ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

Glen M. Segell

Institute of Security Policy, United Kingdom. E-mail: glen@segell.com

Resumen: The 1997 United Kingdom general election was a historical event introducing new technology and information flows. This was initiated by political parties and utilised by the media. The process empowered citizens into electronic democracy challenging the establishment system of Westminster government. The civil-society model best describes the event and consequences. The event placed in context of the process of computer networking and of the political devolution generates a historical appreciation of its significance.
Palabras Clave: democracy, electronic democracy, England, Europe, United Kingdom.

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INTRODUCTION

Through the advent of the technology and information revolution there is an emergence of a new type of democracy as a challenge to the establishment system of central Westminster government in the United Kingdom. This is electronic democracy defined as the delivery to the citizen of information pertaining to the political process, the ability of the citizen to engage in debate with other citizens, and to engage actively with the political system to influence the electoral process due to new technology. Consequently there is an emerging different and divergent civil-society that furthers devolution in the United Kingdom and regionalisation in the European Union away from central elected government. The topic of electronic democracy is not new and so widely written upon that it is too numerous to cite hence the innovation of this article to focus on the specific historical event to show the nature of electronic democracy. This event is the United Kingdom general elections of 1997 that has not been written upon previously in this context. This election was the first time in which electronic democracy played a significant role and is therefore the historical watershed case study. Glen Segell, at the time in 1997, gathered a comprehensive set of electronic democracy data on this election[1]. Subsequently in 2004 an edition of the *ECPR Studies in Political Science* has taken a broad conceptual reflection on electronic democracy[2].

Of significance for such an investigation and analysis is to locate the history, the culture and the context behind the event to determine its real meaning. Intellectual discourse assists in explaining such a thesis by placing the event and advent of electronic democracy in context of the existing parliamentary system. Notably Robert Keohane that "systemic theory is important because we must understand the context of the action before we understand the action itself"[3]. This builds upon C. W. Mills who told us, the "sociological imagination" should locate individual biographies in larger social-historical contexts[4]. Robert Cox identifies this for electoral processes noting "the most promising form of critical theory is historical materialism, which sees conflict as a possible source of structural change rather than as a recurrent consequence of a continuing structure"[5]. This critical theory is based upon Karl Marx's writings on historical materialism furthered by the Frankfurt School[6]. It follows that the essential program of contextual historicism involves finding connections between peoples ideas and the material world. This article contends that such connections have been revolutionised by the advent of electronic democracy through new technologies typified as computer network connections that permits a two-way flow of information. Hence the event and advent of electronic democracy in historical dialectic context is a continuation of the evolution of mass communication and society from the telephone through the radio, terrestrial TV, cable

TV, satellite TV, the Internet and now integrated digital broadcasting.

This article will use traditional historical methodology to investigate the emergence of electronic democracy to show how it challenges the establishment system of Westminster government. This methodology offers perspectives on phenomena such as the electoral processes reflecting the cultural circumstances and ideological assumptions that underlie phenomena and the role played by key decision makers together with long-term economic, social, and political forces in creating them. Hence this article continues using a seven-step methodology normally used by historians as applicable in evaluating such cases. This would be 1) begin with focusing questions, 2) specify the domain, 3) gather evidence, 4) critique the evidence, 5) determine patterns, 6) tell the story, and 7) write the transcript. The first of these, focussing questions, has already been covered in this introduction while the last is this written article.

1. SPECIFY THE DOMAIN

Four models of electronic democracy can be identified. Each provides an inherent and critical perspective of historical method. These models are not mutually exclusive yet were enacted simultaneously in 1997. The electronic bureaucracy model refers to the electronic delivery of government services. The information management model refers to more effective communication between individual citizens and candidates or decision-makers. The populist model enables citizens to register their views on current issues. Finally, the civil society model strengthens connections between citizens, thereby building a robust and autonomous site of public debate. The first three models are useful to describe the advent and nature of technology and information revolution. The fourth model is the most significant to ascribe the emerging new civil-society that challenges the establishment system of Westminster government seen in the electronic democracy relating to the general elections of 1997.

