Internet Voting, Turnout and Deliberation: A Study

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Abstract: Analysis of the profile and motives of internet voting users in Geneva (Switzerland) shows that the common explanations of political participation ignore a subjective – or affective – dimension of political participation. This emotional dimension is the driver of internet vote use. Coincidentally, iVoting is mostly used by citizens who describe themselves as irregular voters or abstainers. This points to invisible barriers to political participation, as these citizens do not lack resources or knowledge, but the desire to participate by the common paper-based channels. For them, political participation is a self-centered process. Ultimately, this reflects a deep shift in the political life, from class-based choices to individual choices in the realm of public affairs. The present-day common good is defined by an aggregation of individual wills.

1. From poll tax to universal suffrage

"No taxation without representation", shouted the American revolutionaries who achieved the US independence in 1776. They were excluded from political life although they were paying taxes. The 1789 French Revolution reversed this motto by linking the voting right to the payment of a tax. The "no representation without taxation" principle was born. This "suffrage censitaire", known in English as "poll tax", would dominate the early stages of Western democracy. The word "poll" once meant "head", hence the name "poll tax" for a per-person tax. This electoral system design gave its current meaning to the expression "going to the polls".

The poll tax is but one of the many disenfranchisement motives that were enshrined in the electoral law of the nascent Western democracies. It has been gradually abolished over the 19th and 20th centuries. France, the very first country to do so, cancelled it from its Constitution in the 1850's, Belgium in 1893 and Canada in 1898. In the United States, the 24th Amendment to the Constitution, adopted in 1964, in the wake of the civil rights movement, made it illegal.

From its inception, universal suffrage was seen as appealing to the citizens' sense of responsibility, making them more willing to obey the law – their law - and respect the social order. In this light, universal suffrage was a logical extension of poll tax suffrage.

Poll tax suffrage relied on the idea that only by owning land and/or paying taxes do citizens acquire important enough responsibility in the public realm to reason impartially. Promoters of universal suffrage retained the idea that involvement in public life is necessary to justify full citizenship, but reversed the reasoning: being called to participate in law-making gives all citizens an interest in public life, pushing them to reason.

Census suffrage was dead. Or was it?

1.1 The origin of universal suffrage

In most Western countries, universal suffrage was introduced to stabilize the political scene and harness the unrest of the industrial revolution era (Tingsten, 1975). The rationale was that the established political figures and currents would attract the vast majority of votes, marginalizing the most extremist movements.

This pragmatic approach was built on the reflections of the XVIIIe century political thinkers. These were however not unanimous regarding the best form of self-government. Should citizens rule themselves directly or should they elect representatives? This question contains two further ones. In a representative democracy, do the electoral delegates have a free hand or are they bound by an electoral program which they must apply in its integrity and integrality? Secondly, in reference to the Athenian practice of drawing of a number of public positions among citizens, must the parliament be a sampling of the population in order to ensure sameness with the electorate?

A draft of the first declaration of human and citizens' rights by Thouret (Thouret, 1988), an important actor in the first phase of the French revolution, provides another argument supporting universal suffrage. Thouret, following Rousseau, wrote: "All citizens have the right to participate in person or through their

representatives in the law-making process and to only abide by the laws they freely consented to" [my translation]. This formulation was handy in that it transcended the debate between representative and direct democracy. Whatever the institutional system, citizens were deemed to have participated in the making of laws and therefore were expected to abide by their own choice.

In a different approach, James Madison (Hamilton, Madison & Jay, 1961), one of the main draftees of the US Constitution and the country's fourth President, argued that the greater the number of voters, the more likely they would elect respected figures rather than populist leaders. While this argument was used to promote the creation of large electoral districts rather than universal suffrage itself, it clearly links political stability and good government to the number of voters candidates have to convince. The underlying idea is that while unfit candidates may deceive a small constituency, they cannot fool a large group of voters encompassing citizens of all crafts, professions and skills. It was therefore important to sociologically balance the electoral districts in order to protect the institutions from a populist embezzlement.

Beyond the very practical issues of ensuring representation, a harmonious decision making process and institutional stability, one gets a glimpse of the notion of turnout waiting to develop from the folds of the XVIIIe century political philosophers' minds.

1.2 Is there nowadays a hidden poll tax?

While the low turnout common in many modern democracies is often interpreted as reflecting a diminishing interest for public issues and a retreat into private life, this brief historical detour invites caution for two main reasons. As the governments' diminishing role and power give more space to non-state actors, there are more ways to engage in public life today than there were one or two centuries ago. The rise of the welfare state, endorsing the idea that politics must foster happiness in the community legitimized the private (some would say selfish) pursuit of well-being.

Yet, recent situations, such as the US Presidential election in 2000, have shown that there remain organizational barriers preventing the free access to political rights or even to the polling place. Whether registration procedures, scarcity of polling stations, their short opening times, the presence of police force on the voting premises or the inadequacy of the voting channels in relation to the state of the society, "invisible" obstacles still exist in the eye of many a voter. In France, for instance, the presence of a policeman in front of each polling station, meant to assert its "sanctity", scares socially excluded people away from voting. [Communication by Michel Laflandre, Counselor to the International Relation Department of the French Senate, during a meeting of the Council of Europe Working Group on eVoting, 2002.]

As a result, access to voting isn't as easy as one would imagine in our era of universal suffrage.

A thorough study by Daniel Gaxie (Gaxie, 1978) has shown that there remain many obstacles to full political participation by the masses. Gaxie came up with the powerful concept of "invisible poll tax" to describe this situation. Gaxie, Professor of political sociology and methodology at Paris I University and Vice President of the French National Association of Political Science, uses the "hidden census" to characterize a sense of powerlessness keeping groups of citizens away from the polls. In this article, we use this expression in a broader meaning.

