

Representing the people

- **Could online voting help to increase voter turnout generally or among under-represented groups, particularly young people?**

On balance it may be likely to increase the likelihood that young people would vote. Recent longitudinal evidence from local elections in Canada analysed by Nicole Gooding (2014) for example has shown that amidst a preponderance of older and more educated citizens there is evidence that less engaged and non-voters have been drawn into voting for the first time. Evidence from Estonia, one of the leading nations in taking internet voting forward has shown an appeal to younger people, a lack of digital divide and an appeal to casual voters (Alvarez et al. 2009).¹ Despite this evidence of mobilization it is important to bear in mind the normative aspects of the debate. Voting is a ritual and so reducing it to mobile/texting devices removes the ceremony and arguably authority and value of the process. So there may be a counter-productive aspect to making it virtual. See Gibson (2001) for an overview of the normative side of the debate.²

- **Should there be better online provision of information about elections?**

Yes, looking over at the U.S. elections of 2012 there were a number of sites that were independently run that sought to mobilize voters through providing details about where/how to vote, and also offered a vote selector feature e.g. Isidewith.org. There were also a number of sites aimed particularly young people such as Rock the Vote, MTV's Power of 12 and Our Time. If we compare provision to the most recent relevant example in the UK and the content provided in the last London Mayoral election, the sites were really much more sparse and not as content rich. There was one youth mobilization site 'Bite the Ballot' and two voter advice sites. The U.S. by contrast had at least 8 such advice sites. My PhD student is conducting a thesis comparing UK and US online elections in terms of the provision of information and participation opportunities and can send more details of her findings if you would be interested. In terms of candidate sites, a chapter by Stephen Ward and Ros Southern in the edited volume about the 2010 election contains details of the extent of presence of candidates online during the election and showed that while most of those from the major parties had sites, minor party candidates (i.e. Green, UKIP and BNP) were less likely to have a presence. This indicates that there is some issue of resources involved.³

- **Could MPs make better use of the internet and technology to engage with their constituents? If so how and what would be the challenges to overcome? To what extent is there a role for Facebook, Twitter and other social media?**

Again yes in that not all MPs are using social media. If a young person wants to engage with their MP this will likely be their first medium of choice and not having any presence in that domain indicates they are not open to input via those channels. Evidence from the Southern and Ward chapter (see above) revealed that most candidates were not using their social media sites to engage with voters interactively i.e. providing options for comments from the public and responding to them. This differed across parties but in general reveals reticence/caution to using the medium and developing a more conversational relationship with voters. Of course during a campaign it is more likely candidates would seek to meet voters and canvas directly. Recent work by Bartlett et al (2013) on MPs use of Facebook and Twitter found that Conservatives had the most followers (excluding party leaders accounts). Around 1 million people in total were reported as following one or more of the three main parties/MPs. While large this still remains a very small proportion of the electorate as a

whole. Barack Obama for example alone has over 43 million followers. Over time as more of the 'digital natives' that grew up in the internet age enter parliament this will inevitably increase the amount of social media based communication.

- **How well does constituency representation fit with digital democracy, in other words how do you reconcile the local with the global digitally?**

My own perspective here is that I don't see why twitter and facebook would not be able to support a closer relationship at the constituency level. Its use scales up and down and that is perhaps its greatest contribution to the democratic process. Whereas with television – one is faced primarily with national content and not much room for local input and interactivity, the new media tools allow for much more localized discussion and interaction between voters and their representatives.

Encouraging citizens to engage with democracy

- **How effective has the Government's [e-petitions](#) system been in enabling the public to engage with parliamentarians and the democratic process?**

Not really my area of research expertise. See Hale, S. A., Margetts, H., & T. Yasseri. 2013. Petition growth and success rates on the UK No. 10 Downing Street Website. In Proceedings of the 5th Annual ACM Web Science Conference (pp. 132-138). ACM. (May) Available at <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1304.0588.pdf>

- **Should citizens have more input into the political decision-making process (other than in relation to legislation)? If so, what is the most effective way of doing this online? Would crowd-sourcing solutions to problems be a useful addition to the consultative process?**
- **Could video and webcasting be used more to encourage greater engagement? If so, how best could this be done?**
- **How should MPs and Parliament ensure digital inclusiveness?**
- **What are the downsides of technology for MPs and how can they be overcome? These might include the additional overheads of using digital and traditional working methods side by side, online abuse, etc.**

Facilitating dialogue amongst citizens

- **Should Parliament (or Government) have a role in facilitating dialogue amongst citizens?**
- **Is it important for citizens to have an online platform or other medium for discussing political issues and the work of Government and Parliament? If so, who should be responsible for providing it – Government, Parliament or the private sector?**

Most successful examples of these platforms are bottom up and not necessarily expressly political i.e. Mumsnet for example. News media organizations already provide this service through blogs and comments sections. I am not sure what would be added by having a platform or forum expressly designed for political discussion. How would this ensure representativeness. Wouldn't it be dominated by those that were already active. More useful would probably be a tool that was designed to facilitate action and showing how people actually can make a difference in their community or nationally by giving them resources and

tools. The BBC initiative iCan was along these lines but has ceased operating as far as I can see.

¹ Gooding, N. J. (2014) "Internet Voting in a Local Election in Canada" in B. Grofman et al. (eds.) *The Internet and Democracy in Global Perspective*. Springer International Publishing: New York: 7-24. Alvarez, R. Michael, Thad E. Hall, and Alexander H. Trechsel. "Internet voting in comparative perspective: the case of Estonia." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42.03 (2009): 497-505. Other useful sources on the e-voting debate include Trechsel, Alexander H., and Fernando Mendez. "The European Union and e-voting: addressing the European Parliament's internet voting challenge." (2005)., Alvarez, R. Michael, Thad E. Hall, and Morgan Llewellyn. "Are Americans confident their ballots are counted." *Journal of Politics* 70.3 (2008): 754-766.

² Gibson, Rachel. "Elections online: Assessing Internet voting in light of the Arizona Democratic primary." *Political Science Quarterly* 116.4 (2001): 561-583.

³ Southern, R and Ward, S (2010) 'Below the Radar: Online Campaigning at the Local Level at the 2010 Election' in 'Political communication in Britain' (eds Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore and Simon Atkinson, Palgrave Macmillan