

# Voting and the Public Sphere: Conversations on Internet Voting

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Voting was propelled onto the media stage in November of 2000 as the spotlight illuminated Florida and questions were raised about how people cast ballots in that state and around the country. Briefly discussed, alongside other forms of ballot alternatives to the butterfly, was the possibility of Internet voting. Casting a vote digitally using a computer terminal and having the vote sent electronically over the Internet grows increasingly viable as an alternative to traditional forms of voting.

Arizona's Democratic primary vote in March 1999, for example, was the first attempt to make voting over the Internet viable. The event received extensive news coverage, with pundits and experts both for and against Internet voting commenting on its effects. The public mulled two major questions during the Arizona event: was the voting free of fraud and did it increase voter turnout. Although these are important questions, particularly at a time when traditional forms of voting are at an ebb, Internet voting raises larger, theoretical questions about the process of voting and the sphere political voting occupies. The national discussion about Internet voting makes prime more basic questions about what it means to vote and whether or not it is valuable for people to enter a physical, public space to cast a ballot.

I obtained a richer understanding of what people think about voting generally and Internet voting specifically by observing 60 discussion groups as a part of a larger research project on the 2000 presidential election. The participants' discussion revealed three major themes of thinking about Internet voting: opposition to online voting, support for it, and support for place-based polling. The first two themes can be understood as favoring the view of voting as a private activity. The third

theme is an articulation in favor of public sphere voting.

This essay attempts to give further evidence for the claim that there is a shift in U.S. society in which the public sphere has been largely replaced by a "private world of culture consumption" (Habermas [1962]1989, 160) and that as a result, U.S. citizens are private citizens uninterested in coming together to engage public issues. In order to provide this evidence, I address the notion of voting and what role it plays in the public sphere's process of rational-critical debate. Then, I offer analysis of the three aforementioned schools of thought on Internet voting in light of the public and private spheres.

## Voting and the Public Sphere

In the Constitution, the mass citizenry are given one task: vote for a representative in government. All other acts of government are allocated to those elected or appointed through the will of "The People." It would seem, then, that in a representative democracy the vote by the people would be critical. Instead, voting turnout is at a 60-year low, causing concern about the health of the Republic.

What role does the public sphere play in voting? The ideal public sphere, according to Habermas' ([1962]1989) is private people coming together to consume and discuss literature, culture, and politics. Consumption and conversation are facilitated by the increase in information dissemination due to the printing press (Baker 1997; Eisenstein 1979), as well as the increased role of the marketplace, which helps disseminate information and hone rational-critical skills. The awareness of governance, the role of the state, and of people's own role in and experience with government are critically heightened.

Habermas's ([1962]1989) critique of contemporary society is that the public sphere has been "shattered." This occurred through the blurring of public and private, state engagement in acts that penetrated the private realm (the social-welfare state), and private individuals and organizations increasingly assuming public power. In addition, "The public is split apart into minorities of

specialists who put their reason to use nonpublicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical. Consequently, it completely lacks the form of communication specific to a public" (175). The mass population engages in uncritical consumption of news and products, while elites use their rational-critical skills for behind-closed-doors activities and exclusionary debate. There no longer exists a forum for critical debate across social strata on subjects that range from culture to government.

The public sphere as defined by Habermas is an ideal type that has been further elaborated in research conducted by Zaret (2000) and others (Baker 1997). Habermas's ideal type is centered around rational-critical discourse, but others such as Ryan (1997) suggest that not only rational-critical discourse but also protests, civic volunteerism, philanthropy, and government reform movements exist in the public sphere. Yet, Fraser (1997) argues that Habermas's conception of "the public sphere . . . is not the state; it is rather the informally mobilized body of nongovernmental discursive opinion that can serve as a counterweight to the state" (134). She offers a notion of "strong" and "weak" publics as a counter ideal to Habermas's. Weak publics are those Habermas identified in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*—people discussing among themselves without direct affect on policy. Strong publics are those that are both discursive and have decision-making duties, including voting. This still leaves the question in the contemporary United States, does voting, then, exist in the public sphere?

