

Pre-voting sphere and internet voting:

Possible impact of i-voting on pre-electoral opinion formation

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Introduction

The growing literature on Internet voting has until now focused on the question of the technical/legal feasibility and the impact it could have on electoral turnout. Surprisingly, no research has focused on the impact that i-voting could have on pre-electoral opinion formation. We believe this to be a fundamental issue that should not be ignored, since, as some critics have already pointed out, a limited introduction of i-voting could, by accelerating, simplifying and individualizing the act of voting, have a negative impact on opinion formation. If so, should i-voting still be promoted? Should public administrations, in other words, promote a new ‘technology of democracy’¹ that could increase the quantity of participation at the expense of the quality of participation? We argue that the introduction of i-voting, if implemented with what we call a “pre-voting sphere”, could increase not only the electoral turnout but also improve the process of pre-electoral opinion formation.

According to the way we propose to use the term, the “*pre-voting sphere*” corresponds to all the possibilities of vote-related information and communication (forums, chat-rooms) provided by the voting site. The presentation of information and the access to communication spaces at the voting site have the potential to contribute to the quality of the citizens’ opinion formation. The discussion of this potential will be the object of the first part of this chapter. Whether this potential will actually be realized depends to a great extent on the design of the web-site which will serve as the portal to the electronic voting. Questions of design will be dealt with in the second part of this chapter.

¹ Perhaps cite STOA on the concept of a new ‘technology of democracy’

In order to put the discussion of the potential contribution of a pre-voting sphere to the process of opinion formation into perspective, we would like to briefly introduce the reader to the results of recent research on public opinion formation. Following the models from the psychology of attitudes, we can distinguish between two qualitatively different paths of individual opinion formation (Eagly and Chaiken 1993: 306f.): a heuristic and a systematic path. The distinction between these two fundamentally different ways of opinion formation is based on the role played by arguments. *Systematic* opinion formation is essentially *argument based*, while *heuristic* opinion formation is essentially based on *short-cuts*, which do not make any reference to substantive arguments. Whether and to what extent individuals use systematic arguments as opposed to heuristic cues in their opinion formation is generally determined by their *motivation* and their *competence*. Thus, the key hypothesis of the “elaboration-likelihood” model of attitude formation presupposes that argumentative strategies are used, when individual and contextual characteristics guarantee a high degree of motivation and competence.

There may be elections and direct-democratic votes which provide strong incentives for the voters to participate and to form their opinion in a systematic way, but we cannot generally assume that high motivation and competence are guaranteed among voters. If motivation and competence are low, as is likely to be the case for many voters, individuals tend to rely on heuristic forms of opinion formation, i.e. on various *simplifying strategies*². Confronted with a decision-making problem people behave as “cognitive minimalists”, i.e. they try to limit the cognitive investment and they are satisfied with acceptable (not optimal) strategies³.

² This idea goes back to Simon's pioneering work on “satisficing” and “bounded rationality” (1959) and to Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) “cognitive heuristics”.

³ Downs (1957: 230ff.) had already applied this insight to the choices in representative democracies: he had argued that citizens simplify their choices by using cognitive shortcuts and by delegating the search for information or even the decisions to other actors, whom they trust and believe to be competent. It is very likely that voters will use similar strategies in direct-democratic procedures.

The required heuristic cues for the voters are provided by the *political elites*, the media, experts and opinion leaders of all sorts. According to Zaller's (1992) influential theory, the political elites constitute the driving force in the process of opinion formation: it is precisely because they are badly informed that citizens have to rely on the cues and recommendations supplied by the political elites. In particular, the quality of the individual citizens' opinion formation largely depends on the strategies of the elites, especially on the quality⁴ and the intensity⁵ of the campaign they organize for the election or vote in question.

The pre-voting sphere could constitute a crucial site for providing the relevant heuristic cues to voters who want to decide in a "quick and dirty" way. By providing additional, more detailed information and the possibility to communicate with other voters and/or opinion leaders, the pre-voting sphere could also cater to the needs of citizens who wish to choose in a more systematic way. Indeed, a well-designed pre-voting sphere could even have the potential to motivate some citizens to make a more elaborate choice than they originally intended.

The potential impact on pre-electoral opinion formation

The ability of the pre-voting sphere to improve pre-electoral opinion formation depends on two complementary aspects – the attitudes and evaluations of the political actors involved, and the inherent characteristics of this new form of opinion formation. As far as the relevant actors are concerned, we can distinguish between three groups:

⁴ As Kuklinski et al. (2001 : 423) suggest, « the much lamented limitations of citizen competence are less inherent in the capabilities and dispositions that individuals bring to politics and more a consequence of deficiencies in the political environment than scholars and practitioners often suppose ».

