

CITIZEN 2.0

Nancy E. Tate and Mary G. Wilson

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The notion of redesigning U.S. democracy for the Internet Age is an intriguing one, probably with endless possibilities. But Americans use the term “democracy” to mean a variety of things. Some mean the election process itself. Others mean the ways in which our governmental system—with its three levels and three branches—operates. And others focus on the role of the citizen (and the public at large) in the process of engagement and self-government. All of these components have been—and will continue to be—impacted by the online world and the emergence of many-to-many communications.

We at the League of Women Voters believe that the most significant changes are those affecting the ways ordinary Americans perceive and interact with both candidates and government officials and institutions. And we applaud these changes. We are already seeing that the

expanding possibilities for user-generated content online are providing new and positive changes for our democratic system. Here at the League we strive to empower citizens to “make democracy work” for themselves and their communities. The enhanced role of the Internet in recent years has helped to do just that. In so doing, it has increased the power—and expanded the responsibilities—of ordinary Americans. The potential is limitless.

Power to the People

As others have noted, the Internet expands the types of roles an individual can play in politics and government. Historically, citizens have been essentially observers in the civic sphere, making their views known periodically through voting and petitioning. In order to play that role, they were dependent on information provided by candidates, or by a government body, and filtered through the media. Today, the public can obtain information from many sources, including not only the original sources (such as a candidate’s website) but also from their peers and others whose judgment they trust. Getting information—and opinions—from people whom they trust greatly increases citizens’ confidence in discussing and formulating views on complex public policy subjects.

Even more significantly, individuals can now become players in the process, in the sense of creating and distributing content themselves. And increasingly, the views of individuals—shared on blogs or Facebook pages—directly affect what is happening in the political sphere. We have already seen this year how the ease and speed of transmission of new ideas, or challenges to official statements, or the unveiling of past indiscretions can produce instant reactions from candidates or public officials. Relatedly, many more sources of government data and information are available to those willing to “surf the Net.”

As a result of these trends, citizen expectations concerning their “right to know” about candidates and government operations continue to grow. This increases both the pressure for government transparency, and the ability of citizens to hold decision-makers accountable. Although public figures do not always welcome increased transparency or accountability, many have realized the advantages of more and better ways to gather public opinion and to expand the lines of communication. We are encouraged by these trends.

21st Century Worries

Americans’ role in the political life of the country has definitely expanded, with no end in sight. Now, instead of simply digesting the news provided by a daily newspaper or news show, individuals can drive the news, interact with one another, and actually influence the decisions of campaigns and government decision-makers in real time. All of this empowers citizens in ways that are better for them and for the country as a whole.

As we embrace the tremendous potential for individual Americans to play a bigger role in our democracy, however, we ought to consider ways to guard against the potential downsides of the new online world. The fact that more information is available from more sources increases the necessity for individuals to evaluate the credibility and validity of information they want to use and share. The recycling of misinformation or “urban myths,” for instance, is not a step forward in public discourse and decision-making. Relatedly, the growing “echo chamber” effect needs to be minimized. When people only visit the particular websites and blogs (or talk radio shows) whose views they agree with, they will most likely become less informed than if they are exposed to a more balanced perspective on issues and candidates. This will lead to more polarized—and presumably more partisan—discussions and decisions. Often the result of extreme polarization is gridlock.

More information on the web, in and of itself, will not improve the quantity or quality of public decisions.

Finally, accountability flows from openness. The anonymity allowed by the Internet may often be at odds with that. If we want our politicians and decision-makers to be trustworthy and transparent, we must expect that citizens interacting with them in the public sphere do so in an open and transparent way. This is particularly important in an era when news coverage often focuses on the personal lives and actions of our leaders. The instant access to information, no matter how dated or what the source, can foster a “gotcha” environment that stifles substantive dialogue and sullies the civic space.

Old Wine in New Bottles

One fear that is often expressed about the evolving online world is that it distances people; that people who once met and interacted face-to-face now just sit at their computers. We at the League disagree. New political technologies are helping people connect—across town and across the world. Town hall meetings are not being replaced; they are going online where no logistical constraints limit participation. Door-to-door voter engagement has not ended. New tools, such as databases connected to handheld tracking devices, are being deployed to knock on doors that have often been overlooked. And this is the final challenge: to make sure that the new tools of democracy are not just used by the elites or the special interests, but allow all Americans to be active participants in the democratic life of the 21st century.

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