Can internet make a difference in lowering the access barrier to vote? And if it does, does it act through one of the "classical" dimensions of political participation such as empowerment or simplification of procedures?

1.3 The Swiss case

Switzerland's institutions are known as "direct democracy". Semi-direct democracy would be more fitting, since Swiss citizens elect representatives, while retaining a high level of control over them. In Switzerland, the emphasis is placed on public participation in polls, as an expression of the citizens' sovereignty and as an echo of local historical circumstances. Swiss democracy is neither the result of the age of enlightenment nor of a fight between feudal lords and an emerging entrepreneurial class, nor is it the decision of an elite class to grant citizenship to the masses: it is the prolongation of cities and rural communities self government of the Middle Ages.

The last hurdles restricting access to vote were removed in the 1920's from the federal legislation. Since then, political rights have been strongly extended, with the generalization of proportional representation in the federal, cantonal and municipal parliaments and the introduction of referendums allowing them to censor

laws adopted by these parliaments and of initiatives allowing citizens to propose laws or Constitutional amendments.

Switzerland's case is thus different than that of most European countries. This is also exemplified by the enduring existence of Landsgemeinde, or popular assemblies, meeting on the main square of some cantons' capital city to elect their authorities, by a show of hands, thus exercising their referendum and initiative rights.

Voting turnout has been slowly decreasing over the 20th century. The progressive introduction of the women's vote since the late 1950's hasn't reversed this trend. Electoral data show that turnout is lower for parliamentary elections than for referendum or initiative ballots. (Contrary to the United States, Switzerland never mixes election and referendums or initiatives in a same voting operation). It is often argued that the possibility to censure the elected officials through referendums reduces the voters' interest in elections. It is also well known that for referendums and initiatives, citizens vote according to their level of interest, of involvement in or of understanding of the issues at stake (Gray and Caul, 2000). Referendums and initiatives are typically votes "à la carte" where citizens do not display a regular participating pattern. It is here that we observe the highest proportion of occasional voters.

It is also a fact that citizens casting their ballot for elections form the base of voters. They are the regular ballot attendees, driven either by a sense of institutional responsibility or by a strong partisan preference. They tend to be older and better educated than the average population.

While this system encouraging "tailor-made" participation by citizens could explain why turnout is low in Switzerland by international standards, together with the automatic inscription of citizens on the voters' register, the lowering trend in turnout remains to be explained. The apparent irrational behavior of Swiss voters strikes a blow to the utilitarian approach to turnout. Having a legislative body in tune with the voters' wishes would minimize the citizens and political parties' investments in referendums. We must therefore admit that voters behave irrationally by ignoring the cost factor in politics.

It must be however remarked that the introduction of postal voting over the last thirteen years in addition to polling stations voting has led to turnout increase for elections and for referendums, albeit stronger for the latter. This shows that it is possible to overturn the lowering trend.

The most dramatic increase occurred in the canton of Geneva, where participation rose by twenty percentage points over the 1995-2003 period, to reach an average of 55% for referendums and initiatives. Nationwide the turnout gain amounts to some 5 to 7 percentage points. Turnout has since stabilized but hasn't decreased. The gains are being maintained.
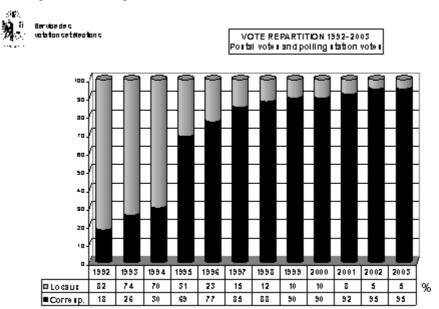

Figure 1: Progression of postal vote in Geneva, 1991-2003 (grey = polling station vote; black = postal vote). The postal vote share hasn't progressed since 2003. (Source: Geneva State Chancellery). Postal voting was generalized in 1995, which explains the strong increase in its use from 1994 to 1995.

It seems reasonable to draw two conclusions. The adoption rate of postal voting and its impact on turnout show there are organizational factors keeping citizens away from voting. The classical approach to turnout with its emphasis on citizen feeling of empowerment doesn't provide the whole picture.

Secondly, postal voting has broken an invisible barrier preventing a share of voters from casting their ballot. This barrier was not so much the scarcity of polling stations (in Geneva, before the introduction of postal voting, they were 70 for some 200'000 registered voters and at least one in each village or neighborhood) nor restricted opening times of these, as they opened Friday evening, Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning. It was furthermore possible to vote by anticipation the week before the ballot. Any ski-loving citizen leaving town for the week-end was given a reasonable possibility to cast a vote before surfing the slopes.

Bringing the vote directly into the voters' home is the real breakthrough that triggered increase in turnout. It can be described as a qualitative change that made the difference for voters. This service-driven approach has convinced many abstainers to join the ranks of active voters.

2. The Geneva internet voting project

In 2001, the Swiss federal government started an internet voting project. Capitalizing on the success of postal voting, the federal government decided to offer a one-stop voting solution. Ten years of error- and manipulation-free postal voting and the strength of the social ties in Switzerland provided the required trust basis. The government chose three cantons to develop an internet voting application of their choice, based on their electoral laws and procedures, and conduct iEnabled official ballots. These are Geneva, Neuchâtel and Zurich.