⁵ By lowering the information and motivation hurdles for the citizens, intensive campaigns diminish the difference between the cognitive strategies of informed and uninformed citizens. This could not only be observed for elections to the American senate (Kahn and Kenney 1999), but also for direct-democratic campaigns in the U.S. (Bowler und Donovan 1998: chapter 8).

- The *political parties and candidates* who would mainly be concerned with presenting and discussing their electoral program,
- The “*netcitizens*” who would use it for getting electoral information and for participating in online electoral discussions and
- The *public authorities* who would have the delicate role to decide whether a pre-voting public sphere should be created at all, and if yes, how it should be designed and controlled.

A brief presentation of the way these key actors perceive and use the Internet should help us to get a first idea of the democratic potential of the pre-voting sphere and of the format it is likely to acquire.

Political parties and candidates

As to the *political parties and candidates*, it is generally considered that they do not stimulate deliberative processes online but that they rather perceive the internet as a “showcase” and as a platform for internal communication (Nixon and Johansson 1999). Norris (2002: 1), who has analysed the online campaigns of political parties and candidates, indicates that “most campaigns by mainstream parties and candidates have proved relatively conservative in design, acting more like electronic ‘top-down’ electronic pamphlets than as a radically new forum for interactive ‘bottom up’ participation”. This result is confirmed by a recent empirical survey covering 144 websites of political parties in the 25 EU countries. The survey shows that the most important feature of internet for national and European political parties is the possibility to provide information, while the aspect of multilateral interactivity has proven to be much less important for them (Trechsel et al. 2003: 29-30). Such results are not surprising, when we keep in mind that the principal goal of parties and candidates is to gain electoral support by presenting an attractive and coherent public image of themselves. Now, can we expect the pre-voting sphere to change anything in the attitudes of the parties’ members and candidates on the net? Can we expect politicians to be-

come more deliberative and interactive in the pre-voting context? If this seems unlikely on the basis of the empirical evidence so far, it may well be that the specific context of a pre-voting sphere might encourage political parties and individual politicians to adopt a more interactive stance. Whether and to what extent they will take a pre-voting sphere seriously will, however, depend on the attitudes and the behaviour of the second group of actors – the citizens.

Citizens

With regard to the *citizens*, electoral studies for the 2000 US presidential campaign show that more and more citizens get politically informed on the Internet: “Overall only one in ten voters reported getting most of their news from the Internet, but almost one-third (30 percent) got at least some news about the political campaign” (Norris 2002: 64). The way they used the Web was quite conservative since people tended to consult journalistic sources with established reputation and credible authority⁶. It is equally interesting to note that among the citizens who used the Internet to get information about the presidential election 2000, roughly one third (35 percent) used the Web to participate in online polls and to get information about a candidate’s voting record (30 percent), while there has been a sharp decline in the participation in online discussions: the latter dropped from 36 percent in 1996 to only 8 percent in 2000 (Norris 2002: 69). Similarly, a study carried out in Pennsylvania based on a representative sample⁷ indicates that, on average, people discuss politics online 8 times a year, compared to a rate of discussing politics both on- and offline of 84 times per year. This is to say that online discussions about politics correspond to only roughly 10 percent of all political discussion – “a small but perhaps not negligible amount” (Muhlberger 2000: 1).

⁶ When asked where the Internet users went more often for news about the 2000 elections, “almost half of news consumers (47 percent) said they frequented the websites of major news organizations such as CNN and the New York Times, and in contrast few often visited candidate websites (7 percent) or issue oriented websites (4 percent)” (Norris 2002: 65).

⁷ Data was obtained from 524 respondents, with a response rate of 65 %. According to Muhlberger the sample was sufficiently representative (2001).

The question is, of course, whether a relevant number of *citizens* would be willing to use the pre-voting sphere instead of or in addition to traditional sources of information and communication? Can we expect citizens to take advantage of the new opportunity provided by a pre-voting sphere? A recent survey among Internet users in the context of the ongoing i-voting project in the canton of Geneva gives us a first idea of the desirability of such a site for potential users of Internet voting facilities. Users who had tested the prototype online voting system answered, when asked about future improvements of the voting site, that the latter should contain more tools for information and interaction between the citizens and the State as well as among the citizens themselves⁸. This study attests to the desirability for a well developed pre-voting site. Of course, this does not prove that the latter will be used and that it will have a positive impact on opinion formation, once it is available. This result tells us, however, that there is some *demand* on the part of the users of Internet voting for a pre-voting sphere.

Another indicator of the citizens' demand for such a site comes from a recent American report organized by the Pew research center (2002), which shows that American Internet users increasingly use official websites for public/political purposes. For instance, 62 percent (42 million) of Internet users said that they have used an official website to seek information on public issues; 34 percent (23 million) sent comments about an issue to a government official; 21 percent (14 million) used it to get information that helped them to decide how to vote in an election; and 19 percent have used the official site as part of a concerted lobbying campaign. Hence, we have reason to expect the i-voting site – by definition an official site – to be referred to by similar shares of users.