Voting itself was an historically public act until the late-nineteenth century. The parties typically created the ballots, there were separate ballot boxes for each party, and the cast vote was not secret. Schudson (1997) explains that "politics . . . was more a communal ritual than an act of individual or group involvement in rational-critical discussion. This extended all the way to the ballot box" (159). Ritual, nonetheless, is a public activity that a community engages in (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Freud 1950), even if it fails to meet the ideals of the public sphere. Through a series

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of reforms beginning in the 1880s aimed at reducing fraud and public spectacle, voting became secret and the process before the casting of a ballot was refocused on critical information seeking and discussion akin to Habermas's ideal. The outcome has been a private vote cast by individuals in the 20th century.

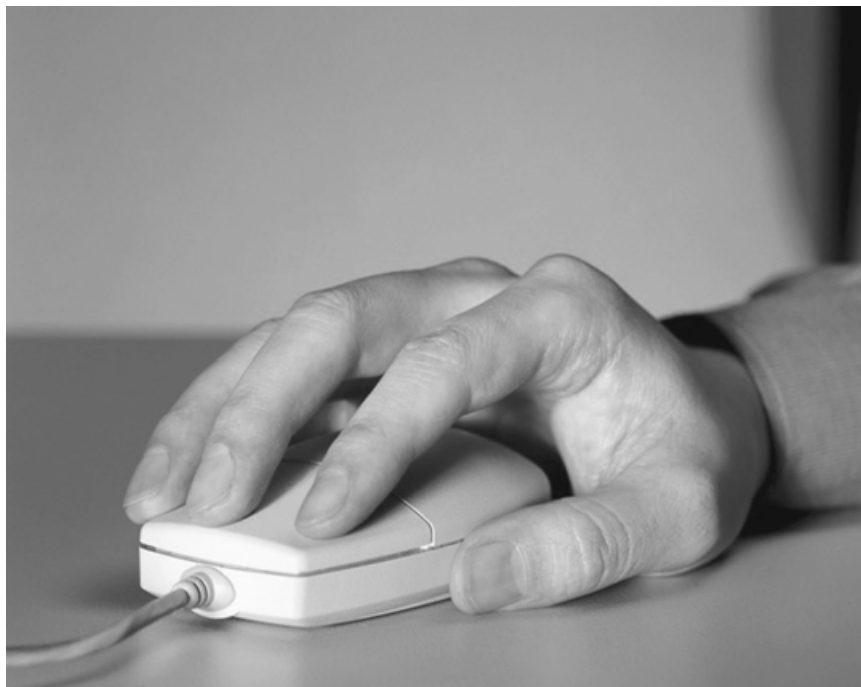
In the discussions about Internet voting, thinking about voting as public or as private proves a contentious issue. Increasingly, the frame that people employ in thinking about voting, and in particular Internet voting, suggests a continuing evolution of the United States citizenry in the direction of private citizens engaging in private acts of political involvement. Although debate about voting assumes that the cast vote is private and anonymous, part of the debate centers on whether there is a need for people to leave the private sphere and enter the public to cast their private vote. Internet voting continues a trend toward voting in the private sphere, where citizens no longer have to enter a public place to cast the vote. For many this is good. For others, this is undesirable.

## Discussions of Online Voting

This project analyzes online discussion groups that were part of Vincent Price and Joseph N. Cappella's *Dialogue* Project conducted at the Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania (see Price and Cappella 2002 for an overview of the project and study design). The discussion groups spent time talking about traditional and Internet voting as part of a larger research panel studying public opinion concerning the 2000 presidential election over a 12-month period starting in January of 2000. Utilizing WebTVs, approximately 900 people from across the United States answered a survey once a month, discussed the presidential election with up to 12 others in an Internet

Relay Chat (IRC) environment, and then answered a post-discussion survey.

From August 7 to August 13, 2000, 60 groups ranging from two participants to 10 (Mean = 6) talked for an hour in a moderated, text-only environment about voting, the political campaign



**Vote early, vote often?** Opponents of Internet voting are concerned about voter anonymity, especially as it relates to voting fraud. Photo: istockphoto.com/Yang Tong.

process of generating candidates, and the role of money in campaigns. They also were asked their views of voting over the Internet as part of a broader conversation about why people do not vote and what obstacles might make it harder for people to vote.

