democratic vision put forward by some parties and individuals – a vision which is really anti-democratic in its process and results.

What those who push such techno-solutions fail to appreciate is that plebiscitary majoritarianism is quite different from the dream of a democratic polity sustained by debate and judgement. Plebiscites have been used routinely to shore up anti-democratic, majoritarian movements and regimes – Argentinean Peronism comes to mind. ... True democracy requires a mode of participation with one's fellow citizens animated by a sense of responsibility for one's society. The participation of plebiscitarianism is dramatically at odds with this democratic ideal. Watching television and pushing a button is a privatizing experience; it appeals to us as consumers, consumers of political decision-making in this instance, [and] not as public citizens.<sup>10</sup>

For my part, I am far from hopeful about the future of democracy, no matter what happens to technology. No one who has surfed the political newsgroups on the Net can fail to be appalled by the cynicism, rancour, and ignorance on display. Here is the most extraordinary opportunity for public discourse since the *agora* of Athens, and all the *demos* of the Net can do is insult each other while spouting their prejudices in prose which makes the average freshman essay look like Shakespeare.

This gutter level of discourse should teach us a healthy skepticism about techno-democracy.

*If Bill Gates strikes you as a modern Pericles, you are more hopeful about the future of democracy than I. From where I sit, he looks a lot more like King Midas. A figure less likely to rejuvenate true democracy can hardly be imagined.*

This brings me to my final point. The new technologies which I have been discussing are largely controlled by profit-making corporations operating in a free market. The logic of profit-making undermines the logic of democracy, if we take democracy to be a process of rational deliberation by well-informed citizens, as a glance at most mass-market newspapers and television channels will confirm. Benjamin Barber, a former techno-democracy enthusiast, paints a bleaker – and, I think, a more accurate picture in his latest book, *Jihad vs. McWorld*:

Telecommunications technology has the capability for strengthening civil society, but it also has a capacity for unprecedented surveillance and can be used to impede and manipulate as well as to access information. ... The market has no particular interest in the civic possibilities of technology – unless they can generate a respectable profit (which generally they cannot).<sup>11</sup>

If Barber is right, then the only way to create a techno-democracy is by reverting to that most unfashionable of entities, a Crown corporation. Private entrepreneurs will not perform their democratic functions adequately so long as their primary goal is a healthy bottom line. Unless we are prepared to claw back some legitimacy for the collective activities of government in the name of the public good, unless we are prepared to defy the current mood of short-sighted, privatizing hysteria, we should drop the subject of techno-democracy right now.

Ultimately, technology is a tool, no more and no less. It should be used correctly, for the proper ends, and it should *not* be touted as the solution for problems which it cannot fix. The computer and communications technology can process and disseminate reams of information; but they cannot cure the ills of democracy.

#### Notes

1. See Heather MacIvor, "From 'Emergence' to Electronics: Explaining the Changes in Canadian Party Leadership Selection, 1919-1995", *National History*, forthcoming, 1996.

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2. Agar Adamson et al., "Pressing the Right Buttons: The Nova Scotia Liberals and Tele-Democracy", paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Ottawa, June 1993.
  3. Donald E. Blake and R. Kenneth Archer, *An Analysis of Tele-voting in the British Columbia Liberal Party: The Leadership Contest of 1993*, MT&T, Halifax, April 1994, p. 6.
  4. David K. Stewart and Keith Archer, "Electronic Fiasco? An Examination of the 1994 Liberal Leadership Selection in Alberta", paper presented to the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, St. Catharines, June, 1996.
  5. Edward Tenner, *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences*, Knopf, New York, 1995.
  6. Heather MacIvor, "Party Leadership Selection in Canada: A Study of Change in Party Structures, 1985-1995", Queen's University, PhD thesis, 1996, p. 313.
  7. Alanna Mitchell, "Few succumbing to Internet's allure", *Globe and Mail*, October 24, 1995, p. A1.
  8. Angus Reid, Shakedown, *How the New Economy is Changing our Lives* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1996) p. 96.
  9. R. Kenneth Carty, *Canadian Political Parties in the Constituencies: A Local Perspective*, volume 23 in the collected research studies for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Dundurn, Toronto, 1991, p. 29.
  10. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*, Anansi, Toronto, 1993, pp. 27-8.
  11. Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World*, Ballantine, New York, 1996, pp. 270-1.
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