Theoretically the civil society model refers to a transformation of political culture. As such, the specific event of the impact of electronic democracy, in the 1997 general elections, on the establishment system of government can be appreciated within the context of the broader transformation wrought by communications

technology. For example, the quality of public debate was influenced by changes in inter-personal relations and organizational structures of the election campaign and its aftermath. The growing cultural value of the election information is also relevant, given government responses to such issues as technology, privacy and regulation. This phenomena described by the civil-society model is not contained solely to the United Kingdom. It is the globe as a whole that is 'shrinking' in the wash of information flows. Given this the 1997 British experience was a mirror of the worldwide expansion of democracy that may have less to do with how these technologies favor domestic democratic processes than with how they spread democratic ideals internationally. In general then information revolution technologies enable citizens of democracies to learn more about how societies operate. At the same time, information revolution technologies empower citizens anywhere to broadcast and communicate instantaneously with governments.

The civil-society model therefore points to a set of strategies and priorities set in motion by the needs of a tertiary-sector economy dominated society. An example of such priorities and strategies include the shift of the knowledge needs of local community in towns and villages to meet those of cities in the delivery of education and government services. This includes the particular information needs of the most disadvantaged and excluded social groups. In this civil-society organizations play a primary role in constructing standards, applications, regulations and policies for the development and management of such enterprises. In doing so the local approach in the United Kingdom mirrors that of other regions fostered the emergence of a European Union wide movement of civil society. This builds upon knowledge development, while simultaneously anchoring the process in the sharing and constructing of diverse social models, cultural perspectives and the lessons of actual information empowerment initiatives.

In this the civil society model leads to be the most important for analysing the social horizon of broad participation, self-determination, knowledge empowerment, and the outward expansion of knowledge capital that challenges a central elected government such as that of the Westminster model. This being a government in London dominated by hereditary elites in the House of Lords and political party determined

candidates for elections to the House of Commons. The civil-society model of electronic democracy lays the foundations for the creation and incubation of de-centralised governance by social institutions from the ground up, initiated by communities themselves, rather than from the top down initiated by arbitrary state power. It generates the understanding of governance supplementing government. This approach, the civil-society model, is premised on a particular view of democracy, namely that it is more than just a mechanism for determining government by decree or legislation. Rather, the term implies genuine opportunities for popular participation; open and accountable government; broad input into policy debate; and an informed and critical public. The successes of such democracy is viewed when the electorate becomes more informed about issues, when there is a high level of public debate, when residents organize in support of their positions, and when citizens evaluate public officials and then hold them accountable for the effects of their decisions.

Such a civil-society of electronic democracy emerged during the 1997 general election campaign due to the new technology of computer networks and the flow of information. In a reciprocal manner this civil-society approach has been accorded as accelerating social participation in the construction of knowledge systems and of self-regulatory structures. Hence in the period after the 1997 elections until the 2001 elections this demand-led model lead the way for resolving the information gap that neither the state nor the market alone could satisfactorily resolve[7].

This as expected was influential in successfully implementing the Westminster debate on the 'Act of Devolution' that commenced and is ongoing since 1998. Such devolution empowers citizens away from the Westminster system due to the localization of government, the erosion of the tax base and the transformation of the education sector. Each of these aspects and factors have had considerable bearing on the shape that democracy actually takes as opposed to its formal structure. Namely electronic democracy has constructed a reality that democracy is no longer solely a legislative process centralized in Westminster. This reveals an insight about the future of democracy as being a form of civil-society governance more than an examination of the technicalities of voting, the role of political parties or the management of government services. The

Westminster government has not tried to inhibit this trend, though has attempted to regulate it understanding that trying to squelch the new information technologies to protect monopoly on centralized power would essentially be at the peril of economic growth.

2. GATHERING DATA

In continuing the methodology mentioned at the start of this article to further the civil-society model describing the specific historical event of the 1997 UK general elections, it is clear that the critique of scientific knowledge or practice requires the gathering of data to substantiate the specified domain. This act of gathering data is by the historical evaluator was unique given that it was an evaluation of how the citizen gathered and stored data using the same means and techniques that furthered civil-society of electronic democracy.

To be sure, the event data grasped the epistemological and social critiques in a contextual fashion to justify the inherent technology innovations emanating from the expression of electronic democracy. The domain of the 1997 data is unique given that freedom to communicate or the democratic right of political expression is not normally associated with computing networking. The progressive networking of computers with the free flow of information though not necessarily the flow of free information has led to the entry of computing to the realm of historical political analysis. Further, in gathering data during the 1997 general elections it was clear that unique methods used to store data on political processes would be emerge. Hence the 1997 general election was also a historical watershed for historical data archiving. The computer systems and networks used for electronic democracy also became their own accessible archives.

