

## **The Future of Democracy: Customer designed local governments**

“Apparently, a democracy is a place where numerous elections are held at great cost without issues and with interchangeable candidates.”  
Gore Vidal

The Washington Post said that 78.7 million votes were cast on the last US legislative election, meaning a turnout of 39.3 percent of all voting age citizens.<sup>1</sup> According to Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, an independent election expert that was a slight increase from the 37.6 percent turnout in the previous midterm elections, in 1998.

Why almost four of 10 Americans in voting age are not voting?

The reasons for this phenomenon are several, although one of the most important is the deep entrust to the political system and its member from citizens. Approximately 73% of British citizens do not trust politicians<sup>2</sup> and 45% of Americans believe that politics is about politicians competing to be elected<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the system is clearly suffering a desprestige that is becoming dangerous for its existence and survival.

On the other side, we are looking the emerging of a new tool that can change the way we see democracy and citizen participation: the Internet. The power of the free and instant flux of information is transforming the way we see our political system. The numbers are illustrative:

- “42 million Americans have used government Web sites to research public policy issues

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Walsh, November 08, 2002, A SECTION; Pg. A10 Washington Post

<sup>2</sup> Market & Opinion Research International spring, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Council for Excellence in Government Jan, 2002

- 23 million Americans have used the Internet to send comments to public officials about policy choices
- 14 million have used government Web sites to gather information to help them decide how to cast their votes
- 13 million have participated in online lobbying campaigns<sup>4</sup>

What government site users do at agency Web sites	
<i>The percentage of those who use government Web sites who have ever done these activities at government sites...</i>	
Get tourism and recreational information	77%
Do research for work or school	70%
Download government forms	63%
Find out what services a government agency provides	63%
Seek information about a public policy or issue of interest to you	62%
Get advice or information about a health or safety issue	49%
Get information about potential business opportunities relevant to you or your place of employment	34%
Send comments about an issue to a government official	34%
Get information or apply for a government job	24%
Get information about elections, such as where to vote	22%
Get information that helped you decide how to vote in an election	21%
Get information about a lottery	21%
Get information about or apply for government benefits	20%
File your taxes	16%
Renew a driver's license or auto registration	12%
Renew a professional license	7%
Get a fishing, hunting or other recreational license	4%
Pay a fine	2%

*Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.*

If we consider that fully 68 million Americans adults have used government agency Web sites and this new access is bringing benefits: citizens can find more information about the system, enhance their professional and personal lives by being more civically engaged.

<sup>4</sup> Larsen, Elena; Rainie, Lee; The rise of the e-citizen: How people use government agencies' Web sites, Pew & American Life Project, Washington DC March 2001

What are the new political trends we will see emerge during the following ten years? What will be the new role of the citizens with the new web tools available at that time?

Issues addressed online by the users of government Web sites	
Environment	15%
Education	11%
Health Care	11%
Civil Rights/Social Justice	10%
Abortion issues	7%
Criminal justice issues	5%
Traffic/Sprawl/Development/Zoning	4%
Government Budget/Tax/Finance	3%
Internet issues	3%

*Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Sites Survey, September 5-27, 2001 date. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.*

Citizens are looking also for a more “personal” government. For example, 80% of British citizens consider that they should influence on a greater way the local economy and shape it based on their needs<sup>5</sup>. Eventually we will see a more pressure over our local communities to offer the tailored services required by their constituencies. The local government will be, in fact, the online reflex of the individuals living there.

How much does the Internet improve your interactions with government?				
<i>The percent who say it improves their interactions</i>				
	<i>A lot</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Only a little</i>	<i>Not at all</i>
Federal government	20%	29%	25%	23%
State government	18%	27%	27%	26%
Local government	11%	19%	18%	48%

*Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Sites Survey, September 5-27, 2001 date. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.*

<sup>5</sup> ICM/Ecologist Mar 20, 2001

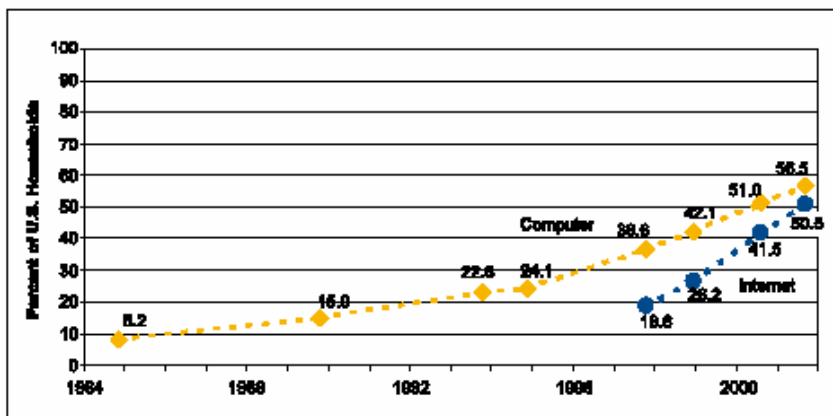
How will this transition occur? What roles will the Internet have and when do we expect this change?

