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Mulford Sibley is not the sort of scholar who makes a career of elaborating variations on a theme. There are recurring themes in his work, however, and I want to sound two of them, participatory democracy and technology, in this essay.[1] These themes may be joined in a number of ways, but here I shall take up only one—the possibility that advances in communications technology may actually promote democracy by extending and enhancing opportunities for political participation.

This possibility has been raised by several writers who have noticed that computers and coaxial cables now enable us to establish an instant direct democracy.[2] With the aid of computers and cables, it seems, we could install electronic voting devices in the homes of all citizens, disband our legislative bodies, and proceed to set policy by the direct vote of the electorate. What had hitherto seemed suitable only for the Greek *polis,* the Swiss canton, and the New England town now seems conceivable, at least, in the modern nation-state.

To say that something is conceivable is not to say it is desirable, of course, and the latter point is my concern here. Is instant direct democracy a desirable form of government? I think not. It is an attractive prospect in some ways, to be sure, and I shall note some of

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these in this paper. But it also has its drawbacks, notably its tendency to render political action less meaningful, rather than more, than it is at present. To put the point in terms I shall define later, instant direct democracy threatens to discourage people from acting as ethical citizens. I must emphasize at the outset, though, that my criticism is aimed only at this particular form of direct democracy. For that reason, it seems best to begin with a sketch of instant direct democracy.

As a preface to this sketch, I should like to enter the following qualifications. First, in order to avoid the charge that I have merely set up a straw man, I try to portray instant direct democracy in the most favorable light. Some readers may suspect that I overstate the case in its behalf. Second, some of the features of this sketch, such as the terms of office for president and judges, are somewhat arbitrary. Those who do not think that the president in such a system should serve a term of one year may trim or extend the term as they see fit, making similar adjustments to similar features of the scheme. Third, because I try to outline an instant direct democracy which is as direct and as democratic as possible, I do not consider the possibility of using computers and cables to create a mixture of representative and direct government. Some of the arguments against the pure case of instant direct democracy may tell against these mixed forms, others may not. Finally, I simply suppose in the following sketch that instant direct democracy is in operation. This may seem unfair, for I neglect the possibility that a gradual transformation might be necessary to prepare citizens to meet the demands of the new institutions and procedures.[3] But my purpose is to consider the claim, advanced by at least one proponent, that instant direct democracy will itself lead to a change in the habits and attitudes of the citizenry.[4] Given this concern, it seems fair to proceed in an admittedly ahistorical manner.

I

Let us suppose that the government of the United States has somehow been converted into an instant direct democracy. As with all forms of direct democracy, the basic premise of this regime is that the people, not their intermediaries, should themselves determine the policies which govern their lives. To make this possible, a computer console has been installed in the home of every member of the electorate. These consoles, connected by two-way cable television to a computer in the capital, allow the citizen to cast a vote on an issue by touching one or more buttons.[5] For some issues the voters may be asked to rank their preferences among a number of alternatives; for others they may be able to select from Approve

Strongly, Approve, Don't Care, Disapprove, and Disapprove Strongly. This allows voters to register intensity as well as support for or opposition to a proposal, although the range of intensity is quite limited. The voter may cast no more than two votes for or against a proposal, that is, so that someone who votes Disapprove Strongly (or Approve Strongly) will have cast the maximum number of votes on an issue. In every case, a proposal is adopted if it receives more positive than negative votes.

In this instant direct democracy the citizens themselves are the legislators, and each week they vote on one or more issues. This referendum is conducted via cable television, where the proposals of the week are announced, then debated by their proponents and opponents. These debates are rebroadcast at various times throughout the week so that everyone may see them, and at the end of the week the referendum is held. The polls are open, so to speak, at three different times during the day to give everyone a chance to participate. Those who cannot be home at any of these times can arrange to vote at a post office, library, city hall, or public office of some sort.

The executive and judicial branches of government play important, but diminished, roles in this scheme. The executive branch is responsible not only for carrying out policies approved by the electorate, but also for providing regular televised briefings on matters of public concern. The president is elected by direct popular vote to serve a term of one year in office. A president may be re-elected, but not to consecutive terms, and the man or woman who holds this office may be removed at any time by the vote of the majority of the electorate. Although the president exercises certain emergency powers, they do not include the authority to introduce or veto legislation.