This was no mean feat given that the main focus of the civil-society model is the interaction and impact of that interaction by the population at large on government by generating a new mode of governance. An example relates to on-line discussions. The originator software, operating systems and network layers were not of significance given that all the communication could be read on ASCII computer screens. Hence 'eves-droppers' could capture all the data for storage, providing that the author had granted permission. Such permission was inferred, at the time, given that the thousands of

participants desired a mass audience and did not signify copyright restrictions.

Issues have since changed due to the 'Data Protection Act' (1998). At the time there were numerous Internet sites which trapped such data and stored it, however, most of this data remains un-indexed. There is no single agreed manner in which to keyword index the opinions and questions of the man in the street and the responses of politicians. Use of the politicians name tends to abstractive the citizen. Use of the citizens' name leads to vindictive responses, given that the data remains in the public domain. Use of the topic of discussion lead to thousands of items on keyword searches. Additional problems arise as time passes. Computers that once held such data on the 1997 elections are now being replaced. In many instances the data is not being transferred to the new computers. Some Internet sites are no longer available, maybe because the provided is no longer interested. Given this the data gathering at the time needed to be specific and printed into hard copy for prosperity. Easier was the manner in which government, academic and private entities archived with index the digital processes that mirrored the hard copy of electoral literature.

Despite these issues it was clear, at the time, in the gathering of this data that democracy was enhanced through the electronic medium. In the short six weeks of electoral campaigning the system evolved rapidly, enabling the electorate to become more informed about issues. When there was a high level of public debate, residents in physical and on-line communities organized support of their positions. When citizens evaluated public officials responses there was clear attempts to hold them accountable for the effects of their decisions. All of these electronic processes took place at an exponentially increasing level. This typified the emergence of civil-society governance challenged the centralized Westminster political party dominated system of government.

A comparative perspective of this electronic democracy data is ascertainable in evaluating the preceding twenty years. During this period electronic communication was available to the academic and military community. Private users also had the ability to communicate via modems though purely in the text form. All these users combined these accounted for less than 1% of the overall British population. During the same

period two other mass communication media also emerged. These were satellite and cable television. These were one-way delivery systems of the same or similar information that could be provided in an audio-visual manner by either terrestrial TV, video or film. All these mediums were passive forms of media for both local and national campaigning. The voter is presented with information as determined by the TV or Radio programme scheduler, script-writer and producer. There is a certain subjective bias in this information.

The two-way street of electronic democracy only emerged with the advent of the desktop computer, enabled with audio-visual graphic software and user interfaces coupled with networks. By 1997 over 20% of the population was using this technology. The new technology of the Internet provided an active form of media for both local and national campaigning. It enabled the voter to actively seek the information and to concentrate when reading and evaluating that information. Further value is provided given that each and every political party on the national level and each constituency candidate on the local level could provide their own views and political agenda where the voter actively compared the data without intermediary opinion and editing and for a very nominal fee was already being paid for his Internet access for other purposes. Hence the citizen became the active gatherer, sorter and store of data.

3. CRITIQUE THE EVIDENCE

Despite the uniqueness of the technology and its potential in election campaigning there was a failure by all the political parties to consider the special needs of the Internet electorate. It was in this failure that the citizen was empowered. The public relations and media planners of the political parties did not attempt to ascertain the different needs of each sector of the electronic population in order to plan a more cohesive winning campaign. The same format of information for example that was available on television broadcasts was made available over the Internet. In some cases this was as transcripts of those broadcasts and in some cases this was as the actual audio-visual files in down-loadable formats. There was no attempt to apply different marketing techniques! It was due to this that electronic democracy through citizen participation, as described by the civil-society model, managed to challenge the establishment system of Westminster government. To

comprehend how this was achieved it is necessary to first describe the nature of the establishment system of Westminster government.

First and foremost Westminster democracy in the House of Commons ascribes to Plato's Republic defined by Webster's Dictionary as "government by the people collectively by elected representatives; political or social equality." The United Kingdom votes on a constituency basis for the House of Commons at a maximum of every five years, though elections can be called earlier. The House of Commons is devoted mainly to the monetary functions of the state. Between elections, the population has little or no say in legislative voting patterns of the House of Commons, often along party lines. Referenda are extremely rare even though members of Parliament often meet informally with their constituents who are also able to communicate issues via letter.

