

"How the Internet is Advancing Democracy in the United States"

Remarks by Kim Alexander, President and Founder
California Voter Foundation, www.calvoter.org

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I. Introduction

It is often said that information is the cornerstone of democracy, and at no time is information more crucial than during elections. But prior to the advent of the Internet, reliable voter information was difficult to find. Now, through the Internet, it's possible to provide all kinds of helpful information to the public 24 hours a day, such as voting records, campaign finance data, and candidates' positions on issues. On the Internet, we can build the essential tools citizens need to be truly informed and engaged in the process of self-government. By making information more convenient and accessible to the public, we increase the likelihood that busy people will be motivated to get informed and pay closer attention to our public institutions.

I first recognized this opportunity to advance democracy by making information more accessible to voters via the Internet in 1994, when I started the California Voter Foundation. Our first project was the California Online Voter Guide, an Internet site featuring 300 pages of nonpartisan information about state candidates and measures. In that first year, our guide attracted 14,000 visits over a six-week period. The popularity of our guide grows with each election; this Fall, we produced the seventh edition of our online guide, which attracted over 300,000 visits to our web site, www.calvoter.org.

II. The lack of reliable voter information in the United States

I started the California Voter Foundation for many reasons: because I was concerned about the large amount of money candidates need to raise to pay for the advertising required to get their message out to voters; because I was fed up with well-financed

interests groups having an unfair advantage in the lawmaking process; and because I was deeply frustrated with the lack of reliable information available for voters.

The United States likes to portray itself as a model democracy for other countries to follow. In many areas, such as free speech and freedom of the press, I think we set a good example. But when it comes to our electoral process, we are no model; we are a disgrace. The United States Congress appropriates \$31 million to the National Endowment for Democracy every year to advance democracy abroad, yet we spend virtually no money on voter education at home.

Most election information U.S. voters receive comes from campaigns, in the form of direct mail and 30-second TV spots funded by special interests. Much of this advertising is designed to manipulate voters, confuse voters, or instill fear in voters. While news media coverage of elections is available, it has been declining and is generally limited to "horse race" stories about the hottest contests on the ballot.

Meanwhile, the voter's job becomes more difficult. In half the states, including California, we have "direct democracy", a process that allows citizens to place proposed laws (called "initiatives") on the ballot for consideration by the voters. These initiatives are often very complex and confusing. In addition, we elect many different representatives. I personally elect 22 individuals to represent my interests on the federal, state and local levels of government.

To help with this task, voters receive ballot pamphlets in the mail from their state and local governments that run hundreds of pages of information that don't make for light reading. As Michael Schudson, author of *The Good Citizen* has pointed out, this is more non-fiction that we are expected to read in the two weeks leading up to an election than the typical person reads in an entire year. The process leaves many people feeling inadequate and ill-equipped to make informed, confident decisions.

III. How the Internet helps voters get better informed

Now voters have a choice. Government agencies, news organizations, candidates, and nonprofit groups like the California Voter Foundation are using the Internet to share thousands of pages of helpful information with voters that previously was very difficult, if not impossible to access. Giving voters convenient access to reliable voting information helps voters make more informed decisions and vote with confidence, and also helps people get more involved with the process of self-governance. At our web site, we tell voters who the top ten donors are for and against every proposition on the ballot, and provide an impartial analysis of each of the measures. We provide links to hundreds of California campaign web sites where voters can learn first-hand what candidates promise to do if elected. Voters are using the Internet to look up their polling places, access election results, and read the text of ballot measures.

In addition to providing helpful resources on our web site, my group works with our state elections agency to help them develop new information tools for our government's web site. Five years ago, I created a list of 19 items we wanted to see on California's Secretary of State web site -- resources like how to become a candidate for public office; the official Statement of the Vote; reports of voter registration statistics; and campaign finance studies. Today, every one of those 19 items is available from the official state elections web site.

IV. Three Kinds of Citizens

I don't expect every voter to go online and get informed; some people simply are not motivated. There are essentially three kinds of citizens:

- 1) those who are really paying attention;
- 2) those who are sort of paying attention; and
- 3) those who aren't paying attention.

The people who are really paying attention are the proactive voters. They are the 10 to 15 percent of the electorate that votes consistently. They attempt to read all the official voting material, and they usually have great influence among their friends and family at election time. The proactive voters seek out better information than what they can get from TV commercials and campaign mailers. These are the people who make the most difference in politics, and these are the kinds of people who use and rely on our web site. The people who are sort of paying attention may get on the Internet, but they are more likely to be influenced through broadcast news and commercials. Our web site indirectly benefits this audience too, since many reporters who produce news stories rely on our site for information. The people who aren't paying attention are the nonvoters; with these kinds of people, there is usually some other factor that keeps them from voting -- laziness, cynicism, apathy, ineligibility -- and providing information alone is typically not enough to turn nonvoters into voters.

