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INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY

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JUN 8, 2017

The Dark Side of Voting Technology

NEW YORK – According to an unpublished "kitchen table survey," conducted before last November's presidential election in the United States, approximately 95% of the predominantly Hispanic members of one of America's largest domestic unions preferred the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton to her Republican opponent Donald Trump. Yet less than 3% of that union's members actually planned to vote. The reason came down to economics.

For most of the people surveyed, the costs of voting – including lost wages from time off work, transport to the polling station, and the need to secure proper identification (such as a driver's license or passport) – were simply too large. This reflects a broader trend in the US, with poor Americans often unable to participate fully in their country's democracy.

According to the US Census Bureau, fewer than half of eligible adults with family incomes of less than $20,000 per year voted in the 2012 presidential election, whereas voter participation among households with incomes of more than $75,000 was 77%. In the 2014 midterm election, the think tank Demos reports, 68.5% of people in households earning less than $30,000 per year didn't vote.

This is a serious problem. But the proposals most often put forward to address it have serious drawbacks.

The proposed solutions typically focus on digital technology, which many claim would boost voter participation, by lowering the costs of voting. For example, mobile apps have been touted as a means to boost voter turnout: people could vote at their convenience, whether in the break-room at work or from the comfort of their own home.

The idea certainly sounds appealing. In Estonia, which is widely considered to be a leader in the use of voting technology, almost one-quarter of all votes in the 2011 parliamentary election were cast online.

Yet the actual impact of such technology on voter participation remains dubious. Although the rate of online voting in Estonia increased by nearly 20% between the 2007 and 2011 elections there, overall voter turnout increased by fewer than two percentage points (from 61.9% to 63.5%). This suggests that online voting may simply encourage regular voters to change how they cast their ballots, rather than encouraging additional voters to participate.

But voting technology may not just be ineffective; it could actually be damaging. Such technology doesn't reduce costs only for voters; it also reduces costs for the state, making it easier than ever to conduct elections. The risk is that lower costs would encourage more frequent elections and referenda, thereby undermining the efficiency of government.

At a time of lackluster global economic growth and deteriorating living standards for many, efficient government could not be more important. According to the US Millennium Challenge Corporation, more efficient government helps to reduce poverty, improve education and health care, slow environmental degradation, and combat corruption.

A key feature of an efficient government is long-term thinking. Policymakers must work toward the policy goals that got them elected. But they must also be given enough political room to adjust to new developments, even if it means altering policy timelines.

Amid constant elections and referenda, that isn't really an option. Instead, policymakers face strong pressure to deliver short-term, voter-pleasing results – or get punished at the polls. The likely result is a shortsighted agenda prone to sudden politically motivated reversals. Beyond hurting political credibility and market confidence, such volatility could create friction between elected politicians and civil-service technocrats, damaging a relationship that is critical to efficient, forward-looking, and fact-based decision-making.

Proponents of referenda hold them up as the epitome of democracy, giving ordinary citizens a direct say over specific policy decisions. But, in a representative democracy,

referenda undermine the relationship between the voters and their political leaders, who have been entrusted to make policy on citizens' behalf.

Ominously, referenda are already becoming an increasingly common – and consequential – feature of policymaking in the Western world. The United Kingdom has held just three referenda in its entire history; but two have been carried out just in the last six years (plus another in Scotland). François Fillon, a candidate for the French presidency, promised two referenda if he won the recent election – and suggested that France needs as many as five.

Elections, too, are becoming more frequent. The average tenure of a G20 political leader has fallen to a record low of 3.7 years, compared to six years in 1946 – a shift that, no doubt, is contributing to a rise in short-term thinking by governments.

It is not yet clear whether voting technology actually does spur greater voter participation. What is clear is that, if it is adopted widely, it could exacerbate trends that are undermining public policy, including governments' ability to boost economic growth and improve social outcomes.

Reducing barriers to democratic participation for the poorest citizens is a worthy goal. But what good will achieving it do if those citizens' interests are harmed as a result?

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