2.1 Swiss context

Many internet voting projects stem from the need to provide citizens living abroad with a practical way of voting. This was for instance the case with the Serve project, which should have allowed US army personnel abroad to vote for the 2004 presidential election, with the system provided to French residents in North America,[1] or with the Dutch experiences for the 2004 European elections and the 2006 parliamentary ones.[2]

Such is not the case in Switzerland, where the residents are the prime target. As an average, Swiss citizens are called between four and six times a year to the ballots. The first aim of the Swiss internet voting project is to increase turnout locally. It is silently hoped that internet voting will achieve turnout gains the way postal voting did before. In the mid-term, the second aim is that internet voting could prevent a new wave of diminishing turnout by making a new "product" available to voters in a time of rapid changes.

However, compared to the way political life is conducted in Switzerland, this project could seem out of context. The "concordance system" where all major parties are represented in the local and federal governments and the small size of the country discourage online interactions. The government by consensus disincentive the excessive personalization of politics and places the emphasis on the issues. Traditional media and a real local presence by members of the federal parliament and politicians in general fit the population's needs of contacts and information.

Online campaigns such as for example the 2005 French mobilization against the European Constitution Treaty, which French voters rejected in their first vote of defiance of the European Union, or as the grass root movement built around the Barack Obama candidature for the US presidency in 2008 have yet to happen. Political fundraising still shuns the web, as does political advertising. The number of elected politicians who have their own web site is limited and most of these are showrooms rather than dialogue spaces (see for example Bircher, 2001).

Public and community life are however booming. There is a healthy political debate and political parties' membership is high in European comparison. Swiss people mix and exchange in the country's many cultural and sports associations.

This notwithstanding, a vast majority of citizens does not feel anymore the need to ritually gather in a single place to vote. The polling station has lost its symbolism and in the process also its purpose and "raison

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[1] See for example www.expatries.senat.fr/depeche_afp_elections_afe.html.

[2] See the English language pages of the Dutch Ministry of interior website at www.minbzk.nl/aspx/get.aspx?xdl=/views/bewindslieden/xdl/page&SitIdt=68&VarIdt=72&ItmIdt=69774.

d'être". Although the share of votes cast at Swiss polling stations oscillates between 25% and 30% (in Geneva, it is as low as 5%, as shown on Figure 1), it is diminishing regularly.

2.2 In Geneva, ten iEnabled ballots

In Geneva, ten iEnabled ballots have been organized between January 2003 and November 2008. In all of them, voters had a choice of three channels to cast their vote: internet voting, postal voting and polling station voting. No other state or public entity has such a long record of internet ballots.

All but one were referendums and/or initiatives. The remaining one, a school board election, is not considered here when discussing the Geneva project, since internet was the only voting channel available and no comparisons along channels is possible. Far from demonstrating the doubts over electronic voting, voters used this new possibility in much higher percentages than expected.

The distribution of online turnout calculated with the voters – and not the citizens – as reference (100% refer to all citizens who cast a ballot) goes from a maximum of 44% for the very first iEnabled ballot (January 2003, in a municipality counting 1250 registered voters) to a minimum of 21.7% during the first federal ballot conducted online (September 2004, four municipalities totaling some 22'000 registered voters involved). The 44% figure, which has never been repeated, can be explained by an intense lobbying by municipal authorities as well as by a visible media presence in the village during the ballot period.

More importantly, the average online turnout ranged from 22% to 25%. The issues at stake, whether municipal, cantonal or federal, didn't affect online turnout, while they impacted the overall participation. It is therefore possible to say that the tendency to vote online has been very similar among municipalities and ballots.

The tenth ballot, conducted in November 2008, shows a different pattern. Online turnout reached 14% for two main reasons. It took the Geneva State parliament from 2006 to 2008 to debate a law generalizing internet voting, so far operated on an experimental basis. During this period, online ballots were suspended as they could have been understood as a coercion attempt on the parliament. Therefore, for three years, there were no more iEnabled ballots.

The second reason illustrates one of internet voting constraints. The Geneva application has been steadily upgraded during this pause and a java applet to be downloaded by the clients PC has been added, among other new features. Because Java is not normalized among platforms, the 2008 iVoting application ran on a smaller number of platforms and browser combination than its predecessors.

Based on the prevalence of Mac OS in Geneva (25% of the state web site visitors use Apple computers) and the calls to the helpdesk during the ballot, I estimate that three to four points of online turnout were lost for technical reasons. This sets the corrected online turnout value at some 17% to 18%. A legal procedure challenging the ballot, introduced while the referendum was already under way (ballots last for three weeks), and the subsequent partial ballot cancellation by the tribunal explains the remaining differences with previous ballots, as it provoked a great uncertainty and resentment among the citizens.

For the first four ballots, online voters were submitted an electronic questionnaire at the end of the voting procedure. As this method did not allow for a comparison between online voters, offline ones and abstainers, a phone survey was organized on a sample of 1014 registered voters in the days following the September 2004 ballot (Trechsel and Christin, 2005). The sample composition reflected the registered voters' splitting into abstainers and effective voters, and, in this second group, among polling station voters, postal voters and online voters. All municipalities involved in this ballot had already been able to vote online at least once in the past.

As far as socio-demographic variables are concerned, the findings of this survey - the first of its kind in any of the countries having conducted online ballots - confirm the results that the iQuestionnaires used in previous ballots had revealed. These can be summarized as follows:

- Postal voting is appreciated by voters over 50 years of age, while internet voting is stronger and may even be the preferred channel among voters under 50.
- When internet voting is made available to voters, the 18-29 age group votes in proportion to its demographic weight (some 10% of the voting age citizens), while when internet is not available, this group makes up only 5% of the voters.

- Although the level of iVoting use is lower among women, the use curves for both genders display the same shape through the different age groups. The difference between genders is non-existent among the younger voters.

