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### Empowering Democracy Through Internetization

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# Empowering Democracy through Internetization<sup>1</sup>

Constantine E. Passaris<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This policy brief explores the challenges and opportunities congruent with the advent of internetization on the democratic landscape. Internetization is a new word that I have coined to describe our contemporary empowerment through global outreach and electronic connectivity. There is no denying that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has precipitated profound structural change and empowered democracy through digital capacity and electronic connectivity. This paper analyzes the impact of internetization on e-democracy, social media, civics education, non-governmental organizations and global outreach. It also addresses the consequences of internetization on cybersecurity threats, election tampering and the contemporary challenges associated with electronic voting. This policy brief concludes with a set of recommendations embracing a new governance architecture, adapting the machinery of governance to electronic capacity and a strategic list of public policy initiatives directed to enhance the role of internetization on the democratic landscape.

**Keywords:** democracy; internetization; public policy; electronic democracy; cybersecurity; civics education

## Introduction

This policy brief will analyze the confluence between internetization and democracy. Internetization is a new word and concept that I have coined to describe the digital capacity and electronic empowerment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Passaris, 2014). The impact of internetization on democracy has been asymmetrical. It has empowered democracy in a positive way by facilitating democratic connectivity, enhancing global outreach, and digitalizing information. It has also impacted democracy in a negative manner by exposing its digital vulnerabilities such as electronic espionage and election tampering. This brief will conclude with a set of public policy recommendations for empowering democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has empowered democracy through digital capacity and electronic connectivity. Internetization and digital democracy have emerged as game changers for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Electronic democracy is carving a large legacy footprint and leading transformational change for democratic engagement. Internetization has empowered the democratic process towards enhanced citizen participation, government transparency, and public policy accountability. In short, internetization has

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created a new public policy agenda that requires supporting its benefits and curtailing its adverse effects.

## **Empowering Democracy**

Democracy has a long pedigree and a distinguished provenance. It was born in Ancient Greece with Plato and Aristotle as its intellectual fathers. They nurtured democracy in its formative years and guided its development. Indeed, the word democracy has Greek roots which proclaim the power of the people and convey the principle of governance by the people. Throughout time, democracy has responded to civil society's evolving values, aspirations, and directives. Many centuries later and up to the present time, democracy remains a work in progress.

The success of democracy is based on the full and equal participation of the people. In effect, democracy is a public good that is owned by its citizens. A foundational cornerstone of democracy's evolution has been to make it more inclusive. A necessary precedent for an effective democracy is an informed public dialogue among its citizens.

## **Internetization**

My operational definition of internetization consists of two interactive forces which are global outreach and electronic connectivity. In essence, internetization refers to how civil society, the economy and government have increased their capacity to interact on multiple levels through revolutionary advances in digital technology. I coined the new word internetization in order to elongate the conceptual reach of the term digitalization. Digitalization refers to the conversion of text, images or sound into a digital form that can be processed by a computer. Internetization extends the process of digitalization to include electronic connectivity and global outreach. There is no denying that internetization has enhanced the quality of our lives and made our daily tasks easier and quicker. The electronic prefix that is appearing before an increasing number of our daily interactions such as e-commerce, e-mail, e-learning, e-shopping, e-banking, e-democracy and e-government is a tangible expression of our contemporary digital capacity. In consequence, internetization is the process that is empowered by technological innovations in a borderless world with a tremendous capacity for virtual connectivity (Passaris, 2019).

Democracy's digital footprint is in its infancy. Already, it has made profound and indelible contributions on the contemporary democratic landscape. The digitalization of individual discourse, public information, and mass communication have profoundly altered the interface between civil society and democratic institutions. Internetization has also redefined the scope and substance of

democratic engagement. A direct beneficiary of these digital realignments has been the democratic ecosystem and the exercise of democracy.

More precisely, internetization has impacted democratic governance by facilitating public scrutiny of government policy and promoting the electronic connectivity between civil society and the machinery of governance. In short, the spectacular advances in computer technology and the development of new electronic software have generated a powerful empowerment for the scope and mission of democracy.

### **Electronic Democracy**

Electronic democracy, also known as e-democracy refers to the digital empowerment of democracy. Electronic democracy is serving as a catalyst for the dissemination of information, fostering the protection of democratic rights and enhancing democratic development. In effect, internetization has advanced the democratic process by creating electronic communities, news groups, e-networks, chat rooms, electronic forums, and blogs. All of this has transgressed the limitations of the more traditional mass communication boundaries such as newspapers, radio, and television.