Of course, i-voting does not appeal to the same extent to all groups of citizens. It might, however, bring the campaign preceding the vote to the attention of some

⁸ With regard to information while the official information concerning the object of the referendum was present and widely used (76%), 32% of the respondents asked for more official information, 54% would like to have direct links to political parties' websites, 44% to media websites and 43% to other political actors' websites. With regard to interaction, 67% of the respondents indicated they would like to have the possibility to contact through e-mail the political authorities and 55% said they would like to see discussion forums be proposed on the official website and 36% showed an interest for having "chat" (Christin, T. & R. Mueller, 2002).

groups, which otherwise would not have taken notice of it, because they are heavy users of the internet, while they ignore other media such as the press or direct mail. We are primarily thinking of the *younger generations*, who have a particularly low interest in politics and a correspondingly low participation rate in elections and direct-democratic votes⁹. Moreover, the gap with respect to the interest in following public affairs between the younger generation (“Generation X”) and the generations of their parents and grandparents is growing – at least in the U.S. (Graber 2001: 435). In his well known analysis of the decline of the American community, Putnam (2000: 266) attributes about half of the overall decline in social capital and civic engagement in the U.S. to generational change, which is in turn shaped by changes in social habits and values.

A recent survey among Genevan voters adds some evidence to the possibility of a participation effect of the introduction of i-voting, especially among the young (Kies and Trechsel 2001: 53ff.): Asked about their voting intentions in the case of the introduction of the new voting procedure, a third of the irregular voters and abstentionists declared that they would vote more regularly if they had the possibility to vote on the Web. The corresponding share reached up to 50 percent in the age categories below 40, while it was negligible among the age-groups over 60.

We believe that the pre-voting sphere will be particularly appealing for the younger generation, since it is adapted to the peculiar characteristics of the newsgathering approaches of the new generation. Citing Zukin (1997), Graber (2001: 435) mentions five such distinctive characteristics:

- This generation as a whole is far more visually oriented than previous ones and superbly adept at extracting the central meaning conveyed by pictures

⁹ A huge amount of literature suggests that political involvement increases with age (e.g. Milbrath and Goel 1977: 114-6; van Deth 1990: 303-5; Wernli 2001: 87-104). For direct-democratic participation, in particular: Mottier (1993: 130).

- Its members like diversity in their information supply, they are perpetual surfers who move quickly from program to program to find what catches their fancy
- They like to participate in shaping their information menu
- They prize interactivity
- They are niche viewers, i.e. they skip stories that they do not like and get more information about preferred stories as long as they are readily available at the push of a button or the click of a mouse.

The Internet provides the technical means for accommodating these characteristics. It allows for the predominance of visual formats, the proliferation of venues, the ending of time-clock tyranny, the weakening of gate-keeper control, the growth of interactivity and the emergence of niche programming (Graber 2001: 438). Given the opportunities of Internet, the trends in news-seeking behaviour of the younger generation lend themselves to an optimistic interpretation of the current situation (Graber 2001: 447). However, as we shall argue later on, one should not adapt the pre-voting sphere exclusively to the needs and preference to the younger generations. To put it bluntly, we should avoid transforming it into a political televisual/videogame just for the sake of attracting the younger generation. Such a strategy could be detrimental to the quality of opinion formation in general and for the participation of other categories of the population who do not appreciate the same characteristics. A virtuous compromise has to be found.

More generally, the behaviour of the citizens with respect to a possible pre-voting sphere will depend on the way this site will be designed, and this in turn, heavily depends on the attitudes and decisions of the public authorities, the third type of actor involved here.

Public authorities

With regard to *public authorities* studies show that while they are generally keen to develop their administrative efficiency through programs of e-government¹⁰, they are much less ready to implement e-democratic tools such as providing pluralistic information, fora for discussion or systems of e-consultation. As a Slovenian study based on governmental sites suggests: "The central decision-making in Slovenian policy perceives the Internet potential simply as an opportunity for improving information(...) [it] focuses on presenting its work, ideas, and different proposals to the interested public. The aim therefore is not to discuss the issues or dilemmas, not even to open new questions" (Oblack, 2002: 12). Given the public authorities' reluctance with regard to e-democracy – an attitude which is also reflected in the way they have implemented their parliamentary websites¹¹, can we expect them to introduce an i-voting system containing a pre-voting sphere? This question can be divided into two parts: The first is whether we can expect public authorities to introduce i-voting in the first place. This seems to be likely. The spread of i-voting feasibility studies and the diffusion of i-voting pilot projects worldwide are indicative of the public authorities' interest in i-voting procedures. This interest in the implementation of i-voting facilities is in line with the efficiency philosophy behind the introduction of programs of e-government: indeed i-voting can facilitate electoral procedures such as voter registration, the counting of votes and the act of voting itself. In addition, from the *politicians* perspective, being at the forefront of the development of an innovative e-democratic tool constitutes an international publicity stunt for the political authorities who are responsible for moving ahead.