The president appoints the members of the national judiciary, but nominees must be approved by a majority of those voting in special referenda, with the pool of eligible voters comprising the citizens who live in the jurisdiction in question. Every citizen may vote for or against a nominee to the Supreme Court, that is, but only those who reside in the relevant jurisdiction may vote for or against a nominee to a Court of Appeals or a District Court. Once admitted to the bench, judges remain subject to recall throughout their tenure. They apply and interpret the law, but they are not allowed to declare a policy approved by the citizens to be *ultra vires*.

These are the basic features of an instant direct democracy. I shall now add a bit more detail to the sketch by anticipating some practical objections which may be brought against a scheme of this sort.

The first objection is that it will prove too expensive. This claim cannot be refuted, strictly speaking, because no one (to my knowledge) has calculated the costs involved. We do have some idea, though, of how much it costs to maintain Congress—about $519,000,000 in personnel costs alone in 1974, for instance[6]—and in light of this one may wonder whether instant direct democracy might not prove less expensive than our current form of government. One may also ask, what makes something *too* expensive? According to one advocate, the argument that instant direct democracy is "prohibitively expensive" is a "highly disreputable argument. If we have any serious regard for the value of democracy, then we ought to be prepared to expend resources on it. A society which prefers to allocate resources to the pomp of Government, and to royalty, presidency or members of the inner caucus of the Party, has failed to take democracy seriously enough."[7]

Another objection is that instant direct democracy invites fraud. A number of safeguards can be employed, however, including steps to insure that only the person to whom it is assigned can operate a console. This could be accomplished by using cards and codes, as automatic cash machines at banks do; or the consoles could be designed to require the thumbprint of the assigned person before registering a vote.[8] The same measures could prevent voters from voting more than one time on any issue. Other precautions, such as security screening and "failsafe" procedures, could protect against the possibility of tampering with the computer.

This leaves the most serious of the practical objections: the charge that the electorate will be at the mercy of those who set the agenda. How issues are formulated, what proposals are put before the public, even the order in which alternatives are submitted to the vote—all these are important problems which cannot be settled by the people's vote, for they must be settled before the people vote. This is to say that at least one set of intermediaries is necessary even in an instant direct democracy. The problem is to see to it that the intermediaries are under the control of the people, not the other way around.

To meet this problem we may suppose that once a year the citizens elect an Agenda Committee. This committee formulates proposals which its members present on television at the end of each week's referendum, and any proposal which draws at least a third of the votes cast is selected. When this is done, the Agenda Committee chooses speakers from its ranks to take part in the televised debate on the merits of the proposal(s) in question, then sets to work to formulate the proposals for the following week. Like the president

and judges, members of this committee are subject to recall at any time. In this way the Agenda Committee, the sole indirect element in this instant democracy, remains subject to the control of the citizenry.

This is only a sketch of instant direct democracy, of course, not a full portrait. Nevertheless, it should serve to indicate that a direct democracy of this sort is neither hopelessly far-fetched nor absolutely inconceivable. With this in mind, let us now consider its attractions.

II

Instant direct democracy promises to be an attractive way to conduct a nation's affairs in several respects. There is no legislature, to begin with, so the problems associated with representative government are problems no longer. There is no need to worry about whether representatives should act as delegates or trustees, for instance, or in what proportion they should mix these roles. Moreover, direct democracy guarantees that no one will be either under—or over-represented. As matters now stand in the United States, the Senate in one way and the House in another give more weight to some person's preferences than to others'. In the Senate, the citizens of the less populous states enjoy an advantage because every state elects two Senators. In the House, with its single-member districts, those who do not vote for the successful candidate—and this may be a majority of voters when there are more than two candidates—can be said, in a sense, to have no representative at all. Problems such as these vanish in a direct democracy, where everyone has an equal part in setting policy.