Responses on Internet voting were mixed. There was no overall position of support or opposition. Most assumed that Internet voting would entail individuals casting their ballot at home or possibly at work, in private and semi-private spaces. Three major themes emerged from the discussions, all of which can be viewed in a public or private sphere frame. The first theme was opposition to Internet voting. These arguments included: voter fraud, concerns about the technological have-nots being disadvantaged or left out of the voting process, and a concern that their vote would not be private if transmitted over the Internet. The second theme was affirmative arguments to Internet voting, which included: the ability to work out the technical problems that might result from fraud or hackers, the ease of voting, and that the ease of casting a ballot may in turn increase the number of

people who vote. There were more arguments generated against than for Internet voting, with people more likely to simply state that they liked the idea without further elaboration. In contrast, arguments against Internet voting were fast in coming. A third theme, articulated

less often than the other two, offered a position of support for place-based voting. These advocates expressed a position supporting both a need for people to go out in public to cast their vote and a concern that without place-based voting the vote is less valuable because it costs less in time and energy to cast.

## Arguments Against Internet Voting

The arguments against Internet voting can be thought of as articulating a view of voting that should be private and occur in the private sphere. They expressed concern that one's private vote could be compro-

mised by others or turned into a public vote because others, particularly hackers, could learn about the vote, then reveal or change it. Concern about fraud, for example, was articulated in three ways. First, participants worried that voters could vote multiple times: "I do not like the idea [of Internet voting] because votes could be cast by the same people more than once,"<sup>1</sup> explained one participant. Second, and closely tied to the first, participants highlighted the possibility that those who legally cannot vote will because there is no means to verify identity. A participant, for example, wrote: "How do you know who is voting? How do you know who is on the other side of this keyboard?" Another participant typed: "Even dead people could vote on the Internet." Multiple discussions referenced past Chicago elections in which deceased, but registered, voters somehow cast votes, and discussants worried that Internet voting would repeat such mishaps.

The concerns expressed in the first and second types of fraud arise because one is not going to a public place to vote. One who votes online is not physically seen by others. There is no

process of visually identifying the voter. Instead, the electorate must trust a technological system to verify identity; many do not trust that such a system would work. A vote cast over the Internet, then, is a vote cast in a private, highly anonymous way.

A third concern about fraud is that other people would force a voter to vote in a particular way. One comment indicated the power of spouses to influence votes. One participant humorously wrote: "If my wife disagrees with me I can just lock her in a closet and tell her not to worry—that I'll cast her ballot." These kinds of comments were uncommon, but their articulation is suggestive of another way of thinking about voting in the private sphere. If a person travels to a polling place, they enter a public space, where multiple people are present to witness someone enter a voting booth—alone. If someone casts their vote at home, the protection created by the public voting place disappears, the thinking goes, and individuals become susceptible to vote manipulation.

Comments on the growing digital divide, with some people having access to the Internet and others not, were frequent. One participant suggested that Internet voting is "a pretty middle class solution but certainly an option for some." Some said Internet voting should not happen because there were people who do not have access. Some of these participants appeared to assume that the question about Internet voting precluded place-based polling. Others would follow with a clarification that voting online should be but one option for casting a ballot. The following exchange is a good example:<sup>2</sup>

<ben> Internet voting should be an option, but not mandatory (disclaimer: I'm a web developer).

<moderator> Could you elaborate why you think that way?

<ben> well, it could be mandatory in the sense that you don't have to vote from a home computer, but you could go to voting place much like now, but there would be Internet terminals there.

<paul> As long as there are precautionary devices established I feel as though Internet voting should be available.

<ben> One issue is that it's not fair to require people to use a voting mechanism that they can't afford.

<ben> If they are going to do Internet voting—you have to give people free access on that day and make it really easy, so even if they haven't used a

mouse before, they can do it. (remove all the barriers possible.)

<david> Ben I agree it should not be mandatory but should be an option.

This exchange suggests a technologically sophisticated group of people who want to ensure that new technology does not create for some an obstacle to voting.

Although these above concerns are criticisms of online voting, they are not necessarily arguments for voting in the public sphere. Indeed, a few participants mentioned the opposite, that voting online would be desirably private: "The Internet voting would be private, easy to accomplish at home and would avoid the problems of bad weather." Except for one participant who mentioned online town hall meetings, no others raised the possibility or desirability of the Internet opening up voting as a public act, whereby people's votes would be made public or that people could enter an online public discussion space before casting their ballot.