The second part of the question refers to whether we can expect i-voting, if it is introduced, to be complemented by the introduction of a pre-voting sphere. This seems to be much less obvious. The pilot project and the one existing binding official i-election we are aware of – a local election in UK and the referendum in

¹⁰ For a review and evaluation of e-government initiatives worldwide refer to "Global E-Government 2002" (West M. D., 2002)

¹¹ The already quoted study indicates that very few parliaments in Europe have introduced e-democratic tools such as the e-forums, e-consultation, e-feedback. On the other hand, most of them offered the possibility to contact the MPs through e-mail, but as the study shows this does not constitute a guaranty of reply (see Trechsel et al. 2003).

the commune of Anières (Switzerland) – did not introduce such a space and the reports as well as the studies commissioned by the various states on the question of i-voting tend to be silent on this issue¹². This does not mean, however, that public authorities oppose such an option, but it simply means that this question has not (yet) become the object of a public debate. We hope to contribute to the public authorities' awareness of the importance of the issue at stake.

The inherent characteristics of the pre-voting sphere

A functioning pre-voting sphere has some inherent characteristics, which contribute to its potential for improving the process of opinion formation and to its attractiveness for all groups of actors involved. First of all, the pre-voting sphere is likely to generate a high rate of interest among the voters and the parties/candidates alike, since it will become a highly visible public sphere. The simple fact that all those who vote by Internet will automatically enter the pre-voting space *just before voting* implies that it will become a space of “prime time visibility” where individual citizens and political organizations (political parties and their candidates, interest associations, social movement organizations) will be highly motivated to provide their cues and to express their opinions. In particular, as (Norris 2002: 239) points out for digital politics more generally, the pre-voting sphere “has the potential to amplify the voice of smaller and less well-resourced insurgents and challengers, whether parties, groups, or agencies, which have difficulty being heard through the conventional channels...”

Second, by centralizing all the information concerning elections in an easy accessible and efficient way and by offering a space for public deliberation – the

¹² A notable exception, however not a public one, are the i-voting binding experiences of the Italian “Partito Radicale” for electing a part of its executive board every year. For these elections an elaborated pre-voting sphere was elaborated: each candidate could present its CV; people could deliberate on the election among themselves and with the candidates; an elaborated system of question to the candidates was proposed ect. For more information on this *avant-gardiste* experience refer to Kies (2003).

pre-voting sphere has the potential to become *the site of reference* for all net-citizens seeking relevant information on the election. Why searching somewhere else if the most accurate and complete electoral information are to found at the voting site itself? This reasoning is particularly valid for the large number of citizens who wait until the last moment to get information for voting. The experience with the ballot pamphlet sent by the government to all Swiss voters before a direct-democratic vote provides some grounds for an optimistic assessment of such a site. This pamphlet constitutes the printed equivalent – the “poor parent” if you will – of an electronic pre-voting sphere. It typically presents a brief introduction to the issues on the ballot, stating the government’s point of view as well as, more briefly, the opponents’ position. This pamphlet is not only widely used (up to 50 percent of the voters used it in the early nineties), it also has a significant effect on the issue-specific level of information of the voters (Kriesi 1994, 1994a). By pushing the analogy one step further, we could say that the pre-voting sphere corresponds to a new *genre* of pamphlet that is more informative, more pluralistic, more tailor-made for the particular needs of a given citizen, and, on top of it, interactive. It constitutes, in other words, a “cyber-pamphlet”.

Third, the pre-voting sphere has the potential for contributing to enhanced systematic opinion formation, because it allows for the presentation of a plurality of diverse and conflicting opinions and because it opens the possibility for each individual to participate in public debates.

To summarize our argument up to this point, we have argued that the pre-voting site has the potential to improve the quality of democratic choices by raising the quality of the citizens’ opinion formation. In particular, we have argued that its openness, visibility, appeal and convenience make it likely that it will be widely used – both by citizens looking for relevant information and by political parties and candidates offering the relevant information. However, these are just potentialities. Whether these potential advantages will become true or not, depends a lot on how the pre-voting sphere will be implemented, i.e. on how it will be technically organized and administratively regulated. As Lawrence Lessig (1999) puts it, on the internet “code is law”. Which means that the technologic architecture

which will be adopted (code) for this pre-voting sphere will automatically define the freedom of expression of its users (law).