Equality figures also in the second attractive feature of instant direct democracy: the reduction of the influence of interest groups. In a representative government, the representatives of interest groups typically gather in the capital to try to influence the representatives of the people. In many cases interest groups even do what they can to determine who is elected to the legislature. The abolition of the legislature might not bring a halt to the lobbying efforts of these groups, but it would certainly hinder them. Insofar as the Agenda Committee in the preceding sketch assumes some of the functions of a legislative body, it will also afford some opportunities for lobbying. But insofar as these functions will be limited, we may expect that the opportunities for lobbying will be limited as well.

Direct democracy also promises to end or minimize some of the legislative maneuvers which characterize representative government. There would be no filibuster in an instant direct

democracy, for example, nor would there be committee chairmen from "safe" districts to delay the passage of laws favored by a clear majority of the people. For better or worse, log-rolling and pork-barrel politics in general will be nearly impossible in such a system. This is not a necessary consequence of direct democracy, to be sure, for direct democracy does not itself eliminate strategic voting. It is a consequence of *instant* direct democracy, however, because the large number of voters and their isolation from one another will prevent them from sending signals, "thus reducing the scope for strategic behavior to its bare minimum...."[9]

We may note, too, that instant direct democracy will probably not suffer from what many consider to be a major defect of contemporary American government—its emphasis on personalities rather than issues. This tendency may be more pronounced in the United States than elsewhere, but it is likely to appear in all representative governments. When we have to choose a representative, after all, we usually want to know something about his or her character. In a large polity where access to the mass communications media is widespread, this concern for character seems to degenerate into a concern for personality, image, or "charisma." This is in marked contrast to instant direct democracy, where the issues themselves are likely to be at the center of attention.

Some may also find instant direct democracy attractive, finally, because it is free from the intolerance and pressure to conform which, in the eyes of critics, characterize other forms of direct democracy. On this view, direct democracy of the sort found in face-to-face societies purchases community and equality at the expense of more precious values, liberty and privacy. As one critic puts it, "direct democracy effaces boundaries and separations, while subjecting everything to the publicly political imperative. This imperative repels the exploration of possibilities in nonpublic life that the spirit of representative democracy fosters."[10] Not everyone accepts this criticism of the traditional forms of direct democracy; yet those who do should recognize that an instant direct democracy will differ from the traditional forms, largely because it is not confined to face-to-face societies. Given the size of the body politic and the isolation of citizens voting in the privacy of their homes, instant direct democracy seems to preserve the desirable features of other forms of direct democracy while minimizing the prospect of smug or brutish intolerance.[11]

In all these respects instant direct democracy appears to be an appealing system of government. These are not the only respects which matter, though, and in the remainder of this paper I shall

argue that more important considerations count against government by electronic referenda. We may also expect that some people will not agree that all the features mentioned above are to be counted in favor of instant direct democracy; indeed, I turn the last feature against it later in this essay. The purpose of this section, however, is not to provide a conclusive argument, but to suggest that this novel form of direct democracy should not be rejected without consideration—for there is something to be said in its behalf.

III

Any advocate of instant direct democracy must expect that he or she will soon face the challenge, "Are the people of this (or any) country willing and able to govern themselves in this way?" There is abundant evidence to suggest that they are not. Sidney Verba and Norman Nie report, for example, that 22% of the electorate of the United States take no part in politics; another 67% participate only occasionally.[12] When researchers study levels of political awareness and information, furthermore, the surveys almost always reveal that most people are ill-informed, misinformed, or uninformed. In these circumstances it is easy to understand how some might fear that the policies adopted by an instant direct democracy will prove to be short-sighted, ill-conceived, and ultimately disastrous.

This is the kind of argument we associate with elitists, democratic and otherwise. Because the people lack the capacity to deal with the difficult issues in politics, the argument holds, they ought to entrust their governance to those who are wiser, more prudent, and more public-spirited. Yet even an advocate of participatory democracy may conclude that instant direct democracy goes too far. Thus C.B. Macpherson says that the most democratic government we can hope for at the level of the nation-state, even with the aid of computers and cables, must still be a mixture of direct and indirect government. Some form of representation is necessary, as he sees it, if questions are to be formulated properly and if inconsistent demands are to be reconciled. Otherwise, voters would

very likely demand a reduction of unemployment at the same time as they are demanding a reduction of inflation, or an increase in government expenditures along with the decrease in taxes.... To avoid the need for a body to adjust such incompatible demands...the questions would have to be framed in a way that would require of each voter a degree of sophistication impossible to expect.[13]