Electronic democracy therefore granted constituents greater access more rapidly to the affairs of parliament, enhanced the means of communication between constituents and parliamentarians, and generated an informal referenda forcing parliamentarians to check daily on-line to consider their constituents views. This returns, in part, to the days of Athens where all eligible citizens participated in the development of laws in an open forum. Every citizen had an equal vote on each issue, and in true participatory democracy style, the topics for discussion were often introduced by the voters themselves. Electronic democracy therefore attempts to achieve this ideal by reproducing the framework for democracy common in 430 BC Greece. Electronic democracy encourages this participatory style of government by accommodating the voters' personal concerns in much the same way the personal views of Athenians were addressed. Electronic democracy's advantage over the traditional system is that it allows more people to enter into discussion with one another, and with their representatives in government. Through such popular participation establishment system of centralised elected Westminster government is challenged by electronic democracy. The new technology enables placing the event of the 1997 elections within context of enhanced accountability to provide opportunity for greater public input to a responsive and responsible government.

4. DETERMINE PATTERNS

In the Westminster system of government the traditional use of mass media and communication has been diversified by political parties. The national media provide the party political platform to concentrate on the party leaders and the ideological basis of that parties existence. This has emphasis on the concerns of the electorate which is predominately monetary issues. The local media concentrate on individual candidates for each constituency, sometimes with less emphasis on which party the candidate belongs to as they do not have to be affiliated with any political party. In sum the local election campaign is often seen as 'who is the better chap for the job' while the national campaign is seen as "do we want socialists or capitalists and how much is beer and cigarette going to cost us?".

The new technology of computer networks such as the Internet crosses the boundary in theoretically being able to aim both at the constituency and at the party level of campaigning. In practice the 1997 experience has shown that its value is to concentrate at the Party level. In a kind of Darwinian process electronic democracy, as the medium, weeded out politicians who attempted to defy and swing public opinion. Turning to the 1 May 1997 elections, it was the young advisers who had become familiarised with the Internet and other computer networks during University days that turned to the Internet for election purposes. It was Tony Blair of the Labour Party who first tried to introduce an Americanization by pronouncing the 'Information Super Highway' into the election campaign. The mass public did not generate the initial move. To make matters worse the Labour Parties electronic campaign got off to a bad start when security on its Internet site was breached by a hacker who embarrassingly re-wrote bits of the party's agenda.

The pattern that emerged was a citizen based and driven community network At the onset of the election campaign there were 18 Conservative MPs with e-mail addresses, 19 Labour, 14 Liberal Democrat, and three Scottish National Party. There was only one MP with a fully-fledged Web Site. This was Anne Campbell, Labour Candidate for Cambridge. By the end of the campaign the man in the street had turned these techniques against the politicians. Politicians were forced to respond to

thousands of e-mail enquiries, provide constant new and update information on their websites and engage in active discussion groups. Further, the election campaign over the Internet globalised these elections to an audience outside of the national boundaries. This was extremely relevant since citizens of the Commonwealth, British protectorates and the European Union are all eligible to vote after meeting certain residency and other requirements. As such the Internet became a two-way street of electronic democracy to this eligible electorate who did not have access to local radio, TV and newspapers in their domicile, albeit temporary, outside of the United Kingdom. In sum the pattern was no longer a hierarchical structure of bureaucratic government but one of a flattened network of governance through citizen participation.

5. TELL THE STORY

The politicians became entrapped through their own means as they had not undertaken research or investigation on the impact of electronic democracy. At the onset of the election campaign the political parties failed to use the Internet to provide anything further than other media such as TV, Radio, newspapers or door-to-door canvassing. At best the Internet was only utilised to duplicate these media for a very select audience and for a very short time in a one-way street in the provision of information. The politicians did not comprehend that there is no sub-conscious awareness element in the Internet. Whereas radio and TV could be repetitive in political broadcasts, the Internet could not. The Internet requires active participation of the user who progressively becomes selective. An already viewed Website is boring unless it is constantly updated. To this extent the political parties failed to understand that you cannot bombard a citizen with e-mail saying "vote labour" or "vote conservative" in the manner in which you a television advert does.

Conversely within a week of the commencement of the election campaign, with its new found political medium –the Internet– the established media jumped on the band-wagon. TV stations, radio networks and newspapers all established Web sites. At the time it was clear that the media was making better use of the Internet than the political parties. The Financial Times (FT) for example provided a different set of information and format to its printed newspaper. The FT website offered electronic democracy in the form of 'letters to the editor and his editorial teams responses' where a lively debate ensued. The FT newspaper coverage in print was confined to a few short articles followed by election results in its normal style of financial rather than domestic political coverage. The FT was not unique and the television networks such as the BBC and ITN quickly mirrored its style. Even The North American based CNN had a section of its Web site devoted to the British elections. Other newspapers, which were more politically allied, used less Web coverage and more printed coverage such as the Telegraph. It was clear that the media knew who was reading the print, watching the TV, listening to the radio and had Internet access. The market had been well surveyed and was being catered for. The media thus made full use of the new technology.

