DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP AS THE DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEMS FOR THE INFORMATION AGE

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ABSTRACT

Representative democracies throughout the world are undergoing major transformations with strong challenges from well-armored citizenry with ICTs. Voter turnout rates have been steady decline since 1960s in the world, while other forms of political participation of citizens, *e.g.*, popular initiatives and recalls, powerful NGOs, and so on, have been increasing. Into what form will our democratic political systems evolve in the information age. There might be many possibilities to redesign the democratic political systems. 'Digital democracy' could be one of the strong alternatives for the new political systems. It is composed of two processes: democratic decision making processes and effective administrating processes. It not only resolves some problems of representative democracy, *e.g.*, the failure of representation, but also takes advantage of some traits, *e.g.* the emphasis on interaction, process and change, *etc.*, that direct democracy and deliberative democracy are believed to have. Technological feasibility, unfortunately, does not necessarily entail political possibility. If we intend to realize the potentialities of digital democracy, we have to solve some problems anticipated in the information age such as political fragmentation and atomization, overloaded information, tyranny of the majority, *etc.* In order to overcome these problems and, thus, to make full use of the potential of digital democracy, we have to become citizens with self-guiding capacity. In other words, liberalistic perspectives, which stress civic autonomy, seem more appropriate than communitarian perspectives, which stress civic virtues, for democratic citizenship in the information age.

Keywords: digital democracy, political systems, citizenship, representative democracy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 18th century, most of the democratic counties in the world have been adapting the representative democratic systems which originated from the Enlightenment. The representative democratic systems are, now, facing their legitimacy crises from a widely educated citizenry who are employing new communications technologies(ICTs). Voter turnout rates have been steady decline since 1960s in the world, while other forms of political participation of citizens, *e.g.*, popular initiatives and recalls, powerful NGOs, and so on, have been increasing.

According to Easton(1965, 25), it is helpful to interpret political phenomena as constituting an open system, one that must cope with the problems generated by its exposure to influences from the environmental systems. The ICTs, exponentially developed in these days, are, I think, one of the most powerful environmental changes which strongly influence on political systems. Bailey(1994, 230-233) postulates a set of structural variables with the social system as the unit of analysis in his Social Entropy Theory (SET) and suggests six macrovariables: population, space, technology, information, organization and level of living. I think the ICTs make, at least, five macrovariables, except population, dramatically be

changed. In these situations, could the existing political systems be maintained as status quo? I doubt the representative democratic systems keep their validity in spite of environmental or macrovariables' changes in the information age. Then, into what form will our democratic political systems evolve in the future?

As society is computerizing, citizens can use more political information and also have more communication channels that enable them to transmit their ideas to the representatives or fellow citizens. Thus, the control power of citizens over policy-making processes, their public deliberativeness on issues, and political participation and equality are highly getting increased.

It can be, thus, reasonably assumed that the increased civil power in the information society is making citizenship as important factor as political institutions and structure in operating democracy. So if we are to enhance democracy through ICTs, we need to develop new democratic citizenship as well as to reform political institutions and processes. What kind of democratic citizenship, then, do we need to enhance our democracy in the information age? For this context, this study is focused on how to (re)design democratic political systems and democratic citizenship for the information age.

2. DEMOCRATIC THEORIES

At first, I will start my arguments at representative democracy. Although its institutions and practices are various in each country, it has prevailed all over the world since the 18th century. According to Bobbio(1987, 45), it can be defined as follows: collective deliberations, *i.e.*, deliberations that concern the whole community, are taken not directly by its members, but by people elected for this purpose.