The enhanced nature of democratic engagement facilitated by internetization can take several forms. First, the electronic dissemination of information increases awareness and informs the public on the contemporary issues of government policy. Second, the efficacy of electronic communication between citizens and government has created a new channel of communication for democratic engagement. Third, the enhanced transparency and accountability which has been made possible through the electronic posting of government reports, legislation, and policies. In short, e-democracy has been empowered by internetization for the purpose of reinforcing democracy and enhancing democratic engagement.

### **Global Context**

The word global has taken on a new meaning since the emergence of the Internet more than three decades ago. The most recent and vivid confirmation that we live in a globalized world was the devastating worldwide consequences of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Internetization has eliminated physical restrictions and national boundaries with respect to communication and citizen interaction. In effect, internetization has triggered an age of individual and collective empowerment that is unprecedented in the history of civilization. Internetization provides individuals, institutions, civil society, businesses and governments with a tremendous global influence and outreach.

Democracy has been subjected to global forces unlike any precedent time in human history. It has become clear that democracy cannot be contained or confined within national borders. The domestic insularity of democracy is no longer practical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In consequence, the internationalization of democracy has redefined a country's democratic institutions. In consequence, the global context has become a foundational pivot for the conduct of democracy and public policy.

On the contemporary governance landscape, the dividing line between the national context and the international linkages is blurred at best and fluid on most public policy issues. This does not negate the need for domestic governance institutions but simply recognizes that their efficacy in responding to international issues can be constrained. COVID-19 has revealed the extent to which contemporary national borders are no match for globalization. The modern border is porous, malleable, and surmountable. Today's borders are purely symbolic and only serve as a geographical marker. Global interdependence is a fact of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and our democratic institutions need to adapt and embrace it rather than ignore its existence. An integrated and porous global environment exposes a country's democratic governance architecture to new vulnerabilities and external shocks.

### **Civics Education**

Electronic connectivity has evolved into a convenient tool for disseminating knowledge and mass education. It has created an effective platform for communicating democratic values and citizenship education. The dissemination of information and public communication play a pivotal role in democratic engagement. More specifically, internetization is an important catalyst for educating citizens about democracy. Furthermore, digital communication has become a powerful tool for a more informed and inclusive democracy.

Internetization has removed the barriers of distance, geography, and time and has provided a unique empowerment for democracy. *A foundational axiom for a successful democracy is civics education. Its benefits include* increasing the general public's understanding of the role of citizens in the democratic process and increasing voter participation. Civics education and public awareness campaigns require a commitment to work in partnership with non-profit organizations, community associations and likeminded stakeholders to communicate democratic principles and assist voters in understanding their rights and responsibilities in the electoral process. At the end of the day, civics education is an effective mechanism for preparing citizens for their electoral and democratic responsibilities through the empowering features of internetization.

Internetization has had a profound and empowering impact on non-governmental organizations whose mission is to promote democratic values and democracy. Digital capacity has enabled non-

governmental organizations to mobilize mass gatherings on short notice and enhance their democratic advocacy, outreach, and networking. They have also used their electronic outreach for the purpose of fund raising, recruiting new supporters, and communicating their message to the public on a global scale. For many countries, the coupling of non-governmental organizations and internetization has served as a catalyst for the “democratic spring” and has hastened the democratization process.

## **Social Media**

Internetization has facilitated the emergence of social media as a game changer on the democratic landscape. The ascent of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WordPress and Blogspot have redefined the outreach for mass communication. They have facilitated the dissemination of information and opinion for the purpose of enhancing democratic dialogue.

The role of internetization through social media has also provided an effective medium for different views and perspectives on democratic issues and public policy concerns. It has amplified public discourse and democratic engagement. All of this with the objective of enabling public engagement, broader democratic dialogue, and freedom of expression. Indeed, it has facilitated the cacophony of voices, ideas, and perspectives for the purpose of enriching and diversifying the democratic conversation.

The downside of social media is that it has the capacity to promote “fake news” and cause a disruptive and disingenuous impact on democratic dialogue. However, it has also enhanced the engagement of a younger generation of voters with democracy. This reflects the digital comfort zone of the millennial generation with democratic interfacing on social media.

