Three Case Studies from Switzerland: Smartvote, Electronic Voting, and Political Communication
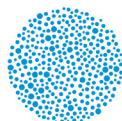
Executive Summary
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The phenomenon of electronic government (e-government), and electronic democracy (e-democracy) more specifically, is a relatively new subject of study. However, with the globalization of Internet use, the deployment of technology to improve democracy has rapidly gained worldwide attention. While scholarly analysis of recent and potential developments in this area covers a diverse range of subjects, we have organized the case studies presented here around three specific examples within the Swiss context that, in turn, map roughly onto three distinct stages of the democratic process. These are:

> **The pre-voting stage** in the first case study of the automated Swiss candidate-voter matching system, Smartvote;

> **The voting stage itself** in our second study on the implementation of electronic voting (e-voting) in Switzerland;

> **The post-voting phase** in our third study on the use of blogs by elected candidates in the Swiss government.

Building upon anecdotal, but substantive evidence, we will assess the actual and potential implications of these uses of the Internet on democratic processes. Although all three studies are examples of preliminary and recent projects, enough evidence was observed to state that, altogether, developing the tools discussed would hold promising opportunities for the citizenry and democracy more broadly in Switzerland. In all three of these case studies we can discern contributions to central principles of the democratic process, namely voter participation and citizen awareness.

In the pre-voting case of Smartvote, the salient issue is one of access to information. The Smartvote system provides an online survey which collects expressed preferences on the part of a voter and provides a ranked list and other data visualizations that match the voter with the candidate whose positions are most similar to theirs. Since voting itself is about information, such a matching system can ease the information-gathering process for the voting public and assist them in making voting decisions. This holds the tantalizing prospect of lowering the barriers to participation,

encouraging high rates of voting and promoting better engagement with the issues.

As regards to the voting process itself, the introduction of e-voting systems contributes both to the ease of the voting process (particularly important for groups that have previously faced particular difficulties in voting, such as people living abroad) and to its quality, by reducing the risk that anyone casts a ballot that is inconsistent with their actual choice.

In a less systematic manner and focusing to a certain degree on the "human touch"—related information rather than political issues in a narrow sense—prominent politicians' blogs also provided information to enhance voter awareness.[1] Politicians' blogs not only inform people in the run up to elections, but also establish a certain feedback mechanism between the political sphere and the general public in between elections, thereby contributing to the ideal of public deliberation.

However, despite these actual and potential benefits to democratic processes which the different initiatives offered, our research indicates that these new phenomena are also perceived to be associated with new risks and dangers.

Particularly with regard to Smartvote, one should not underestimate the framing role of the provider of the system, especially in the process of composing the questionnaire. Moreover, there is a concern that the questions that are included in the Smartvote system might fail to distinguish between all the subtleties of a particular issue and consequently misinform users as to their relative agreement with various candidates.

With respect to e-voting processes, concerns of information overload and the "de-ritualization" of the voting process have to be taken seriously, in addition to concerns related to the security of such processes (that do not, however, appear to have materialized in the Swiss examples we investigated).

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[1] One should note, however, that the two blogging politicians will (in all probability) never be exposed to a popular vote since Federal Councillors are elected by the Swiss Parliament rather than the people.

And, while politicians' blogs certainly contribute to the aims of deliberative democracy, one should not overlook the fact that the high normative standards of this concept are currently not met, especially as the institutional settings of blogs to some degree push citizens into the role of an audience for the self-presentation of the politician. Additionally, the medium does not reveal whether and to what extent the online discourse influences effective political action.

Furthermore, it seems evident that there are certain risks that apply to all cases examined as they are associated with problems that are present in the use of the Internet more generally, such as the creation of new inequalities due to the digital divide or participation gap.

As all initiatives examined have been introduced only very recently, the future will have to show whether the risks mentioned can be adequately met so as to ensure constant realization of the benefits for the betterment of democratic processes, especially by complimenting—rather than replacing—traditional "offline" democratic processes.

