

Online voting can bring us closer to direct democracy

By TRACY DIINA

Although largely unheralded locally, a monumental groundswell is shaking the foundation of politics as we know it. Online voting and "e-democracy" are rapidly emerging as powerful tools that the previously disinterested are using to



exert influence over a process that has become convoluted and unengaging.

The 21st Century Club, comprised of Western New Yorkers dedicated to promoting and advancing the role of future leaders in the civic and governmental process, recently conducted Buffalo's first forum discussing online voting and e-democracy. A lively dialogue ensued with a distinctly energized group, many of whom have devoted their lives to capturing and capitalizing on the next new thing.

No strangers to the significance of young voter turnout, the 21st Century Club spent last summer registering hundreds of new voters in Western New York. This year, the approach is the next logical step: reinventing voting as a mechanism to truly effect change.

We know that voting trends among young Americans are at an all-time low. In the last 30 years, turnout has dropped from 50 to 31 percent among 18- to 24-year-olds and from 71 to 49 percent among 25- to 44-year-olds.

Meanwhile, Internet use is on the rise. In 1999, 75 million Americans over age 16 were using the Internet, with 60 percent being daily users. Clearly, voter turnout among young Americans is plummeting, while Internet use is meteorically escalating.

In a recent survey, 71 percent of 18- to 27-year-olds said they would vote on the Internet if they could. Perhaps an appropriate question would be: What are we waiting for?

Online voting has been tried in Alaska and Arizona. An astounding 77,000 people cast votes on the Internet in Arizona — a record election for that state. Some states also are pioneering online technology that would enable people to register to vote simply by clicking their mouse.

New York State should follow their lead and reap the benefits. One lesson

the 21st Century Club has learned is that much of Western New York's younger generation is, at best, disinterested and, at worst, disillusioned with the existing political process. We think online voting and e-democracy will invigorate and strengthen their voice.

When we first began to investigate online voting, we saw it as our primary function. But our recognition grew as we realized the potential of the Internet in sending signals to our leaders and shaping public policy. A new world opened up and we saw that the Internet could be used to move us closer to the system of direct democracy that our forefathers envisioned. Thomas Jefferson recommended a revolution every 20 years to refresh the tree of liberty. Here it is!

E-democracy includes the possibility of referendum voting through interactive Web sites as well as rooms where people log on and express their views. In his visionary book, "Vote.com," Dick Morris wrote: "Whether direct Internet democracy is good or bad is . . . beside the point. It is coming and we had better make our peace with it. . . . Restricting the power of the people is no longer a viable option. The Internet made it obsolete."

Online voting and e-democracy are certainly fundamental changes to our system, which is why they may be denounced. The issues of security and the digital divide must be addressed.

It's only human to struggle with new realities. But we must remember that change creates opportunity, and to throw a wrench in an exciting new development is regressive and shortsighted. Let's not obstruct progress.

TRACY DIINA, a member of the 21st Century Club, lives in Buffalo.

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