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## Computer-Enabled Democracy?

Technology's role in selecting public officials needn't be limited to the voting machines. But would you let a software agent tell you who to vote for?



Photo courtesy of "The Accelerated Democracy Project."

By David Wolman  
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What might happen when technology becomes more intertwined with voting? The question goes beyond the much discussed issue of whether to adopt computerized voting machines, says self-described "interaction designer" and futurist Jason Tester. Tester, who recently graduated from the Interaction Design Institute Ivrea in Italy, has come up with a creative synthesis of technology, design, and political science that examines technology's potential impact on voting in the context of abysmal voter turnout and decreasing confidence in government.

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Tester's Accelerated Democracy Project consists of four "scenarios" for weaving technology into the voting process. Tester explores the pros and cons of each technology through the use of fictional articles featuring person-on-the-street responses—with some interviewees praising the new technology, others tearing it to pieces. The broader goal of the project is to open public discussion about how technology may—or may not—be used to improve democracy.

The first scenario involves a software "agent," nicknamed Constituty, that monitors a person's online habits to discern his or her political ideology. For instance, perhaps a lot of your e-mail or Web-surfing activity indicates a concern about water problems in the western United States, abortion control, or drug patent laws. Before the election, the agent would appear on your screen or send

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you e-mail recommending candidates or ballot initiatives aligned with your position on those issues. Or perhaps the embedded agent not only tracked your thinking but then also cast your vote. Tester concedes that this sort of software isn't exactly a recipe for more educated and involved citizenry, but suggests that it could at least arrest the decades-long decline in voter turnout.

The second technology, which Tester calls Exercise Your Vote, is designed to address the problem of poor voter understanding of the issues and the candidates' positions. Enrolled voters would be able to "pump up" the value of their votes by consuming media about political issues and candidates, or by taking quizzes through the Internet, cell phones, or public kiosks. The premise: a more informed voter is a wiser voter. But as one of Tester's fictional interviewees points out, it would hardly be democratic for someone holding down two jobs and raising two children to have a vote worth less than the vote of someone who happens to have more time on his hands for accumulating voter value points.

"The one person, one vote equation is a fundamental tenet of ours and most democracies, and that's not likely to change anytime soon," says Tester. But he contends that the trends used as the basis for the Exercise Your Vote concept are already upon us. "As fewer people vote, those that still do are the people who hold the most extreme opinions. If a voter only has mild positions on the campaign issues and doesn't feel a civic duty to vote, he or she just isn't going to take the time on Election Day. Exercise Your Vote was meant to illustrate a future where political fanatics are the only people left that get involved; what would voting look like if it catered to the new profile of its customers?"

In the third scenario, voters would have to electronically prove that they had visited a particular place for a prescribed amount of time before being allowed to cast a vote on an issue relating to that place. Tester calls this Location-Based Voting. Say, for example, that a vote is about whether to develop an open space. People would have to spend at least an hour there, listening to arguments on both sides of the issue. The idea has a built-in green bias, which Tester himself identifies with the pretend testimonials on the Web site: "It's just not balanced, plain and simple. If the city is going to enact this new requirement they should make voters spend an hour in our offices too," says a fictional CEO of a real-estate development company.

The final concept is Post-Vote Tracking. One of the main reasons for falling voter turnout is a generalized distrust of politicians and a widespread perception that campaign promises will be broken. Post-Vote Tracking would help voters keep tabs on elected politicians' actions during their term in office. First, voters in the booth choose which issues they'd like to track. Using a chosen tracking organization, be it the American Civil Liberties Union or the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Los Angeles Times*, enrolled voters would be notified, through whatever technologies they chose, as to how their candidate is or is not following through on campaign promises. Tracking would make elected officials accountable, and it would also make civic involvement in politics a more ongoing process, instead of the every-now-and-then trip to the polls.

Feedback for the Accelerated Democracy project has been mixed. While Tester strived for what he calls "design agnosticism," focusing only imagined future scenarios, many people don't quite understand what he's up to. One e-mail to Tester included a pleading conclusion: "Please, do America a favor and stop your project." Tester welcomes such strong reaction. "I'm at least happy people are outraged at how technology might impact voting, even if they don't quite get my role in it," he says.

Could any of the technologies Tester identifies ever become part of the fabric of our society? "Unfortunately, election technology has not advanced to the point

where it can provide us with electronic systems that are reliable enough to trust with our democracy—we just aren't there yet," says David Dill, a professor of computer science and electrical engineering at Stanford who recently established VerifiedVoting.org to help people understand what technical solutions are and are not within reach. Despite the rush to technology fixes in the wake of the Florida election fiasco, technology may not yet be the answer, says Dill—and indeed may never be.

Tester insists that the Accelerated Democracy project is an exploration of future scenarios, not a prescription for change one way or the other. And whether any of its particular scenarios ever see the light and heat of a real political campaign, it serves as a provocative tool for getting people to think about the ways in which information technology can fortify--or undermine--the scaffolding that supports a self-governing citizenry.

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