Design and control of the pre-voting voting site

We now propose to define which *code* should be adopted for the pre-voting sphere in order to take full advantage of its potentialities. From a normative point of view, the pre-voting sphere should be constructed with the following four objectives in mind: it should

- be easy to use,
- allow for a plurality of points of view,
- be adapted to both heuristic and systematic paths of opinion-formation
- encourage the heuristically inclined to adopt a more systematic approach.

Only if these criteria are followed can we expect the pre-voting sphere to have a maximum impact on the electoral opinion formation. We propose to put these normative criteria into practice by focusing on three aspects that are fundamental in the construction of the site. The first concerns technical solutions which guarantee maximum accessibility of the site. Next, we discuss how the plurality and the quality of the information provided could be secured and promoted. Finally, we deal with online interaction and speculate about the format and the rules to be adopted in order to maximize the civic potential of the pre-voting sphere.

Accessibility of the site

The accessibility of the site is an essential pre-condition for the full realization of its potential for improving the citizens' opinion formation. Not only should the i-voting site be open to all citizens interested, but measures should be taken in

order to encourage the passive and active use of the pre-voting sphere.

A first measure designed to promote accessibility is a measure to overcome the digital divide due to lack of access to the Internet. This would consist in placing computers connected to the voting sites in public places during the electoral period. Such a measure would offer the possibility to citizens who are not connected, but who nevertheless would like to i-vote – not only to cast their vote online, but also to get politically informed and active online through the pre-voting sphere. This measure could be complemented by the presence of a specialized staff who would have the role to explain to the computer beginners how to use the system.

A second measure to increase the openness of the pre-voting sphere would be to increase its visibility. Indeed, visibility on the Internet is one of the sought after features because of the wide availability of information and competing website. As a site of public utility, the official website should aim at maximum visibility. One efficient proposition is to introduce a public icon on the operating system and/or the web browser that would provide direct access to the relevant voting site. Such a measure could dramatically enhance its visibility.

Pre-electoral information

How should information be organized and presented within the pre-voting sphere? The pre-electoral information should be adapted to the needs of both the heuristic and systematic decision-makers and should encourage the minimalist citizens to adopt a more argument-based decision mode. To provide heuristic cues, we could take inspiration from NGOs such as Democracy Network (www.dnet.org), Debate America (www.debateamerica.org), Vote Smart (www.vote-smart.org), which have developed easily accessible information systems¹³. Of particular interest is *the “issue grid”* developed by D-net:

¹³ For a presentation of these different independent web-base campaign organizations see Peter Levine (2003).

“DNet’s ‘issue grid’ allowed voters to read each candidate’s position on a wide range of issues. Each row of this grid represented an individual candidate for the respective office (...) each column represented a particular issue. A cell was checked if the candidate provided a position statement on the specific issue identified by the respective column. Clicking on the checked boxes led the user to the candidate’s statement (...). The issues were arranged alphabetically in an attempt to treat all issues equally and to avoid editorial decisions (...). Candidates could ask for issues to be included in the grid. Other candidates could then submit their opinions on these topics. Namely, a candidate’s name would be moved on the top of the candidate list whenever that contender provide new information. Inattention could lead a candidate to move further and further down the issue grid, creating an incentive to address new issues and update their issue positions.” (Elberse et al. 2000: 135)

Examples of other, less elaborate tools for presenting concise information cues, tools more centered on the citizens’ immediate needs, are provided by the experiments which took place during the most recent elections in The Netherlands, Finland and Switzerland. These interactive techniques allow website visitors to answer *a series of multiple-choice questions on current issues*, which are subsequently compared with the information provided by the candidates and political parties. As a result of this process the e-technique identifies the candidates and parties that are closest and furthest from visitor’s political preference and proposes a list of suitable choices to the voter (see Trechsel et al. 2003).

The issue grid as well as the “political matching machine” are examples among others that could constitute a system of information, which is adapted to the needs of the minimalist citizens, but which also has the potential to incite them to adopt a more systematic path of opinion formation. Such tools would offer them an easy, user-friendly and rapid access to the essential information about the key issues and the candidates. The implementation of such tools in a visible context such as the pre-voting sphere could lead to a certain equalization of the political competition, since all candidates and political parties would have the same opportunity to be heard.¹⁴

¹⁴ However, a study about how citizens consult an independent civic site aiming at increasing the electoral civic competence showed a limited equalizing effect: “the statements of the four major candidates were viewed more often than statements provided by other candidates” (Elberse et al., 2000: 144). This is not surprising, since people are above all interested in candidates whom

In the same vein, the pre-voting sphere could also provide more *auditive and visual information*. It could, for instance, provide an audio-video archive of the speeches not only of the politicians but also of personalities (journalist, academics, interest groups etc.) who have opinions related to the election campaigns and the candidates and issues at stake. Indeed, as argued above, visual information are likely to better correspond to the expectations and needs of the younger generation. Visual elements could also provide complementary information for those citizens who would like to have a more “sensorial contact” with their electoral choice.

