

Digital Democracy Commission: Student Forum Report on Representation

Facilitator: Stuart Gray, Sara McLean

Rapporteur: Laura Griffiths

Executive Summary:

The bulk of the discussion focused on e-voting, something the forum felt very strongly about whilst also being aware of the issues and problems it could cause. Representation then took a slightly different perspective for some members such as lowering the voting age and widening representation via different demographic elements and broadening the range of ideas within the Parliamentary sphere. The final element of the conversation considered a re-education of the public about their inquires and or grievances through an online system.

Introduction:

The Student's Forum Report on Representation does consider many elements within the topic range. In particular, there was a strong focus on one element of representation, the idea of e-voting.

Wider points that emerged from the Student Forum in its entirety do have to be considered, however. The fact that this topic was the second least discussed out of the five shows that representation is indeed a problem. We may know the symptoms, but it was conclusive that there was no cure for the diagnosis without inevitable side effects.

On the other hand, this online forum on representation did prove how successful the digital age has been thus far in terms of representation as we ranged not only in where we studied, but who we were as people, our roles within the forum, our motives for being part of the forum and the different ideas and insights into the topic itself. This showed how successful digital tools can be when considering representation.

Ideas:

1. **E- voting:** This idea was extremely popular amongst forum contributors highlighting how the “internet is a very powerful platform”. It is efficient, not weather dependent and works in the largest of democracies with a varied literacy ability such as Brazil and India. If it is successful in emerging power countries, then why not the country where Tim Berners-Lee, the man who created the World Wide Web, came from?

Problem: However, as Marvel genius Stan Lee wrote in the Spiderman comics, “with great power, comes great responsibility”. This means that things such as security and network infrastructure have to be created in a way that the system does not become jeopardised by a hacker infiltrating the system and damaging the electorate's choices. Likewise, the potential for duplication would have to be absolute zero in order for the credibility of the electoral system to remain.

2. **Voting App:** Similar to the idea above, a voting application for smartphones, tablets and computers was also discussed. Many British households have access to one, if not more, of this type of technology with several applications being interactive, easy to use, and quite often free for the consumer. It is also environmentally friendly and could even be more simplistic for the electorate to vote instead of a ballot paper.

Problem: The construction of said application would be complicated and time consuming for those involved as all those registered would have to be in putted into the system. This large amount of data could cause crashes, potentially cause voter fraud due to apps facilitating easy access and has the issue of duplicate voting on several devices, unless individual pathways that can only be used once are created.

3. **National online voting registration:** Like the registration forms posted through Britain's doors in the spring before an election, these should be available to fill out online. Not only that, but this list of voters at their local polling station could be produced so people are not limited to a single option. Again, this would benefit the environment, be easier for the electorate and open up voter registration on a bigger platform for first time voters, which could increase the level of turnout amongst 18-24 year olds.

Problems: If people try to vote online and then at their local polling station or vice versa, there needs to be a system to show if people have utilised their vote already. Again, data would be complex and vast, needing to be coded in several different ways to cover all areas of the country. The people employed to implement any three of these ideas would have to be beyond technologically savvy and need to work quickly and effectively if there were to be issues on the day of voting. Likewise, whilst this may widen the type of representation we have, it does not necessarily mean that turnout

will improve.

Other elements discussed:

1. Lowering the voting age
2. Improving descriptive representation in Parliament
3. Lowering the cost of candidacy
4. Improving petition system
5. How do we link the public's ideas and Parliament better?
6. Online directory for governmental and council matters.

Whilst not all of the other elements discussed fall within the remit of digital democracy, we do believe that the first four ideas will strengthen representation at the parliamentary level. The second element in particular would involve political parties choosing a more wide ranging type of candidate with different backgrounds and ideas the public can connect to. Potentially, broadening candidacy could open up parliament to more political parties and give independent candidates a better chance of earning a seat.

Improving the petition system in Parliament could lead to more ideas from the public, strengthening both in conjunction with one another. Linking the public's ideas and Parliament better would also strengthen representation, making sure voices are heard, whether it be submitting evidence to a Select Committee or establishing a Commission where a wide range of people can be involved, such as this one.

A stronger, more workable online directory for government and council matters would help the electorate differentiate between the roles of the Cabinet, Backbenchers, and Local Councillors in addition to educating the public on who attempts to resolve a particular issue and the process involved with addressing an issue. This education could mean a better understanding of Parliament and politics more generally as it will lead to a situation where the public knows who deals with what matter rather than wasting their own time and effort in speaking to the wrong political actor.