This paper will address these issues, looking to predict the trends that will determine the new Democracy of the XXIth Century.

### **I Democracy: a sick system in the middle of the information revolution**

Technology is generating an incredible amount of new appliances that will revolutionize our home environment. America is living a boom, adopting the Internet with spectacular rate of growth. Cetron and Davies (1997)<sup>6</sup> estimate that by 2008 80 percent of the population in developed countries will have access to the information “superhighway”. Additionally the same authors consider that most communications systems in industrialized countries will have a digital protocol (instead of analog) by 2006.

Figure 1-1: Percent of U.S. Households with a Computer and Internet Connections, Selected Years



Source: NTIA and ESA, U.S. Department of Commerce, using U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey Supplements

Thus, we can conclude that the digital divide, the unequal access to World Wide Web (WWW), it will not be a problem after 20 years. If we accept the most conservative

<sup>6</sup> Cetron, Marvin; Davies, Owen; Probable Tomorrows: How science and technology will transform our lives in the next twenty years, Ed. Martin Press, New York, 1997, p. 267

estimation, we can agreed that, for example, the whole US population will have access over the Web around year 2010 and 2020.

The political consequences of this prediction are incommensurable because it will mean that most of the adult population will be able to use the Internet as a political tool. Citizens are without any doubt looking to new forms to contribute to its society. The party system is dying: studies show that political affiliations are decreasing dramatically and it is becoming more difficult to motivate people to work for them. As the president of Island commented, if the political memberships continue to drop at the present rate, there are countries like Sweden where they will be no political affiliates left in the parties by the year 2013!<sup>7</sup>

The Internet is the way that citizens will voice their opinions in the next twenty years. Right now, any individual equipped with a PC can express her opinion, create a political group and win support for her cause in a matter of minutes.

As Graham says, “Citizens will be empowered to hold governments more accountable and to monitor and participate in political debate and decision making more effectively”<sup>8</sup> by using means that are recently appearing today. Why? Simply because we consider that public processes and information will be easily available and, therefore, people will tend to use more the Internet as a way to participate in the political life of their country. This change the rules of what we called the democratic dialogue and increase the importance of the sole individual in front of the historical predominance of parties, media and government.

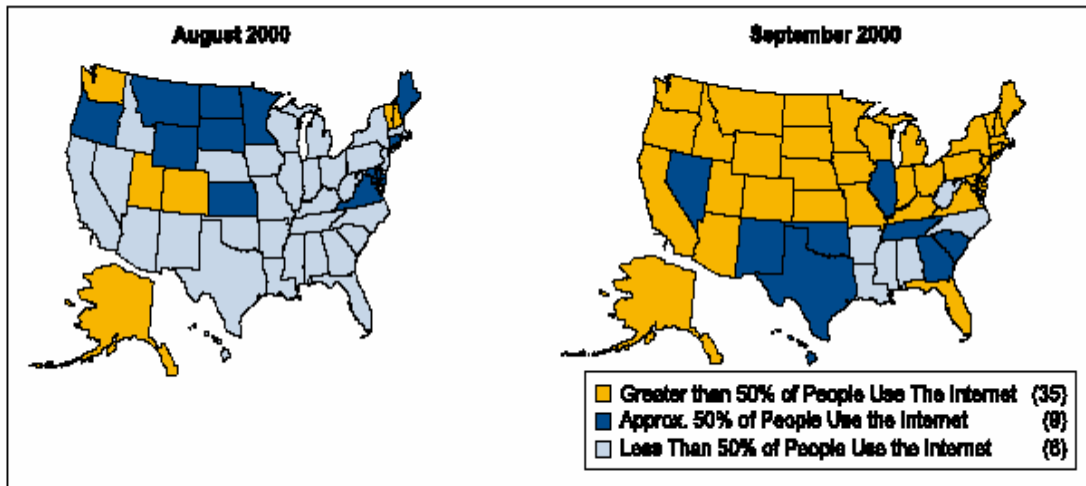
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<sup>7</sup> Ramson, Olafur; The Nordic Countries in the year 2020, The Nordic Council, Reyjavik, April 2002

<sup>8</sup> Longford, Graham; “Canadian democracy hard wired?”, Sept. 2002

The numbers are telling us that Americans like to use the Web as a way to interact with their government. It is a moderate view to estimate that they will progressively require more services and opportunities to express their political decisions over this particular multidirectional tool.