Finally, these cases also point to the importance that an individual country's unique political, cultural, social, economic, and demographic characteristics play in the adaptation of technologies to support democratic processes. For example, the initiatives examined in the Swiss cases profited from the relatively small Swiss population and its tradition of semi-direct democracy. More notably, both trust in technology and trust in the democratic system appear to contribute significantly to the success of e-democracy initiatives, and both arguably are particularly high in the Swiss environment. However, beyond these caveats, this research indicates that the examination of the Internet in Swiss democracy is a rich context with which to gain insights into the role that networked technologies can play in the established democracies of stable, affluent developed nations. In addition, it suggests that our understanding of the relative benefits and dangers of this technology would gain from further analysis and tracking as systems like e-voting and Smartvote mature into accepted parts of the machinery of Swiss democracy. In the very least, the collection and evaluation of more extensive and comprehensive empirical data with respect to these and similar phenomena would enhance our understanding of the evolving role these technologies play in the democratic process and

would permit more definitive findings over time.

Research Background and Motivation

This three part set of case studies on e-democracy in Switzerland is the latest installment in a series of reports produced by the Internet & Democracy Project, a research initiative at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. The goal of the research project is to investigate the impact of the Internet on civic engagement and democratic processes around the world. More information on the Internet & Democracy Project and its previous work can be found online at: http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/idblog.

The project's initial case studies focused on frequently cited examples of the Internet's influence on democracy, including the user-generated news site OhmyNews and its impact on the 2002 elections in South Korea, the role of technology in Ukraine's Orange Revolution, and network and content analysis of the Iranian blogosphere. The project followed up this initial work in the fall of 2008, releasing a pair of case studies on more recent examples that included comprehensive reviews of the role of technology in the 2007 political turmoil of Burma's Saffron Revolution and post-election conflict in Kenya.

Except for the South Korea example, most case studies in the series have focused on emerging democracies or the use of the Internet in more regulated or authoritarian regimes. However, the three Swiss cases examine how technology has been deployed to improve governance in an established, relatively affluent, liberal democracy. For this unique environment, Yochai Benkler hypothesizes that:

> *In liberal democracies, the primary effect of the Internet runs through the emergence of the networked information economy. We are seeing the emergence to much greater significance of nonmarket, individual, and cooperative peer-production efforts to produce universal intake of observations and opinions about the state of the world and what might and ought to be done about it.*[2]

It is the exploration of the contours of this new networked information economy and the systems that are the building

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[2] Yochai Benkler, The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom (New Haven: Yale, 2006).

blocks of this emerging universe in Switzerland that are the central focus of this collection of case studies. To that end, there are a few persistent questions at stake throughout these reports: Can networked technologies play a role in enhancing established systems of democracy? Can it assist in the resolution of the chronic problems seen in these systems, such as voter apathy and limited citizen awareness about issues? What are the relative risks and opportunities created by these new technological tools?

It bears noting here that the theme of achieving the proper synergy between networked technologies and democracy is distinct from the relevant issues that arise in authoritarian or less well-established democracies. There, the Internet often serves to resist or provide an opposing force to the state of civic life. This manifests itself in a broad variety of arenas, whether by providing a platform where individuals can express unsanctioned views in societies where speech is highly regulated (Iran), helping to resist violence in times of social crisis (Kenya), or coordination of protest or civic movements in an era when "organizing without organizations" is possible (Burma, Ukraine).

Ultimately, "Three Case Studies From Switzerland" points to the future, drawing together a diverse set of experiments in "electronic government" that hint at the role networked technologies might play as the system of democracy in a society turns from novelty to accepted institution. Insofar as several previous studies have suggested what the Internet might do to strengthen or promote democracy in places where it is absent or weak, this study offers a picture of how the Internet might work to fundamentally improve, sustain, and revitalize existing democracies.