- The use of internet voting is positively correlated to the level of education. Education does not affect postal voting nor polling station voting. (The education level however affects the overall participation in ballots, as political scientists have shown: voting is positively correlated to the education level, the lower it is, the less people vote.)

- While participation in this ballot, by any channel, is positively correlated to the income level, the use of online vote grows - albeit non-linearly - with income. As the study considers households' consolidated incomes rather than the respondents' one, the income variable should be balanced by the number of persons, or of income-earning persons, in the household. This balance was not possible with the available data.

Table 1: Multivariate model of the impact of socio-economic and demographic variables on the choice to vote online (Source: Trechsel & Christin, 2005)

Independent variables	B	s.e.	Sig.
Age (by 10 years groups)	-.286	.085	.001
Gender	.120	.248	.629
Level of education	.152	.136	.263
Household consolidated gross monthly income	.134	.045	.003
Constant	-.1843	.661	.005

Pseudo R^2 (Nagelkerke): .104; n=411; **in bold = error probability ≤ 5%**

2.3 The less I vote, the more I vote online

These results based on socio-demographic variables only reveal superficial trends. The model created by combining these variables has no explanatory value as why does one vote online. The factorial analysis conducted on these data shows they have no predictive value: it is not possible to anticipate one's voting channel based on one's age, gender, income or study level. The same observation was made in Estonia. We have to look at other leads in order to explain why some citizens prefer voting online.

A new field of questioning can be opened by asking "where do iVoters come from?" Do they come from the ranks of regular voters, frequent ones, occasional ones or abstainers? The answers are surprising.

To state it simply, the less one votes, the more one votes online. (A similar finding was done in the USA, regarding the Democratic primaries. C.f. Kolar Prevost, 2008). Conversely, the more often one votes, the more one votes by mail ballot.

While in the September 2004 referendum, 21.7% of all ballots were cast on the web, 30.8% of the ballots cast by occasional voters were online ballots, an almost 1.5 to 1 relationship. Voters who participate often, but not always, in ballots used iVoting at the rate of 26.2%, a 1.2 to 1 relationship. On the opposite, voters who say they never miss a voting operation cast fewer ballots on the internet than the average: 18.7% vs. 21.7%. Among these two last categories, internet voting took voters away from postal voting but hardly affected polling stations attendance.

Table 2: Usual ballot attendance and choice of voting channel on September the 26th (Source: Trechsel & Christin 2005)

Voting channel on September the 26th	Usual ballot attendance					
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total (n)
Polling station	4.5%	4.9%	15.4%	16.7%	33.3%	5.7%
Postal voting	76.8%	68.9%	53.8%	0.0%	66.7%	72.6%
Internet voting	18.7%	26.2%	30.8%	83.3%	0.0%	21.7%
Total % (n)	100.0% (396)	100.0% (122)	100.0% (39)	100.0% (6)	100.0% (3)	100.0% (566)

The potential of internet voting among occasional voters is emphasized by the sample's answers to the questions regarding future ballot attendance, should internet voting be generalized. The answers underline the mobilizing potential of online voting among those casting a ballot from time to time and, in a lesser measure, among those hardly ever voting.

While one may doubt the validity of intentions ("I would vote more if…") as opposed to facts ("I voted because…"), it must be remarked that nine out of ten Genevan who cast an online ballot at least once before September 2004 made use of this voting channel on this occasion. This evokes the lasting effect of postal voting over time: once this channel is chosen, there is no way back to abstention, as the persistence of turnout increase shows.

It is however too early to quantify the impact of internet voting on turnout. This kind of measurement would require comparisons between the largest series of data collected before and after the general introduction of internet voting. Such data is not available yet. This quantification would also miss the qualitative impact of internet voting, which is being developed here.

In summary, iVoting users come mostly from the files of the occasional voters. They declare that iVoting has the potential to mobilize them. Once they've tried it, they stick to it. It can reasonably be said that internet voting lowers the access threshold to vote for a group of persons who otherwise would not participate in referendums.

We can link this observation on internet voting appeal to occasional voters to the patterns of vote distribution over the three weeks of the ballot-casting period. While the postal votes follow a linear distribution in time, more than half of the internet votes are concentrated during the last ballot week, following an algorithmic distribution which can be seen as reflecting the behavior of citizens following politics from a distance and needing more time to make up their mind.
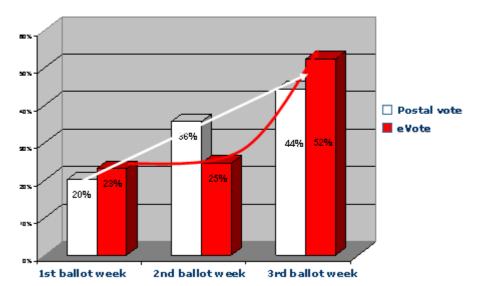

Figure 2: Votes distribution over time according to the voting channel (Source: Trechsel & Christin, 2005)

2.4 The key common features are not where one would expect them to be

We have seen a first characteristic – their electoral behavior - that defines internet voting users as a group and not only as an aggregation of individuals. The question of the driving factor in their choice of the electronic channel remains open. Are they selectively reacting to information and communication technologies (ICTs), while ignoring other channels? Do they suffer a sort of "partial blindness", a lack of attraction for paper ballots and their associated old fashioned imagery?

Looking for the driver of iVote use, Trechsel and Christin submitted a set of so-called "ICT variables" to a factorial analysis. These variables encompass a mix of objective and subjective features: the respondents' self-assessed IT skills, the frequency of their internet use, their confidence in online information, online communication, online transactions and in the internet voting procedure and the place where they access internet (home, office or other).