Figure 1-2: The Rapid Increase in Internet Use in the United States Across States



Source: NTIA and ESA, U.S. Department of Commerce, using U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey Supplements

Today, by placing more services online and enabling citizens to access them faster and more conveniently, governments want to overcome the perceived “service deficit” plaguing the public sector. However, they are opening a Pandora box due to the highly cynical view population have over the current political system. It will become inevitable a more often use of direct voting system to decide issues.

### A. The emergence of E-Democracy

“Simpler developments under consideration include making information more easily available online and using Internet forums and e-mail for policy-making consultations. Even those innovations could change the way decisions are made”<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Sinclair, Jenny; Can Democracy Be Improved Online?, The Age (Melbourne) October 1, 2002 Tuesday

**Table 1:**  
**2001 Global E-gov Leaders**

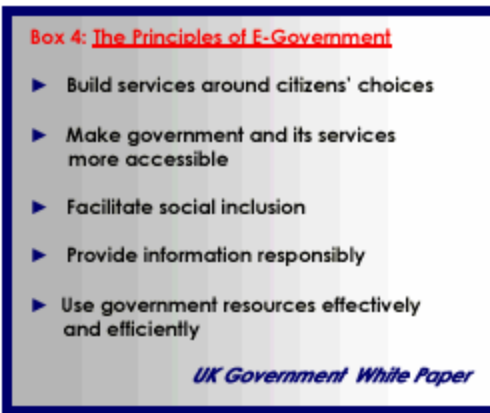
<b>USA</b>	<b>3.11</b>
<b>Australia</b>	<b>2.60</b>
<b>New Zealand</b>	<b>2.59</b>
<b>Singapore</b>	<b>2.58</b>
<b>Norway</b>	<b>2.55</b>
<b>Canada</b>	<b>2.52</b>
<b>UK</b>	<b>2.52</b>
<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>2.51</b>
<b>Denmark</b>	<b>2.47</b>
<b>Germany</b>	<b>2.46</b>

New technologies also raised the possibility of more customized interactions between citizens and government. The consequence will be what we called a “convergence point” where the increasing pressure over how the actual operative democracy functions meets the increasingly powerful desires of the new e-citizen (an individual who wants to transmit his/her civism using the Web as the main communication tool). Both opposite waves, the old fashion of doing politics versus the technology enabling new forms of participation, will clash eventually.

There are already many initiatives that are looking to anticipate this new trend. For example, in Great Britain, a proposal to enable electronic voting after 2006 is already under consideration in the Parliament<sup>10</sup> and other European countries, like Finland or Denmark, with high Internet penetration probably will follow.

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<sup>10</sup> Hull, Stefan; Internet could get our vote by 2006, UK Newsquest Regional Press - This is Brighton and Hove July 25, 2002



Democracy online has other advantages: for example, the Canadians consider that the greatest domestic threat to democracy in Canada is the amount of power resting in the hands of the prime minister. "According to a public opinion poll suggests a substantial appetite for political reform exists across the nation"<sup>11</sup> A large and wide-ranging survey of Canadian attitudes on politics and democracy, conducted for the National Post and Global National, also shows Canadians overwhelmingly want referendums on key policy issues. The use of policy web forums and plebiscites over the Internet will simplify and make easy to appeal to the public opinion on a more regular base. This would have an enormous impact over the way how politicians behave and how policy is discussed.

"There is obviously a great deal of support for political reform and a lot of dissatisfaction with existing political institutions in Canada," said Larry LeDuc, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto. This reform can only be done using a new technology that will transform the way we live the political system.