Participatory democrats and elitists may agree, then, that instant direct democracy requires too much of the average person. But there is at least one political philosopher who is not persuaded

by this argument. Robert Paul Wolff is, he says, "a good deal more than half in earnest" about the proposal for instant direct democracy he advances in his *In Defense of Anarchism*. There Wolff anticipates the criticism just set out and offers the following rebuttal:

> The initial reponse to...instant direct democracy would be chaotic, to be sure. But very quickly, men would learn—what is now manifestly not true—that their votes made a difference in the world, an immediate, visible difference. There is nothing which brings on a sense of responsibility so fast as that awareness. America would see an immediate and invigorating rise in interest in politics. It would hardly be necessary to launch expensive and frustrating campaigns to get out the vote. Politics would be on the lips of every man, woman, and child, day after day.[14]

Whose position is more plausible, Wolff's or the critics'? I must side with the critics. For we need not believe that the average man or woman is stupid, selfish, or irrational to believe that instant direct democracy is too taxing a method of government. What disqualifies most of us as policy makers may simply be the lack of time to become suitably informed about the complex problems we face as a nation. Because these issues are so complex and so entangled, one may have to be a full-time student of politics to acquire the necessary grasp of these matters. There may be much that instant direct democracy can do to increase our political sophistication, but it cannot itself give us the time to learn all we would need to know.

Time is not the only consideration here, of course. People seem to "find time" for matters which are important to them, and it is possible that the number of those who take an interest in political questions may increase dramatically with a shift to instant direct democracy. This is Wolff's position. In his view, the real source of the average person's apathy is the realization that his or her voice is too faint to be heard in our elite-dominated political system. If he sees that his vote actually makes a difference, then the average person may attach more significance to public matters and find the time to inform himself about them.

Wolff's account of the cause of political apathy may be true, if not the whole truth of the matter. If we grant this, however, it still does not follow that the creation of an instant direct democracy is the cure for this malady. For it is far from apparent that the citizens of an instant direct democracy will see that their votes make "an immediate, visible difference" in the world. *Their* votes will certainly make a difference in this system, for *their* votes determine the outcome. But the individual voter is not likely to find that *his* vote makes a difference. As one voter among millions, he may conclude that his vote is utterly insignificant; and this may lead to

the further conclusion that time spent gathering political information is time wasted.

This conclusion is at least as likely as that which Wolff foresees. If the voters perceive that their individual votes are insignificant, we cannot expect them to develop the sense of responsibility that follows, according to Wolff, from the awareness that their votes matter. It seems, instead, that the sense of reponsibility is what now brings many people to the polls in a national election, for it is nearly certain that any individual's vote will have no affect on the outcome.[15] What an advocate of instant direct democracy must show is that some feature(s) of this system would instill a heightened sense of responsibility in the citizens, thus encouraging them to take an active part in public affairs. Wolff fails to do this.

So Wolff's claim is implausible. Yet we must be careful to note what this implies. Even if Wolff is wrong, it does not follow that the critics of instant direct democracy are right when they contend that the result of this system will be contradictory, imprudent, and disastrous policies. This *may* happen, just as it *may* happen that people will meet their responsibilities. But there is a third possibility—that most people, aware of the insignificance of their individual votes, will simply ignore the referenda and leave the resolution of policy to that small group who find politics enjoyable or compelling. If this should happen, we would have no cause to worry—no more than we already have, anyhow—about the soundness of policy in an instant direct democracy. But is the risk worth taking? It may be if govenment by electronic referenda has something else to offer us. For sound policy is not the only thing to be desired from political institutions and processes; we may also want institutions and procedures which enrich human life. This goal cannot be reached unless people are encouraged to act as citizens, however, and this instant direct democracy is unlikely to do.

IV

In this section I shall argue that instant direct democracy is undesirable as a form of national government because it threatens to discourage citizenship. If this claim seems odd, it is probably because we now use "citizen" in an attenuated sense of the word. All the more reason to begin this argument by distinguishing between two conceptions of citizenship.[16]

When we call someone a citizen nowadays, we ordinarily mean only that he or she is legally entitled to participate in public affairs. Whether one does what he is entitled to do—whether one actually participates—is seldom regarded as a test of one's citizenship. Our

modern view of citizenship tends to be passive and legalistic, in other words, a matter of privileges and immunities rather than duties and responsibilities.