The representative democratic systems, however, are confronting strong challenges from well-armored citizenry with new ICTs. We are now in a period where confidence in them has been undergoing profound challenge to their foundation. While most mainstream democratic theorists continue to hale the advancements of representative democracy, many others have recognized its fundamental limitations and are demanding a dramatic change (Woolpert, Slaton, and Schwerin, 1998, 10). As a matter of fact, every representative democratic system in the world seem to be experiencing wider and wider gulfs of alienation between the representatives and the general public. Ordinary citizens fail to see their representatives as either understanding or reflecting their interests. There is a widely articulated sentiment that their representatives are captive of extremely powerful, "special" - as opposed to the general- interests. It is so called "the failure of representation". According to Sartori, the widening "confidence gap" between citizens and representative governments is an "unprecedented trend in a number of countries, disillusionment and distrust have currently swelled into a crescendo of frustration, anger and, in the end, an outright rejection of politics. In the end, then, we are confronted with a surge of anti-politics, with what we might call the politics of anti-politics" (Sartori, 1994, 145).

On the other hand, Budge (1996) defines direct democracy as, in the abstract, a regime in which the adult citizens as a whole debate and vote on the most important political decisions, and where their vote determines the action to be taken. Applying this very abstract definition to the circumstances of the contemporary democracies, he translates it into the operational requirement that the body of adult citizens discusses and votes authoritatively on most of the

matters on which, in representative systems, parliament now debates and votes (35). In other words, he emphasizes on the participation of citizens on the processes of decisions making.

Compared representative democracy with direct democracy in the standards of Dahl's for a democratic process (Dahl, 2000, 37-38), the former is superior to the latter relating enlightened understanding. However, the latter gets more points than the former in the aspects of citizen's effective participation and control of agenda (Cho, 2002). Although it is generally said that the latter has more merits than the former, why has the former been adapted and prevailed in the world since The Enlightenment? Some of the answers are the Newtonian worldview and the technical impossibility (*ibid*.). But paradigms in natural sciences are changing from Newtonian physics to post-Newtonian physics, *i.e.*, the theory of relativity and quantum theory. In addition, according to Budge (1996), the technical impossibility of direct democracy can be overcome because of the newly developed ICTs. They provide means for extending electronic citizen access to decision-making. Public policy can be discussed and voted upon by everyone linked in an interactive communications net. This destroys the argument that is described as technical impossibility of direct democracy.

Although the representatives should not be allowed to monopolise key decision-making processes, we acknowledge the value of expertise. The representatives have much more enlightened understanding than citizens have on social issues. The new democratic political systems, thus, don't have to replace what is connected to representative democracy. They should not replace representative democracy but somehow remake it. According to Bobbio, the problem of transition from representative democracy to direct democracy can only be posed in terms of a continuum, where it is difficult to say at which point one finishes and the other begins (Bobbio, 1987, 52-53). This implies that in reality representative and direct democracy are not two alternative systems, in the sense that where there is one there cannot be the other, but they are two systems that can mutually complement each other. We could sum up the situation by saying that in a mature system of democracy both forms of democracy are necessary.

Now, I will discuss another recent strong democratic theory: deliberative democracy. As you can see in the above definitions on representative and direct democracy, the sharpest contrasting point is who is in charge of deciding the policies. In representative democracy system, the political decisions are taken by elected representatives, whereas in direct democracy system, the most important political decisions are made by the adults themselves. It is who deliberates on policies that is the crucial difference between them. Both theories, however, have in common the fact that they emphasize the deliberation on policies.

In this vein, a number of theorists have recently put forth and defended a conception of democracy called deliberative democracy. Their thesis is that democratic decision-making ought to be grounded in a substantial process of public deliberation (Bohman and Rehg, 1997, 243). In other words, deliberative democracy centers on the idea that a strong democracy should regularly create opportunities for people to engage in dialogue and decision making processes with each other and with public officials (Rapoport and Stratton, 2004, 68).

According to deliberative democratic theorists, political equality without deliberation is of no much use, for it amounts to nothing more than power without the opportunity to think about how that power ought to be exercised. Something such as the criterion that Dahl labels

"enlightened understanding" is required in order to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating a decision. "The ideal speech situation" of J_rgen Habermas is a situation of free and equal discussion, unlimited in its duration, constrained only by the consensus that would be arrived at by the "force of better argument." In the ideal speech situation, every argument thought to be relevant by anyone would be given as extensive a hearing as anyone wanted. If a conclusion could be reached without any limit to decision-costs by free and equal persons, then that conclusion can be considered the ideally rational one (Fishkin, 1991, 36). In other words, deliberative democratic theorists emphasize on citizens' interactivities and changes of their preferences by discussing on public issues.

3. DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

There is no one way or right way to develop the new democratic political systems for the information age, because democracy is a complex, dynamic, and multivariate phenomenon. But we could try, on purpose, to (re)design a political system in order to curtail trial and errors. There might be many possibilities to (re)design it. "Digital democracy" that is the effort to enhance democracy using ICTs could be one of the strong alternatives for the new political systems. It is composed of two processes: democratic decision making processes and effective administrating processes. It makes it possible for us to aggregate deliberative civic preferences more effectively and improve our administrative abilities and, thus, increases our self-autonomy and free interactive activities. It not only resolves some problems of representative democracy *e.g.*, the failure of representation, but also takes advantage of some traits, *e.g.*, the emphasis on participation, interaction, process and change, *etc.*, that direct democracy and deliberative democracy are believed to have. It can be said that digital democracy is the synthesis of three democratic theories through ICTs.

In digital democracy, government would function in much the same way as before, but the transparency and the efficiency of administration would be highly improved using ICTs. The parliamentary representatives would change into an advisory, investigative and debating committee informing popular discussion and voting. Actually, in the modern information societies, collective decision-making has been dispersed or "relocated" to networks of (semi-) public agencies, (semi-) private organizations, civil society organizations and companies which has led to the emergency of new forms of governance. This has led some to argue that we are moving towards a "post-parliamentary state", in which the centrality of parliaments has become eroded (Edwards, 2006, 165).

We can take advantage of politicians, parties and the political division of labour just as well in direct as in representative democracy. The parties can function as facilitators for the transformation of citizens' preferences and opinions into government action and overlapping interactive process of the citizen, like a catalyst in chemical reactions. In digital democracy, decision-making processes and interaction between the citizenry and the representatives can be activated and, thus, they can become more interdependent from each other. Those all processes are achieved with the help of newly developed ICTs.

In digital democracy, political communication would be rapidly changed in its media and its contents. Nothing in politics, especially in a democratic society, is possible without some form of communication. The media establishment has always played a crucial role in the process of political communication, and traditionally this has been through the broadcast metaphor of one messenger communicating with many receivers. Thus, the flow of political

information between the media and the public is usually a one-way process. The Internet, of course, has the potential to change this flow of political information and thus revolutionizes the process of political communication. Anyone with an internet access account, some space on a server, and web page creation software can now become a 'broadcaster' with a potential audience in the millions. Further, the Internet can (and does) remove one layer of filtering of political information-the gatekeepers of mainstream media. In the end, one of the truly revolutionary aspects of the Internet is that everyone is a potential broadcaster and participant in the realm of political communication (Hill & Hughes, 1998, 22-23). This means that citizens' public deliberation and the control power of agenda, some of the criteria that Dahl suggests relating a democratic process, can be enhanced through Computer-mediated Communications(CMCs).

On the other hand, the most unique aspect of CMCs is that the people involved cannot see or hear each other (Hill & Hughes, 1998, 23-24). The lack of visual and auditory information attenuates the social cues that govern interpersonal behavior. And people communicating via computers are usually anonymous. Combined, the lack of visual and auditory cues and the protection of anonymity increase the political equality among those who participate in political communication. CMCs also increase the likelihood of a person expressing unpopular ideas. By encouraging outside the mainstream to participate, CMCs encourage creativity and interactivity among people.

Implementation of the following mechanisms would go some way towards the realization of direct public deliberation: virtual public space, online policy proposals, online consultation, public involvement in select committees, online conferences, interactive information, online evaluation. None of the above proposals is designed to replace representative democracy or to alter radically constitutionally established procedures of law making, parliamentary debate or scrutiny of the executive. The objective is to narrow the gap between representative administration and the deliberative input of the represented within a culture of democratic governance.

4. DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

As mentioned in the above, citizens can use more political information and also have more communication channels in the information age. The control power of citizens over policy-making processes, thus, is highly getting increased. It can be reasonably assumed that the increased civil power is making citizenship as important factor as political institutions and structure in operating digital democracy. So if we are to enhance democracy through ICTs, we need to develop new democratic citizenship as well as to reform political institutions and processes.

Citizens in cyberspace tend to be more individual, to have more pluralistic value systems, not to act on social norms and practices but to act on their own judgments, and to be more sensitive to their own rights. They can relatively easily construct diverse self-identities following their own will owing to anonymity. In addition, cyberspace cannot be effectively controlled by any specific political community. Taking all of those things into account, we can infer that citizens in cyberspace are inclined to behave in individualistic ways. This means that liberalistic perspectives are diffused in the information society whereas communitarianistic perspectives are lessened. Thus, it is reasonable to reshape democratic citizenship on the bases of liberalistic perspectives for digital democracy.

Accordingly, citizens must have civic autonomy in cyberspace which some liberalists, such as W. Kimlicka (1995) and W. A. Galston(1991), emphasize. The new democratic citizenship whose core is civic autonomy, have three elements; knowledge, values and attitudes, and skills. Citizens in cyberspace must know the characteristics of cyberspace, their political rights and social roles, the structure and processes of digital democracy and contemporary social issues. They also must have values and attitudes to reflect and correct their prejudices and opinions, to tolerate opinions different from theirs, to observe "harm principle" which suggests the limit of personal liberty, and to trust fellow citizens. Finally, They must have the skills to seek and interpret information which is needed to solve specific problems, to make reasonable judgments on the base of given information, to communicate effectively with fellow citizens or the representatives, and to participate in political processes. When citizens have these knowledge, values and attitudes, and skills, they could become citizens with self-guiding capacity.

It is the tasks of civic education in the information age to cultivate citizens with self-guiding capacity. Contrary to virtue, self-guiding capacity or civic autonomy cannot be acquired by training or indoctrination. However, we can grow it by repetitive experiences to participate actively in political processes in cyberspace. So it is need to construct a public cyberspace which is designed to make us experience political participation. If we keep on gathering information from it needed to solve our problems, exchanging our ideas with other people on the basis of gathered information, making our opinions according to the exchanged ideas, and participating in decision-making processes in the public cyberspace, we could, then, bring up our civic autonomy or self-guiding capacity. It is critical to the development of democracy that civic education is strongly committed to bring up autonomic citizens in the information age.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Existing representative democracies throughout the world are undergoing major transformations with the advent of information communication technologies (ICTs). Into what form will our democratic political systems evolve in the future? I think, digital democracy could be one of the strong alternatives for the new political systems in the information age. It not only conforms to changing paradigm in natural sciences, but also can resolve some problems of representative and also takes advantage of some traits that direct democracy and deliberative democracy are believed to have. The developed ICTs make it possible for us to have more political information, to communicate our ideas to the representatives or fellow citizens, and to aggregate deliberative civic preferences more effectively. Now, with the help of developed ICTs, we can design a new democratic political system.

Technological feasibility, unfortunately, does not necessarily entail political possibility. The plain fact is that digital democracy is very much a two-edged sword. It could lead either to popular sovereignty or to populist manipulation. It could give voice to the common man and woman, or it could be the vehicle of implementing policies ill-advised that no one is accountable for the consequences. Thus, if we are to realize the potentialities of digital democracy and to solve some problems anticipated in the information age such as political fragmentation and atomization, overloaded information, tyranny of the majority, *etc.*, we need to develop a new democratic citizenship.

Considered the tendency that human is inclined to be individualistic and liberalistic in cyberspace, liberalistic perspectives seem more appropriate for the new democratic citizenship than communitarian perspectives. It is crucial to bring up citizens with self-guiding capacity in order to make full use of the potential of digital democracy. And it could be the tasks of civic education to cultivate citizens with autonomy for the information age.

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