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Trends. Will E-Commerce Lead to E-Politics? Electronic Voting in the 21st Century

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Business and politics have formed a symbiosis throughout recorded history. Now that online commerce--the actual purchasing of goods and services--is a reality, can online politics--the electronic voting for candidates, e.g., in national elections, in the privacy of one's home or in any one of many nearby locales--be far behind?

Already there are political party and candidate websites with information, chat rooms, and procedures for emailing and posting one's questions and opinions. These are almost universally viewed as helpful--or at least no more noxious than other political information available through partisan sources. But would there be untoward social or psychological consequences if electronic voting was introduced?

Some commentators point to the ease that would be afforded via electronic voting and suggest that such voting would be conducive to greater participation of the citizenry and the exemplification of democratic principles. These commentators eschew the possibility of untoward effects and cite the similarity between electronic voting and absentee balloting. Still others suggest that the downside of electronic voting would be analogous to voting in person--e.g., uninformed voting and possibilities for chicanery.

Other commentators suggest that electronic voting would lead to a unique downside--loss of a sense of social cohesion and community that comes through the effort of leaving one's home or place of work for the purpose of voting along with the communal ritual of going to special locations shared with others for actual voting procedures. These commentators seem to discount the power of what may be called the intrapsychic community--a variant of the virtual community. Both communities are based on the observation that forms the title of a classic social psychological textbook by Elliot Aronson that the human is a social animal. Either in physical reality or in the reality of the imagination, sociality is maintained. To suggest that voting in physical, electronic privacy obliterates this social facet of one's humanity is to conflate a reification and demonization of technology. Much political psychology research on electronic voting is needed before mere opinion becomes empirically and experimentally supported hypothesis advocacy. (See Groper, R. (1996). Electronic mail and the reinvigoration of American democracy. *Social Science Computer Review*, 14, 157-168; Harkins, S. G. (1998). Population and Political Participation A Social Impact Analysis of Voter Responsibility. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2, 192-207; Kraut, R. (1998). Internet Paradox: A Social Technology That Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being? *American Psychologist*, 53, 1017-1031; McLeod, L. (1997). The Eyes Have It Minority Influence in Face-To-Face and Computer-Mediated Group Discussion. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 706-718; Valelly, R. (September 13 & 20, 1999). The case against virtual ballot boxes. *The New Republic*, pp. 20-22.) (Keywords: E-Commerce, Electronic Voting, Online Behavior, Voting.)