The factorial analysis performed on these variables shows that the subjective elements in the voters' relation to internet explain predominantly the use of internet voting. These are their self-assessed IT skills, frequency of internet use, confidence in internet communications and in the procedure of internet voting. The statistical analysis reveals indeed that this model explains to a far larger extent the choice of voting online than any other one.

To test all hypotheses about the use of internet voting, the socio-demographic and "ICT variables" models were combined The statistical results confirm that the subjective evaluation of one's own computer abilities, the confidence in internet voting and other online communications and the type of connection are the drivers of internet voting. In this comprehensive model, neither age, gender, education or income can explain the choice of iVoting.

Analyzing the 2005 Estonian online election, Trechsel and Breuer (2006) reached the same conclusion. This is more than a mere confirmation. The whole of Estonia could vote online, including rural areas, while Geneva is a dense urban settlement, but this socio-geographical difference didn't affect the drivers of internet vote.

Voting online depends upon a subjective feature, namely the feeling of ease one has with his/her computer. The use of internet voting could almost be considered the indicator of a lifestyle in which information technologies play a pivotal part. Here, the divide is not between the "internet access have" and "have not", but between "computer feeling have" and "have not". This divide is not correlated to socio-demographic variables, but to the subjective sense of ease and trust with ICTs.

Traditionally, political science has considered voting as the expression of one's feeling of belonging to a community. The feeling of belonging is prerequisite to participating in social and political life. Because it fits some citizens' subjectivity and offers them a suitable voting channel, internet voting gives them the opportunity to participate in ballots and maybe to feel part of the society in the first place.

It comes then not really as a surprise that in the Geneva case the use of web-based transactions such as eBanking or eCommerce is not a good indicator of iVoting use. Voting is asserting one's belonging to a community, one's emotional tie with it and its destiny, upon which one has a saying through the voting process. Online voting differs inherently from online transactions which bear no reference to the community.

Table 3: Multivariate model of the impact of IT variables on the choice of internet voting (coefficients of logical regression) (Source: Trechsel & Christin, 2005)

Independent variables	B	s.e.	sig.
IT skills	.263	.168	.117
Internet utilization frequency	.197	.075	.009
Place of internet access	.104	.326	.749
Type of connection	.901	.320	.005
Confidence in online information	.159	.248	.522
Confidence in online communication	-.384	.196	.050
Confidence in online transactions	.270	.169	.110
Confidence in the procedure of internet voting	-1.338	.255	.000
Constant	-2.008	1.208	.096

Pseudo R^2 (Nagelkerke): .348; n=277; **in bold = error probability ≤ 5%**

While postal voting geographically displaced the vote and introduced it into the voters' home, internet voting created a paradigm shift and reached the intimacy of those having developed a subjective relationship with ICTs. Looking at the model that explains citizen participation according to the three variables, resource, motivation and mobilization, it appears that internet voting acts on the mobilization and motivation dimensions, while postal voting acts on mobilization and resource.

It is however important to underline that the resource dimension is paramount when analyzing the internet voting effect for citizens living abroad. Here, internet voting barrier-lowering effect is closer to the qualitative change brought in Switzerland by postal voting: it makes voting easier and - where postal voting is offered to the expatriate voters - solves the problems of postal delays and poor overseas service.

3. Internet and politics, a discussion

When wondering whether there existed today a form of unacknowledged for poll tax subtly disenfranchising a share of the citizenship, I asked whether internet could make a difference in bridging the gap that keeps many a citizen away from active participation in ballots. The empirical data from Geneva gives a positive answer to this question. There may be however something frustrating to these results.

3.1 Politically competent

Political science traditionally correlates the lack of cognitive tools or socio-demographical specifications with lower participation in politics and decision-making. The remedy to these inequalities was to be found in education - or revolution, depending on one's school of thought.

Challenging the abstract political thinking of the Enlightenment, the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1979) observed that the representation principle in politics acts as a potent filter controlling the expression of political opinions and pushing the citizens' opinions and choices – and especially the opinions and choices of the least educated among them - towards expressions (and vested interest), which they neither create nor control. Bourdieu coined the concept of "political competency", which he defined as "the ability to acknowledge the politics as such and to approach it with political answers based on political principles (rather for instance than ethical ones); this ability is indissociable from a feeling of being conversant in the full meaning of the word, that is socially recognized as entitled to deal with political issues, to give one's opinion in their regard or even to alter their course" [my translation].

The political competency is therefore the capacity to move from a personal experience to a more general problem. This ability is a social construction, which is positively correlated to the socio-cultural level of voters.

The iVoters' profile that emerges from the Geneva case is coherent with the possession of the "political competency". Internet voting might mainly activate citizens who already fulfill an unwritten prerequisite and whose socio-demographical profile is close to that of the active voters. They have the intellectual tools and the political competency, while being abstainers. And iVoting also increases the young citizens` participation.

One can illustrate this with the image of a succession of sieves. The first one, polling station voting, would only stop the largest sand grains. The remaining grains would keep falling down until they reach the second sieve, postal voting, where roughly half of the grains would be stopped. Finally, the third sieve, internet voting, would stop another 20% of grains. The rest would pass through the system.

What is the glue that makes more citizens sticking to the voting process with internet? What is the shape of the sieves' holes that retain more sand grains? We have seen that subjectivity is key for understanding the internet vote attraction. Could it be that it activates some form or perception pattern, some coded key, in its users?

3.2 When internet voting meets the long tail

The internet long tail concept, formulated by Chris Anderson (Anderson, 2006), editor-in-chief of Wired Magazine, can help shed some light on the online voting case. To quote from Anderson's web site,3 the theory says "that our culture and economy are increasingly shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of "hits" (mainstream products and markets) at the head of the demand curve and toward a huge number of niches in the tail. (…) In other words, the potential aggregate size of the many small markets in goods that don't individually sell well enough for traditional retail and broadcast distribution may someday rival that of the existing large markets in goods that do cross that economic bar."