### **B. The impact of a very simple technology**

The persons who do not recognize the deep impact that even simple technology can have over a whole society, should remember the story of the air conditioning:

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<sup>11</sup> Humphreys, Adrian; Canadians hunger for political reform, poll finds: National Post/Global poll: PM's power seen as greatest internal threat to democracy, September 6, 2002 Friday National Edition

“Some of the most revolutionary technologies have been found in the home. Air conditioning, now far from glamorous, has changed the demographics of the world and especially in the US. The great migration from north to south was initiated by air conditioning. Millions of people would simply not want to live in cities like Houston, Miami, New Orleans, Phoenix and Washington without it”<sup>12</sup>

Like the air conditioning, the Internet is going to change the way we choose and we govern our country. One of the main losers of this change will be, without doubts, the political class. There are many reasons to sustain this:

- Campaigns will be more “customer oriented” and less massified as now, making more difficult to sell an empty message to a more cultivated audience
- Lobby groups and Political Action Committees (PACs) will see how its influence decreased face the power of citizens who can directly state and challenge certain positions
- The increase of direct citizen participation (more referendums and interactive policy forums) will imply a close supervision of voters over their represent ant
- “A growing body of research suggests that on-line participation by so called e-citizens may be qualitatively different from off-line forms of civic engagement and participation”<sup>13</sup> This will mean a more proactive attitude of citizens in front of some Executive or Legislative actions, rather reactive as is right now

The political elite will have to allow the normal people to decide directly their future, without the intervention of intermediaries.

### **C. The evolution of government institutions**

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<sup>12</sup> Hull, Stefan; “Internet could get our vote by 2006”, Sept. 2002

<sup>13</sup> Longford, Graham; “Canadian democracy hard wired?”, Sept. 2002

The current system on most of the countries where Democracy has existed for more than century (like the US, UK and some North European countries) the political power has been obtained by a reduced number of parties. However, the new tendencies are prevailing the “niche” politics: multiple groups identified with a specific common interest. Bipartidism, for example, will have to evolve to structure that is more flexible where many actors would be able to have a voice and be distinguished among the crowd.

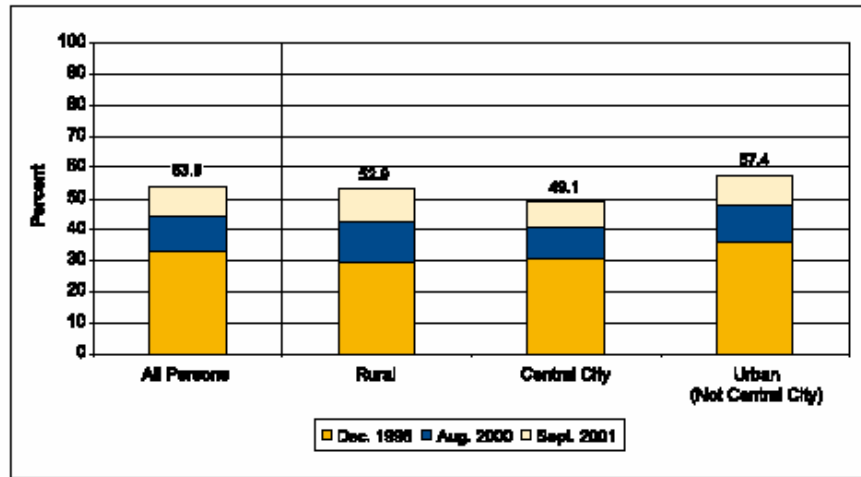
## **II E-Democracy means a Local government adapted to my needs**

One of the main consequences of globalization is the creation of international states that overlap the present nation-state units. Despite the growing influence of this kind of organizations (like the UN, the EU, World Bank among others) citizens are reluctant to loose control over their environment. Individuals do not like to interact with a big and senseless government but with a close and reduced organization that can answer quickly and efficiently to their specific necessities. “U.S cities no longer compete against one another for business and residents” says Indianapolis major Stephen Goldsmith, “they compete against their suburbs, and they are losing badly”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Goldsmith, Stephen; Can business really do business with government?, Harvard Business Review, June 1997, p. 111

Figure 2-11: Internet Use Anywhere by Geographic Location of Household, Percent of Persons Age 3+



Source: NTIA and ESA, U.S. Department of Commerce, using U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey Supplements

The logic is definitely brutal: suburbs offer lower taxes, less pollution and crime, better schools and community services than the cities do. As he remarks, “virtually every older city has seen its population decline over the past 20 years”<sup>15</sup>. The future of public sector will mean that a high percentage of the population will live daily with a local government that manage less than 5 thousand persons.