In doing so the new technology of computer networks interactivity was exploited to the full by the media on election night. Electronic democracy participants were invited to vote on the key election issues and got instant gratification from dynamically updated databases which fed back the new voting picture as soon as they lodged their vote. The figures show an on-line participation of over a million during the election night itself, of which some 80% were within the UK. Of these 45.8% in the age group 21-30, over 50% were graduates, 80% were male, over 50% have a household income of £ 20000 or more. In terms of occupations 36% were in education, 31% in computing, 16% professionals, and 11% in management. Around 47% had Internet access paid for by the employer (compared with the USA in 1997 which had 27%).

Given these facts and figures few would doubt that the legitimacy of the newly elected Westminster government in the aftermath of the election would depend to a considerable degree on the transparency of the processes of government. The new information technologies were forced upon all government departments to enhance transparency. Shortly after the election the policymakers became beware of the labyrinthine computerized spaces for rule-making or adjudication were no longer controlled by centralized government. A proliferation of legislation ensued to protect data, to enforce governmental regulation of electronic networks and a new form of public administration emerged.

Notable in all the processes was that stable government depends on legitimacy. Legitimacy depends on human decision-making as a process reliant on opinions presented by participants and sensitive to intangible and non-quantifiable human wants and needs. The New Labour Party government elected in 1997 recognized that the Internet is an information river from which many can drink and draw at the same time. Open electronic networks exemplified by the Internet offer possibilities for significantly improving the transparency of government and competitiveness in the information industry. In doing so a reform of the establishment Westminster system of government ensued.

The starting point was to put basic government information on Internet servers and to avoid exclusive arrangements with value-added re-disseminators. More ambitious possibilities were also investigated for using information technology to improve adjudicatory and legislative processes and to offer new forms of intermediation to citizens. The real benefit of the Internet to government was to reduce the cost of internal administration. It also speeded up communication within government and between government and people. It provided information such as publications and parliamentary debates (Hansards) as well as handling information input such as Inland Revenue Tax returns. Thus the kind of innovation that the Internet brought to politics was first and foremost managerial. It recognised that the assumption that centralized Westminster government was too dominated by an outdated and out-of-touch bureaucracy. Electronic democracy brought administration closer to the people. In doing so the new technologies and information offered more opportunity for the ordinary citizen to participate not only more directly in decisions but also through on-line forum with other citizens such as the Athenian style democracy of open debate. In sum the 1997 election was the watershed to show that the triangle of citizens, parties and parliament was clearly in a process of change.

CONCLUSION

This article commenced by noting that its innovation was to highlight 1997 was being a historical event for technology and the use of that technology in the flow of information. It showed that the event was a watershed that heralded in a type of electronic democracy and civil-society that no other academic

investigation has focussed on. The above discussion in placing the event in context begs the question 'Is the glass half-full or half-empty?'. Clearly the electronic medium such as the Internet is more than just another means of delivery of the same information be it by government or the press even though it can reach further across the globe to those who would not otherwise have had access to the parties campaign. The debate then turns to an evaluation of the historical progression of technology and the flow of information for the political process of democracy. Herein lies the first innovation. It is true the 1997 election was a historical event in the evaluation of the history of computing. Following the election local councils and central government departments have all set up Web sites, not only to what is going on in their areas but also to stimulate political interaction. These also invite online suggestions and comments on the management of their budgets, what services people want to be provided and what they would be willing to pay for them. Herein lies the second innovation. It is true that the 1997 election was a historical event history in the evaluation of political processes. During the elections the use of new technologies and the flow of information in a two-way street empowered citizens to participate in debate with each other and political parties regenerating an informal referendum that required instantaneous responses from politicians. The importance of this electronic democracy then is not only in the event of the 1997 election itself but the consequences. In the aftermath of the 1997 elections there emerged an electronic tele-democracy in the style of the Greek Polis.

The new technology and flow of information encouraged a participatory style of government by accommodating the voters' personal concerns in much the same way the personal views of Athenians were addressed. In conclusion and with reference to the civil-society model mentioned at the start of this article, the future through devolution advanced by the technology and information model challenges the central establishment Westminster system of government.

This has been in such a fashion that elected government debating and deciding in Westminster has now been supplemented but not yet supplanted by popular civil-society governance in parallel and complementary debating and deciding in community on-line forum.

NOTES

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