In addition, systematic, argument-based information should also be provided. An interesting possibility would be to facilitate the retrospective voting, which is so essential for the functioning of representative government (Manin 1996: 228), by presenting the *voting record of incumbents* for the previous legislative period. For new candidates one could enter a *quasi-voting record* – how they would have voted, had they been in the legislature during the previous period. This quasi-record would have to be collected by interviewing the new candidates prior the campaign. For *direct-democratic votes*, one could provide the arguments in favour and against the issue in question in more or less detail. In addition to such more detailed information, the i-voting portal could also provide links to web-sites of the political parties in the case of elections, and of the political parties and other political organizations, which have expressed an opinion on the issue at stake, in the case of direct-democratic votes. Such additional and more elaborate sources of information would correspond to the information-related expectations of the citizens who make their choices in a systematic way and, possibly, invite the heuristically deciding citizens to become more systematic.

Pre-electoral interaction

they know and who have the best chances to be elected. Nevertheless, this does not mean that such sites will have no impact at all. We still believe that the introduction of such tools could encourage citizens to consult electoral information that they otherwise would have ignored.

Some sort of online interaction should also be introduced in the pre-voting sphere, because it could contribute to the political involvement and the political competence of its users both by offering the possibility to make comments and by providing the opportunity to read about the opinions of politicians and other citizens. This competence enhancing potential is, as we argued above, a particularly salient aspect of the pre-voting sphere.

While it is obvious that an interactive system should be introduced in the pre-voting sphere, it is much less clear how it should be implemented. In order to discuss this question we start by adopting the same criteria which we already used for discussing the information. In particular, the system should be adapted to both heuristic and systematic paths of opinion-formation and it should encourage the heuristically inclined citizens to adopt a more systematic approach. In addition, it should be compatible with the general requirements of the normative communicative ethic of Habermas, which offers some more precise guidelines for how such forums of discussion should be designed. In a nutshell, Habermas (1989) maintains that a democratic society should be grounded in a multiplicity of public spheres the internal dynamics of which should approach an “ideal speech situation”, i.e. a discursive context characterized i) by its *freedom, openness* and *discursive equality*, i.e. everybody capable of speech and action should be equally entitled to enter the public sphere and to take part in the debate without being subject to any type of restriction, and ii) by the *discursive attitudes* of the participants, i.e. the participants should be rational, sincere, respectful, comprehensible and motivated to reach an agreement or consensus.

Turning now to the concrete implementation of this ideal, we can distinguish between two general aspects which the architects of the discussion forum should take into account in their attempts to implement such a discursive space: *the electronic system of exchange* and the *human system of exchange*. On the internet, various technical systems of exchange exist that can be more or less adapted to the discursive requirements. These systems can be distinguished according to the following criteria:

- Written versus audio-visual exchanges (teleconference)
- Synchronous (chats) versus asynchronous exchanges (forum)

We believe that the discursive ideals will best be served by a system of written/asynchronous exchange, the so-called *forum of discussion*, not only because this type of system is technically adapted to most computers, which guarantees a greater openness, but also because it would encourage a systematic process of opinion formation. Indeed, a forum of discussion would promote a greater reflexivity on the part of the participants, since it would encourage them to *write* their opinions. In addition, such a context of interaction would encourage citizens to express their opinion, who in other types of discursive context (face-to-face, television, radio etc.) would remain silent. This does not preclude the possibility to envision systems of interaction that are better adapted to the minimalist citizens who may not be willing to enter a process of deliberation. In particular, as we proposed with respect to information, there could be a more visual system of interaction which may better correspond to the needs and expectations of such citizens.

In addition to technical systems, the internet also involves rules and regulations of the exchange, what we might call a *human system of exchange*. There is no *magic formula* to tell us which rules a discussion forum should adopt and the empirical research on the question is almost inexistent¹⁵. But it is essential to find a suitable formula. Such a formula will depend on many factors including the national political culture, the number of citizens concerned by the vote and the Internet penetration of the country. It will also depend on the type of the vote (election

¹⁵ Theoretically grounded empirical analysis allowing us to define the appropriate format for online forums for promoting the civic competence of the citizens are largely lacking. As Lupia (2002) puts it: "A problem with many claims made by advocates of deliberation and other competence-generating proposals is that they are disconnected from empirical work on belief change in the social and cognitive sciences. They do not attend to discoveries regarding aspects of perception, attention, and retention that affect how people process new information. By ignoring this literature, many advocates cannot articulate what conditions are necessary and/or sufficient for their proposal to cause any particular belief or behavior change. It is, therefore not surprising that the returns to investment in competence-generating proposals are so poorly understood" (p. 23).

and/or referendum). The issues involved concern above all the control at the entrance of the forum, the identification of the online users and whether or not there should be a system of moderation. We are aware of the fact that this is not an exhaustive list of the issues at stake, but we believe that these issues are particularly important at the present early stage of the debate.