Some people are highly engaged, others couldn't care less. But everyone is busy. People are busy, confused, and often don't know where to begin finding answers to their questions about government. If you build public information resources on the Internet, and promote them, and it's high quality information, people will use it. Maybe not everyone, but at least those who want to be engaged and informed.

The Internet provides an opportunity to not only serve proactive voters, but to expand their ranks as well. Today's young people are tomorrow's voters. Young people may not be reading the newspaper or watching the evening news, but they are using the Internet. We are beginning to turn the tide of political apathy in America's youth by engaging them through their medium of choice. By giving first time voters a positive experience, we increase the likelihood that new voters will want to keep coming back to the polls and get involved with civic life.

Of course, information alone doesn't address all the barriers to meaningful engagement: there are essentially four key ingredients for democratic participation: information; context; incentive; and time. But providing information is a good place to start, and making it more conveniently accessible can dramatically reduce the time barrier that exists for busy citizens. More and better information also gives people more confidence and greater incentive to participate, since less of a time commitment is needed in order to have an impact. Reliable information about government can also help reduce cynicism and distrust by making government agencies more transparent and accountable to the public. Citizens also need a context, or framework in which to understand political information, and this is an area where nonprofit groups, schools and universities can make the greatest contribution.

V. Political apathy & Internet voting

There has been much talk in the past two years about Internet voting as a solution to the problem of apathy, and some people are predicting that it's only a matter of time before we can vote over the Internet from home or work. Most of the people making these predictions are woefully uninformed. In my six years of working in politics and technology, I have found there are unfortunately too few people who have a working knowledge of both fields. I find plenty of people who understand politics, but don't really understand technology. Then there are those who are technologically-savvy, but don't understand politics.

This huge chasm between the fields of politics and technology is becoming increasingly evident around the issue of Internet voting. Many of the political experts who talk about Internet voting don't appreciate the technological dangers of voting online. They say, "I can shop online, I can bank online, why can't I vote online?" The answer is that voting is not like those other transactions. Credit card companies and banks tolerate a degree of fraud in all their transactions. We could not accept some degree of fraud in the voting process. And, when you make a deposit to your checking account over the Internet, your bank sends you back a message saying they got the transaction and confirming the amount. But if we are to preserve the right to a secret ballot, then we would not want to vote online and have our election agencies send back to us a note confirming our choices.

The technologically-savvy but politically naive people say, "Wouldn't it be great if we could vote on everything?" and talk about developing more direct democracy in our country. They fail to recognize the advantages of representative democracy and don't appreciate the extra burden more direct democracy would place on voters already overwhelmed by their number of electoral choices.

Voting over the Internet from an official polling place has potential, but voting over the Internet from home or work could lead not only to widespread fraud, but also to political coercion in the workplace, since many people access the Internet from work during the day, and most peoples' computers at work are far from private. Authenticating remote voters over the Internet to secure the system from fraud could likely require biometric scanning procedures, such as retina or finger-printing scans. I, like many Americans, find such security measures invasive, and believe it would be unwise to sanction government agencies to begin collecting sensitive biometric data on American citizens just to make voting more convenient.

Like many people, I was initially excited about the idea of Internet voting. But after serving on California's Internet Voting Task Force and studying the issue for almost two years now, I've developed many reservations about this idea. Overall, I believe there are less potentially dangerous ways to make the voting process more convenient for people than Internet voting, and there are far better ways to harness the power of the Internet to advance democracy besides Internet voting.

VI. Voting technologies

Even if we're not ready to cast ballots from home over the Internet, we can and should explore other ways that new technologies can be used to improve the voting process. Like many people, I was surprised and dismayed to learn that inaccurate vote counts are possible with punch card technology, as we saw with the Florida ballot recount in the recent Presidential election. It turns out this is not a new problem; back in 1988 a federal standards agency said that punch card ballots should be eliminated because they are prone to inaccuracies.

It's ironic that the first U.S. Presidential election held in the new millennium has turned on the question of whether we have more faith in machines or people to accurately count votes. Whatever we do to improve voting technology, we must consider whether all voters have an equal opportunity to have their votes counted. Voters who use punch cards can spoil their ballots by mistakenly casting more than one vote in a race, while computerized and optical scanning systems are designed to prevent overvoting altogether. To use a mix of systems creates an unfair situation where voters using the less sophisticated technology stand a better chance of having their votes thrown out.

The confusion in Florida comes as no surprise to those election officials who have warned for years that punch card systems can produce inaccurate results. We're using 1960's technology because new systems are expensive and our lawmakers have not made it a priority to replace them. Of course, computerizing the vote casting and vote counting process does not have to mean transferring ballots over the Internet, or eliminating a paper trail. Some people understandably find a completely paperless voting process unsettling, and think it's important to have a paper trail if a recount is needed. We could address this concern by using computers to cast our ballots at the polling place and at the end of the process print a paper copy of the ballot that a voter can review and confirm before it is placed in a back-up ballot box in case a recount is needed.