### *Arguments for Internet Voting*

Responses in favor of Internet voting stated convictions that the concerns of fraud could be identified and fixed. One participant expressed some nervousness at the idea of votes cast over the Internet but continued by saying, "as technology increases, it would probably reach a point where it is secure." Another participant stated that he felt that online voting "is just as safe as the ballot box." In a different conversation, many of the participants were concerned about the vote cast being "legitimate" because there is no guarantee that the person casting the vote on the computer is in fact that person. One participant of that discussion, however, provided an interesting example of how a legitimating process could work: "In PA we just applied for a tax rebate online—we got something in the mail with a # in it you could only use once." In a different discussion, a participant offered that "you can be secure practically on the web with PGP [Pretty Good Privacy encryption]."

The most common positive reaction to voting online focused on the ease with which voting could occur. One participant said, "I feel some people would vote on the Internet where they would not if they had to go to voting place and take a lot of their time." Another stated, "It sure would be more convenient for a working parent for one that has to try to take care of bills and cook and care of kids." Others expressed that they personally would be positively affected by Internet voting:

"It would be helpful to people with young children such as myself." Another participant offered, "Definitely YES! I commute from PA to NY to work. Voting is from 6:00 am to 8:00 pm. If the bus breaks down I miss the vote or I have to leave work early." A participant from Arizona told of her story of voting in the Democratic primary in that state and the ease it offered her: "I was fortunate to have participated in that here in AZ . . . I loved it . . . was simple, did not have to leave my home and fast." Others couched the ease of voting in terms of those who don't vote: "I heard that they were thinking of making it possible to vote over the Internet—I wonder what excuse people would come up with then!" Some participants were mindful of the handicapped or people who do not venture out of the house for medical or other reasons and their difficulty in voting. The Internet makes it a bit easier for people in that category to vote, as this person's comments illustrate: "If you was handicapped or a shut in and could not get out to vote," then the Internet would be useful.

In conjunction with ease of voting were statements about the affects of that ease—increased turnout. One participant stated the case clearly, "[Internet voting] would be a great idea. Anyway to make voting more convenient would surely increase participation." Another participant said, "If it can get someone to vote that otherwise would not have, then by all means do it." Another participant thought the Internet might draw young people to the polls: "It may increase voting 'turnout' of younger voters who are web savvy." Online voting is easy, because it occurs at home or other private places that people in their daily lives exist in, and easy voting, the thinking goes, leads to more voting.

The arguments affirming the benefits of voting over the Internet can also be understood as supporting a view of voting that occurs in the private sphere. Although the Internet can be a space or a place (Markham 1998), and that space or place can be public, the physical body of the person using a computer to access the Internet is most likely in a private place. Moreover, that person is likely to be fairly anonymous in so far as that person's physical identity is primarily concealed behind a cathode-ray tube and keyboard. Hence, the experience of casting a vote online is a private one. The positive comments made about Internet voting take for granted this private voting experience and affirm it by offering additional arguments for why voting online is of benefit. One participant suggested this when she

stated, "I think people would be more likely to [vote] being in the privacy of their own home." A different participant wrote: "People don't want to leave their homes—let's get with the computer age, or at least the telephone—use the tech. of the last 100 years."

### Arguments for Place-Based Voting

The third type of comment was in support of place-based voting, either because it was valuable or desirable in its own right, because the vote has merit when effort is exerted to cast it, or because it is valuable to be in public when casting the ballot. Those who articulated this third theme often made basic statements, such as this: "Personally, I like voting booths," without further elaboration of why they prefer to cast a ballot at a traditional balloting station rather than through the Internet. Voting at a voting booth has value in its own right, although it's not clear what exactly that value is. Others made statements such as this: "There's something good about the very act of going to the pools [polls]." But what that something is, they did not say.

The most frequent response was about the importance of exerting effort to cast a ballot. Some people simply said that they would not like to make voting too easy. One person explained that "Getting to the polls takes an effort. Those are the thoughtful voters." The reason they are the thoughtful voters is that if they voted online, as this next person explained, then "People would vote without knowing what they're voting for." Others stated their sentiments more simply, such as: "Get off your--- and vote." An exchange that took place between three people illustrates this notion in a slightly different way:

<mike > people don't like standing in line before work or after

<karl > voting must be in real time

<larry> let them stand. we're talking about the next four years.