In contrast to this is the conception of citizenship bequeathed to us by the ancient *polis* and *civitas*. On this view citizenship is, or ought to be, a public vocation which requires us to take an active part in matters of public concern and to act with the interests of the community in mind. This conception, with its emphasis on the responsibilities of the citizen, no longer prevails, but neither has it vanished. We still attach "good," "ethical," or "responsible" to "citizen" when we want to distinguish a "true" citizen from those who are citizens merely in the legal sense of the word, for instance. When we do this, we invoke the ethical conception of citizenship.

We have, then, two different, if not entirely distinct, conceptions of citizenship. According to the first, citizenship is essentially a matter of legal status; according to the second, it is essentially ethical. The ethical conception presupposes the legal because it takes the right to participate in public affairs as a necessary condition of citizenship; but it also considers this right to be far from sufficient in itself. In this sense we still share the ancients' conviction that those who consistently fail to exercise their rights and meet their responsibilities as citizens are not really citizens at all. This is the sense I draw upon when I say that instant direct democracy is likely to discourage (ethical) citizenship.

Assuming for the moment that instant direct democracy will have this effect, why should we care? What is the value of (ethical) citizenship? Perhaps the best answer begins with Aristotle's definition: "as soon as a man becomes entitled to participate in authority, deliberative or judicial, we deem him to be a citizen...."[17] This suggests that citizenship both recognizes and cultivates the faculties of judgment and deliberation. To be accorded the status of citizen is to be recognized as one capable of leading a rational, self-governed life—and as one who has a right, following from this ability, to participate in the government of the community. Those who are denied this recognition, even if they are ranked as "second-class citizens," are demeaned as less than fully rational and as unworthy of equal respect and concern.

As the status of citizenship recognizes one's human faculties, so the life of the citizen cultivates them. A person becomes a citizen in the legal sense of the word when he or she (*pace* Aristotle) appears to be ready to participate in authority. Yet it is through this participation—through judging and deliberating—that one develops these capacities. This is to say that citizenship enriches

lives by promoting both mental and moral growth. Certainly the problems the citizen faces *qua* citizen are often complex, whether they are primarily technical questions—what will the effects of a tax cut be?—or questions of strategy—how can we persuade others to vote with us on this issue? We need not fear, then, that anyone who takes the vocation of citizenship seriously will lack for mental exercise.

Nor need we fear that the moral muscles of the citizen will grow flabby from lack of use, for (ethical) citizenship calls these into play as well. It does this in at least two ways. First, (ethical) citizenship requires the individual to look beyond private interests to the interests of the community. In this fashion the public vocation of citizenship demands that the citizen's judgment and deliberation be employed in the service of the community. Second, citizenship promotes moral growth by leading the citizen to confront the fundamental question, how should we order our life as a community? For however technical, trivial, or prosaic political questions may seem to be, they refer ultimately to a way of life—an ethos—and are therefore ethical questions.

There is ample reason to believe, then, that the civic vocation promotes both moral and mental growth, thereby enriching not only the life of the individual, but the life of the community as well. This seems to warrant the conclusion that (ethical) citizenship is valuable indeed. Any method of government which encourages it is desirable, *ceteris paribus,* and any which discourages it is not. What remains is to show that instant direct democracy falls into the latter category.

When I say that instant direct democracy is likely to discourage (ethical) citizenship, I do not mean that it is unique in this respect. In many ways it will only extend certain conditions which already prevail in modern nation-states. One of these is the overwhelming size of the nation-state.[18] As I noted in the discussion of Wolff's argument, the knowledge that one's participation is virtually insignificant may well lead the individual to withdraw or abstain from political activity. There is also reason to believe that the individual's willingness to cooperate in public projects decreases as the size of the public increases. More than 200 years ago Montesquieu observed, "In a large republic, the common good is sacrificed to any number of other considerations; it is subject to exceptions; it comes to depend upon accidents. In a small republic, the public good is more keenly felt, better known, closer to every citizen; abuses are spread less widely, and consequently, are less tolerated."[19] More recently and more formally, others have demonstrated that members of large groups have little incentive to

cooperate in a group venture when they can be free riders.[20] This implies, other things being equal, that the larger the body politic, the less the likelihood that people will cooperate freely to achieve public goods and the greater the likelihood that coercion will be required.