**B. Tailor made government**

Dr. Costis Toregas<sup>16</sup>, President of Public Technology Incorporated (the technological arm of the League of US. Cities), thinks that there are two waves on this political revolution. The first one will involve the local governments. These entities will have to compete among their selves in order to attract new residents. Therefore, they will need a “customer oriented” perspective, tailoring their services and infrastructure to the specific requirements of the community living there. That “tailor made” government will be sculpted based on the continual feedback (using new technologies like the Internet)

<sup>15</sup> Goldsmith, *ibid.*, p. 111

<sup>16</sup> Interview Dr. Costis Toregas, October 16, 2002

citizens will provide to their local government. This local government will take charge of the “in house” characteristics: the main two fields would be public safety and the technological and communications infrastructure.

The second wave, as Dr Toregas believes, will include the formation of regional governments. These regions will be formed based on the cultural and geographic characteristics (Sunbelt, Northeast regional governments, among others) and they will take charge of more global issues like environment, energy and transportation.

The main result of the two waves will be a citizen who will be able to obtain fast and better responses to their specific needs. The key question is: How will this “e-citizen” participate in the transformed political life of the XXIth Century?

### **C. E-Democracy and the avatars**

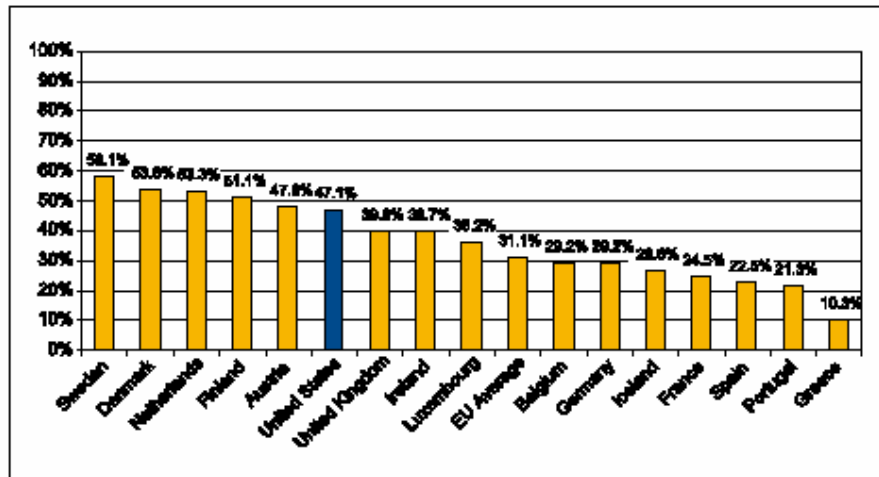
Each individual will program his computer on his political preferences and priorities. Our computer, based on our past political behavior, will be able to create an “avatar” (a digital personality) who will represent us in this new world. If there is a referendum and we are not at home, our Avatar will vote for us. He will represent our beliefs; our opinions and he could even work for a specific candidate he considers represents better his owner interest. Internet will provide the field to create alliances, campaigns and pressure groups, so our community will know our interest. Following this logic, the local government would be able to receive a constant feedback from their constituencies and, by consequence, provide the best and most personalized solutions for their inhabitants...

Our estimates, based on the Internet penetration and political maturity, are the following:

Country	US/Western Europe	East Europe	Japan/Korea	Asia	Latin America	Africa
Online Voting	2010	2020	2010	2030	2030	2050
Online Political Participation	2020	2030	2010	2040	2040	2060
Online Political Profiles	2020	2030	2020	2040	2040	2060
E-candidate	2030	2040	2030	2050	2050	2070
Local government Shaped on my Profile	2040	2050	2030	2060	2060	2080

The Internet development, unequal right now, will be uniform during the middle of the century, even though the progress of “E-Democracy” can be delayed also by cultural factors.

Figure 1-3: Individuals Using the Internet from any Location, Selected Countries, 2000 and 2001



Note: EU country estimates are for February 2001 and US estimates are for August 2000. Source: European Union, [http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/eeurope/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/index_en.htm) and U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administration.

Some societies (China for example) will be more reluctant to evolve other this model. Powerful bureaucracies will be threatening by the new tendency and will try to stop or destroy the new system. Although this is normal (we have to remember the fear provoked by the first cars, for example) we can expect a painful evolution. The trouble

with any invention is that it is uneven and that politicians will, if they can, try to regulate shape and suppress new inventions before they are deployed. Thus, we can expect the represent ants of the old system will strike back. However, it is also certain that, as the explosion of the Internet, this new tendency will be irreversible.

## **REFERENCES**

Souza, D. 2001. "Latin America Wireless Data Series Part 2: Mobile Content and Applications", *Yankee Group Report, Wireless/Mobile Latin America, Report* Vol.2, No. 9 August 2001