VII. Improving government accountability

The Internet is a great new tool for citizens at election time, but it is also a powerful lobbying tool, and one that can bring greater public scrutiny to the workings of government. My work advancing democracy via the Internet is influenced by the idea that a watched object changes its behavior simply because it is being watched. This principle is true in science, and it's true in politics as well. Politicians perform better when they feel they are being watched.

The other idea that inspires my work is what I call the "five percent factor", which is the idea that it doesn't take a high level of public participation to affect change in politics. You need maybe five percent of the people, or even less, to pay attention to a problem or situation, and usually that's enough to get a response from our elected leaders. The world is run by the people who show up, and even if it's a small fraction of the public that's paying attention, a well-informed fraction of the public paying closer attention to our elected leaders can result in better performance by our elected leaders.

One of the greatest areas of improvement in American democracy due to the Internet is widespread access to campaign finance reports showing who's making contributions to political candidates and parties. The advancement of electronic filing programs, rather than paper filing of political financial disclosure reports is increasing the public's

ability to make informed election choices and hold politicians accountable for their campaign contributions. By requiring campaign finance reports to be filed in an electronic format instead of on paper, it is possible to make that data instantly accessible to the public via the Internet. The California Voter Foundation calls this "digital sunlight", and the idea is spreading across the country. Already 42 states, as well as the federal government, have or are developing programs to implement online disclosure of campaign finance data.

Making public documents easily accessible to the public on the Internet helps make government more transparent and less mysterious. Such steps are needed to build public trust, something that is desperately needed in the United States to help overcome public apathy and cynicism.

VIII. Leveling the political playing field

What's different about the Internet is that, unlike other media, it is an affordable way to share information. The affordability of this medium is a key reason why it represents the best chance we've had in a long time to reduce the need for money in politics and level the political playing field between well-funded and under-funded groups and individuals. Many U.S. candidates -- most notably Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota, Presidential candidates John McCain and Bill Bradley, and San Francisco Supervisor Tom Ammiano -- have used the Internet to be more competitive despite having fewer campaign funds than their opponents. They didn't all win; but they did help make their contests more competitive, which is crucial if voters are to feel they have real choices and that their votes count.

On the lobbying front, environmental, human rights and labor activists have used the Internet to mobilize a global campaign focused on the practices of the World Trade Organization, the IMF and the World Bank, and have been incredibly effective in getting their message out. The Internet clearly played a crucial role in the organizing process of this year's WTO and IMF protests in Seattle and Washington, D.C.

These changes are taking place across the board, not just in politics. The music industry is going through a fundamental shake-up of its middleman process due to the success of web sites like Napster. In the film industry, we saw last year how the Blair Witch Project, a low-budget independent film, was able to capitalize on the Internet and its viral marketing abilities to become a commercial success.

The California Voter Foundation is another example of how good ideas can succeed via the Internet with limited resources. Our nonprofit currently operates on an annual budget of \$200,000, with three staff members. (Our work has been funded by a variety of foundations, including the Gerbode, Hewlett, Irvine, Markle, Columbia, Arkay and Joyce foundations, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York). Even with our modest budget, we are able to help thousands of voters through our web site at www.calvoter.org, and indirectly help hundreds of thousands of voters who learn about elections through the news media and civic leaders who rely on our site.

I believe that as more and more people come to recognize that they can effectively share and distribute their ideas and opinions to a wider audience in an affordable and effective way, more people will be inspired to do so. More people will run for office if they think they don't have to raise piles of money from special interest groups to get their message out. More grassroots activists will be able to effectively compete with

powerful interests in the political process. And more citizens will investigate and speak out against questionable government practices.

IX. Conclusion

The biggest obstacle to advancing democracy in the United States really has nothing to do with technology; it has to do with a lack of faith in our democracy itself. Faith is more fundamental than process. We can put all the information in the world on the Internet, but if people don't believe they can make a difference, the information won't make much difference, either. Unfortunately, we are living in a cynical time, when faith is mocked, not celebrated. U.S. citizens have been told they are powerless against well-funded and well-organized special interests for so long that many people believe it.

There are a lot of problems that plague American democracy, and the Internet isn't going to help us solve all of them. But it does offer a great place to begin building the resources people need to function in a democratic society. Ultimately, democratic reform isn't about the Internet; it's about people, and whether we are willing to do the hard work needed to advance technologies that transform the way citizens engage in public life and ensure that everyone has a chance to participate in a meaningful way. There is no doubt in my mind whether we have an opportunity to improve democracy through the Internet; the real question is whether we will make the most of it.