Applied by analogy to internet voting, this model suggests that online voting has the potential to aggregate individual votes that would be lost - that is not cast - were internet not available. This assertion needs however some reformulating of the original model.

This model is based on a commercial thinking (how to reach niche markets) that, literally transposed to politics, would translate into a party-preference approach (how to reach "niche" atypical voters, or single-issue ones to integrate them into a wider process). Political parties ought to be in the position of the retailers, if the model could simply be translated from the commercial to the political world.

What we have seen in the Geneva case, however, is best observed from the electoral authorities' point of view, which differs from the political parties' position: the integrating power of internet voting brings a new dynamism to the voting process.
Pursuing the internet voting analogy with the long tail concept, one must ask where online voters stand politically and whether they represent a coherent political force. To represent such a force, they should have altered the ballot's final result and produced an outcome that would not have been possible without them.

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3 www.longtail.com.

Trechsel and Christin investigated this question. They built a "political model", looking for clues as to whether the online voters' political preferences could explain their use of this voting channel. Their answer is negative. They found that "the proportion of internet voters stays relatively stable throughout the political spectrum, with a slight bias to the left." In other words, the internet voters' political sensibilities distribution is similar to the distribution in the consolidated voters' population (Trechsel and Christin, 2005, page 23).

This finding is reinforced by the fact that in all iEnabled ballots conducted in Geneva, the online voters' choices coincided with those of the consolidated majority. In other words, not only the added number of citizens that online voting attracted to the voting process did not change the final outcome, but it also reinforced the final result. Contrary to the long tail model applied to commercial goods, these voters are politically in tune with the mainstream. By their opinions, they belong to the head of the curve. What these voters did, however, is to increase the results' legitimacy by providing a better sampling of the population, notably thanks to an increased share of young people among the voters.

Let us formulate two hypotheses. For the younger citizens, internet voting activates a cultural code, it speaks their language in so far as "the medium is the message", to borrow from Marshall McLuhan. For the mature voters, iVoting simply appeals to the pride, surprise, pleasure or vanity of being IT conversant. I like iVoting, because it likes me.

If these hypotheses are true, then in both cases, the voting act itself might be more important than the political choice it conveys. What about participation, deliberation and the legitimacy of popular choices?

3.3 Internet, a political enabler?

Reflecting on the quality of deliberation, Bourdieu distinguishes two different political decision-making processes (Bourdieu, 2002): in the first, individual citizens vote independently in isolation to produce a majority. For him, this aggregative process is unable to produce common good as citizens express preferences based on their own interests.

In the second, individuals belonging to a community produce what he calls a "true collective opinion". This emerges when the conditions evoked by Joshua Cohen (Cohen, 1997) are fulfilled: "Democratic politics involve public deliberation focused on the common good and require some form of manifest equality among citizens, and shape the identity and interests of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of the common good."

In spite of the limitations in the socio-economical diversity of the new iVoting "recruits", can internet voting and more generally the use of internet in the political realm produce more "true collective opinions"?

3.4 The three ages of democracy

To answer this question, we need to address it in the framework of a wider conception of democracy. According to Bernard Manin (Manin, 1995), democracy went through three ages since its debut in the Western World, in the 18th century. First came the "parliamentary democracy", which is characterized by a personal bond of trust between citizens and their elected representative. The singular is here the right substantive form as it expresses a direct relationship between a community of citizens grouped in a constituency and their elected representative. This relationship is based on social factors such as good reputation, better education or natural authority that marks the representative out of its electoral base. The representative is not his constituents' spokesperson, but rather their trustee.

Second came the age of political parties' democracy. Following the numerical increase of voters, political parties come to the fore to organize and flank voters. Party loyalties are stable in time and reflect the voters' socio-political conditions. The vote is the expression of identity. It was expected that this form of democracy would allow representatives from a broader choice of socio-demographical backgrounds to be elected. Whatever their political opinions, however, MPs kept displaying elite qualities such as a better (self)education (in the case of trade unionists, for instance), a natural authority or outstanding organizational skills. In this model, voters still express trust, but this is directed toward a party rather than an individual.

According to Manin, we have now entered a third age, the "democracy of the public". Political parties struggle to retain their base and keep in touch with the public's demand. Voters ignore the candidates' program or party affiliation and choose them on their personality. Political parties tend to become public

relations tools focused on the electoral schedule. The mass media bring the emergence of a new elite where leading citizens and good organizers only fit if they also are outstanding communicators, able at displaying a coherent and convincing image through the various available communication channels, including the management of their team of aides.

Globalization increases the personalization of political choice: as many levers of command escape the domestic rulers' power, it becomes close to impossible to campaign on a binding platform. For Manin (see also Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1976), voters in this third age of democracy react to the candidates' charisma, records, style, image and communication ability rather than expressing a social or political identity or preference. Subjective political choices have become the norm of the day.

3.5 Me and the democracy

Manin wrote his book in 1995, before the rise of the internet. It is clear today that this far reaching communication channel which is both a content carrier and a data structure reaching beyond the usual technical boundaries (newspapers have neither sound nor animated images; the radio has no image; the TV isn't interactive, etc…) is bound to accentuate the role of communication and representation in politics.

In a way, one could argue that the internet it the most accomplished expression of our time and its essence: a mix of speed, constructed speech and images and reactivity to the flow of information that shape our daily lives. The candidate who masters best this flow and senses and adjusts to the popular desires becomes the ballot winner.