Who should be allowed to participate in the pre-electoral forums? Should everybody (citizens, politicians, minors, foreigners etc.) be allowed to leave comments or should there be certain restrictions at the entrance? The answer to this question may seem obvious if one applies our normative principles literally: any restriction of entry would impose limits on the plurality of opinions. However, such a point of view does not take into consideration the technical and social limits of the public sphere. We expect very large numbers of people to participate in the pre-voting forum. Therefore, if all the opinions are expressed in a single forum the result is likely to be disorder and confusion within the forum, which means that, as a consequence, the discursive ideals would be subverted.

We face, in other words, the following dilemma: On the one hand, by opting for a total openness of the forums the regulator would, in the likely case of high levels of participation, annihilate any possibility of realizing an ordered, systematic and discursive deliberation in the pre-voting sphere. On the other hand, by limiting, on the basis of certain rules, the expression of opinions in the forums of discussion the regulators of the pre-voting forum can promote a small, intimate and civic space of interaction that could provide the appropriate arena for an ordered and competence enhancing debate which would favour a discussion based on arguments. But such a solution presents a double risk: it would exclude some citizens from the possibility of expressing their opinion, which is difficult to accept in a democratic society, and it would limit the expression of a plurality of opinions, which is essential for a systematic opinion formation.

A virtuous compromise should allow to keep the forum as open as possible while at the same time allowing it to be as discursive as possible. Such a compromise could, first, imply the constitution of a *multiplicity of forums*, in such a way that the

flux of opinions would be canalized into different sites. One could think of random devices attributing citizens to different sites; one could also think of solutions, where the citizens self-select themselves into various discussion groups on the basis of a menu of selection criteria which the pre-voting site would offer them at the entrance. While randomization guarantees that every citizen is confronted with a plurality of opinions, self-selection might imply the possibility that a voter only encounters like-minded citizens in the discussion forum. Self-selection, in other words, could foster the phenomenon of “balkanization”, which Sunstein (2001) and others (Shapiro 1999; Davis 1999; Wilhelm 2000) are so much afraid of. Second, one could introduce a system of *synthesizing the debates* that would facilitate users to follow the debates and participate in them, even if they joined them at a later stage and even if the forums are very much attended to. Another option to promote the deliberative quality of the forums would be to adopt a *decentralized rating system*, such as the one used by some commercial (*ebay*) and discussion sites (*Slashdot*). The aim of this technique is to promote the transparency of the forum by rendering more visible the comments that are considered more interesting or relevant by the participants. The major drawback of such a system, however, is that minor opinions run the risk of being ignored.

Should the participants at the forums be *identified*? Again two contrary positions can be distinguished: on the one hand, one could argue that there should be no control of identities, because such a request could undermine the freedom of interaction and the potential egalitarian character of the exchange derived from a lack of the social cues. On the other hand, it may also be argued that “politics is too important to be debated by unidentified persons” (Maldonado 1997: 58). Non identified participants could participate in an irresponsible and uncivic way. Indeed some authors argue “that anonymity not only encourages disruptive behaviour in discussions, but may also lead to fraud in the promotion of unsupported viewpoints and the libel of individuals (troll)” (Dahlberg, 2001). Faced with this dilemma, we propose to adopt the following compromise: participants should be allowed to hide their real identity – for example by using nick names –, but their identity should be known to the administrative authority so that in the

event of a violation of rules (e.g. trolling, racist and xenophobic views) the perpetrator could be identified. In other words, the users should just be *identifiable*. Such a solution would have the advantage of “responsabilizing” them, while at the same time maintaining the increased freedom allowed for by written forums.

The last issue we would like to raise is whether the pre-voting forum should be moderated. We believe it should be. In fact, the pre-voting public forum is, as we have seen, a site that is likely to be visited very frequently and to foster intensive debates around electoral issues. Therefore, it constitutes a site that is particularly sensitive to certain threats such as confusion, personal attacks, racist and sexist comments, commercial spamming, excessive volume of postings. As numerous examples show, such types of behaviour strongly undermine the discursive potential of the forums and discourage participation in the first place. It is, therefore, essential to construct a system of controls that protects the public forum from such threats. To this end we propose to create a team of supervisors. Its role would be to protect the forum from acts that could seriously damage the deliberation and to promote the transparency of the forums. In order to protect the forum from anti-discursive threats, the supervisors should be entitled to a set of progressively dissuasive sanctions, such as *informative warning*, *cancel command* and the *kill command* for exceptional cases. Obviously, the use of these tools will have to be regulated and controlled by an independent body.