We cannot blame the size of the nation-state on direct democracy, instant or otherwise, of course. But unlike some forms of direct democracy, such as those that call for the decentralization of political authority, instant direct democracy offers nothing to reduce or counteract the effects of size. The ability to vote at home may make voting easier and thus more attractive for some. But when the individual casts a vote in a national referendum, he should soon become aware of the futility of this action. The immensity of the polity and the insignificance of the individual's vote will be brought home on cable television.

The size of the nation-state contributes also to another condition hostile to (ethical) citizenship—the lack of community. If an individual is to take the part of the citizen, he usually needs to feel a part of a community whose concerns are his concerns. We cannot expect many people to act with the public good in mind if that public holds no meaning for them. What we should expect in these circumstances is that many will fail to participate in politics, while many of those who do take part will simply regard their participation as the public pursuit of private ends.

This, again, is not the fault of instant direct democracy. It is, however, a problem which the electronic referendum is likely to aggravate. By enabling us to vote in the privacy of our homes, instant direct democracy may isolate us still further from public contact. In such a system we may lose even the slight contact now involved in going to the polls, standing in line, and casting one's ballot. Little as it is, this public effort should remind us that voting is a public act which carries with it public responsibility.[21] In an instant direct democracy this reminder may well disappear. Certainly it will be difficult to stir people to act on behalf of the public when the public is only a vague notion referring to something beyond one's walls.

Finally, we should note that instant direct democracy will probably accelerate the tendency for politics to become a spectator sport, or perhaps a television game show. This may occur as politics is reduced to little but voting. The elements of politics which contribute to the enrichment of life—debate, compromise, deliberation, for instance—are likely to vanish as the mechanical act of voting in the privacy of one's home, free from the frustration of confronting others with different views, becomes almost the only connection between most citizens (in the legal sense) and public life.

Judgment will not be sharpened by this process; deliberation will not be fostered; and the capacity of citizenship to enrich the life of the individual and the community will go unrealized.

Whether one takes these to be telling criticisms of instant direct democracy will depend, in the end, on the value one attaches to (ethical) citizenship and participatory democracy. If one believes that citizenship is merely a matter of legal status and that political participation is primarily a means of expressing personal preferences, then the prospect of wedding computers and cables to democratic government may prove quite attractive, for it promises an efficient and accurate way of registering the preferences of the populace. Democracy, on this view, is desirable because it affords everyone an equal opportunity to protect or promote his or her interests. This is the vision which seems to inspire many writers in the traditions of utilitarianism and welfare economics. Others, Mulford Sibley among them, find this vision narrow and cramped. And if one believes that political participation can and should be something more than a way of registering preferences—that it is valuable as a way of cultivating abilities and strengthening social bonds—then the prospect of instant direct democracy is disquieting indeed.

V

All this is to say that instant direct democracy threatens to devalue politics by converting an activity into a process, thereby discouraging (ethical) citizenship. Since the quality of the policy it will produce is also suspect, we have reason to conclude that we should not be striving to establish a government by electronic referenda. These criticisms apply only to *instant* direct democracy, however, not to other forms. There may be more to be said for more decentralized versions of direct democracy or even for more localized forms of instant direct democracy.[22] Attempts to combine elements of the instant referendum with representative government may also prove quite attractive.[23] The opportunities exist; it remains for political theorists to explore them.

What I wish to suggest is that we attend to two themes in Mulford Sibley's work as we explore these opportunities to remodel our political system. We should remember that political participation is a means of enriching life and that technological advances do not always bring corresponding advances in the political realm. When we examine the ways in which computers and cables may be used to reform our political arrangements, then, we should keep one question in mind: How will these changes affect the

vocation of citizenship? There is little incentive to follow this vocation now; to discourage it further is to risk its complete loss.