Informative web tools such as the "online vote assistance" Smartvote, to use the Swiss brand name, also appeal to one's emotional dimension, although they were meant to be "objective" devices. Candidates seeking citizens' suffrages fill an online questionnaire on the Smartvote web site. Interested citizens answer the same list of questions and the system displays the candidates whose positions are the most similar to the citizen's.

While this tool brings an added value in politics[4] – and sometimes in a less than straightforward way, such as when for instance candidates cheat in their answers trying to make themselves appear less radical than they really are – it clearly has a foot set into the "me too" category: how do I fare compared to public figures seeking my vote? The "where am I" question that drives many voters to this web site has more to do with egocentric motivations and the fun provided by rankings (the sheer number of web sites or magazines featuring a "the 10 best…" and "the 10 worst…" section is a good indication of the entertainment-related status of rankings), than with a true political questioning. Debating is moreover not possible on this kind of site.

Some of the promoters of such "vote assistance" systems are eager to link it to an internet voting system, which could automatically cast a vote for the list of candidates that came closest to the voter's own preferences. This would deprive the voter of the reflection pause that entails for example the necessity to access a dedicated voting web site. The Geneva authorities have for this reason consistently refused to combine both systems, in order to preserve the free will of voters by dissociating as much as possible the voting procedure from web surfing. (There are also technical reasons to this decision, as a hyperlink leading to the voting web site could prove to be a vulnerability in the system.)

The shift towards emotion-based politics would raise the hair of the US democracy Founding Fathers or of the valiant Swiss mountaineers fighting for freedom, but it needs not mean that democracy has become dysfunctional. The political thinkers of the 18th century promoted the idea that the common good – or the pursuit of it - was a kind of immanent benefit that would materialize whenever free citizens would be able to establish self-rule. By filtering out people with no property, census suffrage was supposed to help selecting representatives able to make common good happen. This gives an indication on what the somehow elusive "common good" meant for these thinkers: economic prosperity based on the respect for property rights and a paternalistic form of social responsibility of the haves towards the have-nots, tantamount to social stability.

The political parties' democracy, Manin's second age, produced several definitions of common good that were indeed based on the various social classes' interest. The dissolution of the traditional social- and identity-defining links (Putnam, 2000) left a void where these competing proposals once stood.

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[4] On the topic of eApplications to enrich and enlarge internet voting, see Kies and Kriesi (2005).

Paradoxically, internet reinforces the need for a program, or at least a position (a posturing?) on everything and anything, because it invites comparison and benchmarks and because it creates a space to be filled by images, texts, words or noise. This call of the void introduces a so far unknown speed in the political "buzz", creating a strain on politicians, who must be able to react very quickly, adequately and "counter-communicate" when a damaging piece of information is disseminated on the web. At the same time, they need some kind of fixed reference, a corpus of affirmation to show they are not moved by the winds of the media or of the opinion polls.

While the "true collective opinion" emphasized both the equality of citizens and a public conception of the common good, the lowering effect of internet on political participation is based on feelings of individual subjectivity. I take part because I am offered a channel that mirrors my own habits. In this reasoning, the "I" is central. Collective choices tend to be more an aggregation of individual ones rather than the expression of a common feeling or a deep seated agreement on the "common good".

The true expression of a collective opinion might indeed be a concept of the past – at least in the categories which Bourdieu used, based on an "objective" reading of the dialectic forces in presence. Bernard Manin (Manin, 1985) wrote: "The legitimate decision is not based on the collective will of all, but on the deliberation of all; the legitimacy of the decision does not come from the unanimity, but from the process by which the final decision is being taken" [my translation]. If "deliberation" is understood as "free expression", blogs, web postings and newsgroups, then internet adds to the deliberative process without changing its nature.

The ongoing campaigning that is becoming common in many democracies is also a consequence of the new possibilities brought by internet. The meaning of elections is changing in the process, moving away from them being a forward looking choice between differing political proposals towards being a backward looking referendum on the incumbents. ICTs provide citizens with an unprecedented memory, by bringing for example a new ease in the maintenance and consultation of MPs voting records, as is for example shown in Canada by the www.HowdTheyVote.ca web site, which includes the pivotal votes in the House of Commons, complete with voting history, dissent, attendance and speaking habits.

Because they understand that under these new conditions, their reelection is being played during their office time more than during the election campaign itself, a growing number of MPs maintain their own web site which offers a real dialogue and public involvement. A good example of such a site by today's standards is the portal of the British Parliament Member Steve Webb, (www.stevewebb.org.uk), which also makes use of the SMS or texting technology. This site received the 2004 News Statesman New Media Award and the inaugural Hansard Society E-Democracy Award in 2005.

4. Governance and the internet

Internet redefines and extends the notion of public space. Going back to the poll tax, one is struck by the historical simultaneity of the fight for (male) universal suffrage and the rise of the mass media. Just as the newspaper boom of the 19th century sparked a thirst for news - or did it simply reveal a huge existing need that compulsory education was contributing to create? - and ultimately helped expand the democratic model, the internet boom changes and expands the way democracy is being lived and experienced in modern societies.

Citizenship is less and less identified with the sole election of representatives and is more and more understood as a broader involvement in public life that doesn't necessarily correspond to party militancy. The role of intermediary bodies such as non-governmental organizations grows as activists promote internet as the tool and the place where counter-power can gain momentum and where a regulatory pressure can be exerted on existing authorities. This process could be called the soft citizenship or the soft power of internet.