Other democratic potentials

Before concluding we would like to point out some complementary democratic potentials that further plead in favor of the introduction of a pre-voting public sphere. In particular, the pre-voting public sphere constitutes a protective device against the danger of “push-button democracy”. Moreover, it can contribute to an increase in electoral turnout, and to a homogenization of the national (and maybe also European) public sphere.

If i-voting were to be introduced without any pre-voting sphere, this could have a

negative impact on the process of pre-electoral opinion formation. The facilitation of the act of voting could encourage certain categories of the population to vote without being properly informed. The categories particularly concerned would be those groups of citizens who usually do not vote at all, but who could be encouraged to vote because of the introduction of i-voting procedures. For this reason, we are also quite sceptical about extending the voting procedures to the portable phones connected to Internet, since the latter offer very limited possibilities for getting informed and for deliberation (Kies and Trechsel 2001: 23-24).

In turn, we think it is possible that the introduction of a pre-voting sphere could encourage some citizens to participate in the vote? The reason is that the pre-voting sphere would offer citizens adapted and relevant knowledge to facilitate their choice. Such information tailored to measure can contribute to the participation of some citizens. As Levine (2002: 123) puts it: "What keeps citizens from voting is not the inconvenience of casting ballot. Even if we allowed citizens to vote instantaneously from home, most would not be able to choose a candidate, either because they would lack of relevant knowledge or because the choice would be unappealing".

Finally, why should the pre-voting sphere encourage the *homogenization* of the public sphere? As already mentioned, many authors argue that the Internet has just the opposite effect. They maintain that it contributes to the "balkanisation" of the society since public spaces online are mainly visited by like-minded people with similar opinions. They are concerned about its "filtering" effect and about the personalizing technology, which allows people to define in advance exactly the information they do – and do not – want to see. The more efficient the filter, the smaller the chance that a citizen would be exposed to a healthy surprise or share experiences with the rest of society. People tend to filter, because they team up with others whom they like, because they defend themselves against information overload, and, because of the availability of so many options, they will simply opt for some options and not for others. The implication would be a new version of

fragmentation and polarization of the society¹⁶.

We believe that, far from contributing to the further fragmentation of the public sphere, the pre-voting sphere may, in fact, contribute to its (partial) homogenization. If appropriately designed, it may encourage citizens to read plural information and to participate in debates that contradict their political convictions. It has the potential to contribute to mutual perception and understanding among the citizens visiting the site. We count on appropriate designs for discussion forums (e.g. randomization of assignment to groups), on the curiosity of the citizens and on a key feature of the Web – its linking capacity, which facilitates unexpected encounters: you never quite end up where you intended to when surfing on the Web.

Conclusion

Summing up our argument, we have maintained that the implementation of i-voting should be accompanied by the introduction of a “pre-voting sphere”, i.e. the voting portal should provide information and possibilities for interaction concerning the election or the direct-democratic vote. As we have pointed out, the pre-voting sphere has the potential for increasing the quality of pre-electoral opinion formation since it is likely to be pluralistically organized and intensely used. We have also underlined that the pre-voting sphere presents some additional important opportunities for improving the quality of a democratic vote:

- It could reduce the dangers of “push-button democracy” that are often associated with the introduction of i-voting

¹⁶ This view, however, has two problems, as Fallows (2002) points out, “one involves the Internet, the other involves the non electronic ways in which citizens interact”. Compared to the past and present balkanization involved by social cleavages based on religion, ethnicity, region or class – remember the construction of class- and confession-specific sub-societies (pillarization) in the early 20th century, the Internet seems a trivial source of the problem at hand. Moreover, and quite contrary to the assertions of Sunstein, the Internet actually functions less as a filtering device, than as the general interest intermediaries that Sunstein thinks are so important. As Fallows observes, “if you start looking up information on Web sites, you almost never end up where you expected” (p. 7).

- It could increase turnout by offering information tailored to the citizens' needs
- It could contribute to the fairness of party competition by increasing the visibility of minor/marginal parties, and
- It could contribute to a partial re-homogenization of the public sphere.

However, such favorable outcomes are neither automatic nor straightforward. For them to be realized, we have proposed a series of theoretically grounded measures concerning the design and the control of the pre-voting sphere. These measures are intended, on the one hand, to achieve maximum visibility of the voting portal and, on the other hand, to offer a system of information as well as interaction opportunities corresponding to the needs of the different categories of voters, helping them to be better informed and encouraging them to get involved.

It goes without saying that the implementation of such measures will require extra public resources that, for smaller political entities (small countries, regions, municipalities), may be particularly difficult to provide. However, the democratic consequences are so important that the implied costs are largely justified. From a normative perspective, it is the only way to proceed if the introduction of i-voting is intended to increase not only the *quantity* of participation but also its *quality*.

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