The casting of the ballot is an important act with consequences. Establishing and maintaining a system whereby people must go to a physical poll to cast their ballot signifies that people are dedicated to the political process of a representative government. One person described it as pride: "People need to have enough



**Location, Location, Location.** Proponents of place-based voting believe that voting in a public setting, as AFL President Samuel Gompers did here, gives greater meaning to your vote. Photo: Library of Congress.

pride in America to get out and vote." Those who wish to cast votes in easier ways, such as online, do not enact their dedication by making the effort and conscious decision to vote. Indeed, one person characterized this by representing the thinking of someone who votes online from home: "Get a Coke out of the fridge, go to the bathroom, oh yeah vote." Voting is equated with unthinking engagement in satisfying basic bodily needs, a notion which is objectionable for those who argue this position.

The third articulation of this argument can be read as making a case for the need to vote in the public sphere, although indirectly, as such an argument is abstract for such a concrete conversa-

tion about Internet voting. None of the discussants clearly stated why it is important to vote in public. Instead they made statements such as these:

"but you know, I really enjoy going to the voting precinct and placing my vote."

"I like going to the polls in person, you feel like you're participating."

"here we go relying on technology & humans need contact."

"I think that voting on the Internet is too impersonal"

"I don't mind the Internet but I feel good about placing my vote and getting my sticker to remind others to vote! ha."

"I don't have a problem with Internet voting, but I think the politicians will hate it. There's a lot of campaigning that goes on at the polls because so many people make up their minds at the last minute."

"let's keep a few things as they were."

"do it the way it was originally set up—go and vote."

"involvement is more than going to the computer."

This range of statements suggests that these people value the act of going into a public space to cast their ballot. Although their vote is private, and none argue for the vote to be public, their act of voting is and should be a public act in so far as it is witnessed by other people also engaged in the process of representative government. One participant described a worst-case scenario when the vote cast is

private: "Very few Internet voting systems are foolproof . . . if you're in the privacy of your own home, it's easy for someone to put a gun to your head and stand over your shoulder as you vote." If votes are cast in public, presumably such a bizarre act would not occur.

The comment by one participant who thought candidates would not like Internet voting is another good example. That participant articulated a familiar polling place scene in which people mill around, candidates hand out last-minute literature and ask for a vote, organizations hand out their recommendations, and voters stand at tables registering their presence then walk into the polling booth and begin pulling levers. For those

who articulate this third theme, that experience is a valuable one with historical precedent that should not be eliminated.

## Conclusion

This analysis attempts to show that there is a tension in U.S. thinking about voting. As Internet voting and mail-in ballots gain precedence in this country, questions are raised about what kind of experience voting should be. For some, voting is a private experience and should or could occur in the private sphere, from the comfort of home or work. There is the possibility that more people will vote if it can happen in the private sphere, and that is a valuable thing. For others, voting should be a public experience witnessed in public. Historically, that is how people have

voted, and there is merit to keeping it that way.

It is arguable that people, such as the discussants in this set of conversations, cannot talk about Internet voting as occurring in the public sphere because when people think of Internet voting, their minds conjure up images of voting at home, which is conceived of as a private or semi-private space. As long as people conceive of online voting as something that could happen at home, then it is hard to imagine how it could occur in the public sphere. Yet, it is important to note again that overwhelmingly fewer people argued for the merits of voting in the public sphere. In the 60 discussions that occurred, mention of the merit of physical polling occurred in only 25. Many people in these discussions conceived of and desired voting to occur

in the private sphere, such that they never have to go to the trouble of entering the public sphere to cast their private vote.

This conclusion leads to another question: Are citizens in the United States primarily private citizens doing their public work in private? The answer is increasingly yes. If many people take it for granted that voting is a private act that is desirable to occur in the private sphere, then they are not conceptualizing themselves as public citizens who are called to a public duty. The opportunity to do their public duty but not leave the private sphere is desirable. That there are people who believe that public acts can be done privately suggests that Habermas ([1962]1989) and Schudson (2000) are right; U.S. culture is shifting as U.S. citizens increasingly view themselves as private citizens.

## Notes

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Views expressed herein are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the principal investigators or sponsoring agencies.

1. Typing errors in quotations have been cor-

rected. Participants' names have been replaced to protect their identities.

2. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

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