In Europe, where the divide between the competing political parties is often small and unessential and where the various political proposals mostly differ in degree, the notion of governance (Hermet, 2007) has in many way replaced - in the facts, if not in the vocabulary - that of politics. The concept of governance is commonly used to describe the dilution of the political power between a multiplicity of stakeholders and a decentralization of the decision-making process. The notion of governance covers the interactions and the coordination between the state and the civil society in the social regulatory process that in many areas has replaced both the public intervention and the policy making by the state and the elected representatives. While the traditional governing model is based on a hierarchical division of tasks and responsibilities, the political structure of the governance is made of a web of powers and counter-powers.

In this web, citizens get a somehow stronger and easier-to-raise voice thanks to the internet. The ePetitoning and the e-mails sent to politicians are two examples. The internet bridges the social and the geographical distance (between the citizens' home and the country's capital city, in the case of MPs, for instance) separating the politicians from the citizens.

We are reaching the shores of the "eDemocracy"[5] – or should we call it the "eGovernance". The question is then of the difference and distance between eGovernance and eGovernment, or, in other words, between the macro management of the public affairs and their micro management. At the local level, both levels of management coincide. It is therefore at this level that I see the major possibilities of eDemocracy being put into practice.

While the oracles standing by the web in its infancy decided it would shrink the planet and promote world citizenship, local issues or the local avatars of global issues (remember the "think global act local"?) are the glue that holds virtual communities together and spark protests. Not only do local issues compensate for the distance created by the democracy by delegation, as Manin observed, they are also the basis of the community social interactions and ties. The local level is at the convergence of the emotional and political dimensions, it is the geographical and emotional nest of the political experience and feelings. Not surprisingly, all pilots of participatory democracy using web tools have taken place at the local level, where they are the more meaningful.

This might legitimately be called "eDemocracy". Is it still "ePolitics" or politics at all?

4.1 The illusion of a truly egalitarian democracy

Some theories of eDemocracy affirm that internet and electronic democracy will contribute achieving a truly egalitarian democracy by erasing the imperfections of the current institutions, heir of the 18th century theories and uprisings (See Vedel (2003) for a critical approach of eDemocracy theories). These theories assume that the technique could overcome the political and sociological issues and differences.

This approach is partially rooted in the fact that internet creates a semblance of equal footing between humans. Anyone can contribute to online discussions, without being filtered for motive of scarcity of space (such as in "letters to the editor"), inability of expression (such as on radio) or poor appearance (such as on TV). All what is needed is a PC and a connection. The very idea of required skills becomes obliterated by the technique. Do not Swiss and Estonian citizens vote online because of subjective skills, or, in other words, because of their own representation of their skills? Little is left here from the measurable capacity, which is the metrics used by Bourdieu when he came up with the concept of "political competency".

5. Conclusion

Centuries after the "no taxation without representation" rallying cry, will there be a "no representation without connection" motto? To quote Jesus-Martin Barbero "the modes of communication which appear in and with the media are possible only to the degree that the technology materializes changes that come from the society and give meaning to new relationships and uses" (Barbero, 1993, page 180). Never maybe was Marshall McLuhan most famous quote "the medium is the message" truer than with the internet. A bidirectional network, supporting all formats of data and information, where the value creation takes place on the edges and that, although it may seem to allow a more direct contact and exchange of ideas between individuals, adds a mediation to the already existing ones.[6]

The impact of the internet in politics resides less in its ability to lower the threshold for broadcasting ideas or to produce a broader and "more equal" debate than in its mix of information and entertainment, its ever-changing content and its "me too" approach. Through these characteristics, internet can reach further to citizens at the edges of politics. Another way of formulating this is offered by the expression "empowering the edges" (Smith, Kearns and Fine 2005).

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[5] This word is used here in its European meaning. In the USA, the word eGovernment it is often used to cover the whole field that European divide in eGovernment (online tax declaration, online social benefit reclaiming, etc.) and eDemocracy (the expression of political choices or preferencse using online tools).

[6] If I read a text on the web, the ideas contained in the text are mediated a first time by the written for chosen by the author and a second time by the internet as data format. The same would be true for pictures, movies or audio.

Internet however does not seem to reach deeper into the socio-economic strata of the population. Under this perspective, the socio-demographic profile of an internet voter is similar to that of the active voters. Although this article relies mostly on the Geneva case, it is interesting to see that in Estonia (Trechsel and Breuer, 2006) and the USA (Kolar Prevost, 2008) too, internet voting reaches the same kind of citizens, on the margins of the political participation to make them cross the line of casting their ballot, that is using the "I" word in politics. This suggests a broad validity of the model these two cases have delineated and allows formulating the hypothesis that the same effect will be observed in the countries that will in the future introduce internet voting.

The larger participation that comes as a result of internet voting does not necessarily mean that the political landscape will be transformed. In all iEnabled ballots conducted in Geneva, online voters always coincided in their choices with the consolidated majority. Our survey showed that they recruit themselves quite evenly among sympathizers of all existing political parties. In Switzerland, the high level of abstention is sometimes "explained" saying that abstainers express a degree of satisfaction with the way things are. This somewhat cynical thesis might well prove true.

At the local level, internet may well foster a governance approach and bring a lowering of the organizational and institutional threshold leading to the implementation of the direct democracy tools, referendums, initiatives or recall ballots. To answer the citizens' claims, local authorities will need increased competence, thus challenging the institutional balance.

At a more general level, the strong personalization of politics together with the technical possibility given to voters by the ICTs to handpick candidates from a party list or to make their own list by mixing candidates from different parties with a few clicks might in the mid-term favor a change of electoral rules for mixed-party ballots and, where it doesn't yet exist, proportional ballots.

Ultimately, there might be more risks associated with refusing eDemocracy than with accepting it. Citizens lacking communications channels with the authorities might prove more damaging than the existence of direct ways to interact with the elected representatives or to challenge their decisions.

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