## **Electronic Voting**

A foundational axiom for the exercise of democracy is ensuring a trustworthy and verifiable electoral process that provides voter privacy and anonymity. With the advent of internetization, electronic voting has become a topic of intense public debate. The principal reasons in favour of online voting are speed, convenience, and accessibility. Internet voting is viewed as a tool that can remove physical barriers and make the voting process more accessible for certain groups. Foremost among those are voters with mobility challenges or visual impairments. It is also argued that online voting would entice younger generations of citizens to cast their ballot and increase voter turnout.

At the present time the implementation of electronic voting is stalled because it does not respect privacy or anonymity when casting a ballot. Those two constraints are deleterious to democracy and

the democratic rights of citizens. Some additional challenges associated with online voting include vote manipulation, ensuring that an individual only votes once, enforcing the safety and security of the devices used to cast and receive ballots. Another drawback for e-voting is the generational divide with respect to internet accessibility and technological competence which will disadvantage voters who do not have Internet access, have limited access to a computer or are unfamiliar with its use.

Cybersecurity experts at the present time are overwhelmingly against embracing online voting because it does not respect the principles of voting secretly and securely. Security breaches could jeopardize the integrity of the voting process and lead to compromised election results. The experts emphasize that security, privacy, and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed with the current electronic infrastructure (New Brunswick Commission on Electoral Reform, 2017).

### **Cybersecurity Faultlines**

The advent of internetization, has exposed distinctive vulnerabilities to our contemporary digital ecosystem and democratic landscape. Technological innovations are moving faster than the adoption of security protocols to control and protect digital integrity. These take the form of hacking, malware infection, identity theft, electronic espionage, cyber-terrorism, and financial misappropriation. It is becoming increasingly clear that the contemporary digital safeguards, virtual firewalls, and electronic locks do not offer a high level of personal privacy and cyber protection. Indeed, in the contemporary digital network the vulnerability of electronic devices has become systemic and lapses in cybersecurity have exposed the inherent systemic risk of internetization.

The frequency of cyberespionage between countries has increased recently because of the availability of spy software and cyber espionage products. Modern cyber espionage products have the capacity to infect their targets' computers and phones, copy electronic messages, record conversations, and activate webcams. In consequence, there is an urgent need for a more effective partnership between government and manufacturers of electronic devices to enhance the security features of their devices in order to prevent the sophisticated hacking and the remote high jacking of those devices.

The next generation of cybersecurity will require an elevated level of personal identification, safer digital locks, and the creation of impenetrable electronic fire walls. It will probably take the form of codified electronic locks, voice identification, fingerprint matching and eye retina protocols. All of this for the purpose of adopting fail safe cybersecurity systems that will protect individual identity, national security, and democratic protocols in the digital age.

## Public Policy

Public policy has a multipurpose and multilayered role in empowering democracy during the Age of Internetization. The overarching premise for public policy in supporting the mission of democracy is to harness the empowerment of digital capacity, advance democratic rights and embrace a proactive approach in the formulation of public policy.

At the outset, the conceptual framework for developing contemporary public policy regarding democracy requires retooling through the prism of internetization. It must recognize the global context and the capabilities of the new digital ecosystem. Internetization has redefined the parameters for the conduct of public policy and has revealed the fault lines in the efficacy of contemporary public policy. The speed with which events unfold require a proactive approach towards public policy. A proactive public policy demands developing a playbook for dealing with future crises with the luxury of time on our side. Furthermore, it prescribes an anticipatory role for reacting to crises, developing different options and a less hurried context in the evaluation of different policy options.

Public policy has a central, strategic, and purposeful role to play in empowering the contemporary mission of democracy. At the micro level public policy should be enacted to ensure access by government and its citizens to electronic empowerment such as computer hardware and the Internet. Furthermore, public policy should be focused on accelerating investments by the public and private sectors in digital infrastructure and enhancing electronic connectivity for governments and citizens.

At the macro level public policy should use internetization for positioning digital government to achieve transparency and accountability. It should also foster the strategic deployment of internetization for the purpose of enhancing mass communication and civics education. Public policy has an important role in protecting the integrity of democratic institutions and electoral outcomes as well as pursuing the efficacy of electronic voting. Finally, public policy must confront the fault lines in cybersecurity and encourage the development of a fail-safe cybersecurity system that will protect the scope and mission of democracy in the digital age.

## Conclusion

This policy brief has charted a pathway for the strategic deployment of internetization in order to empower democracy to achieve new heights, break glass ceilings and discover new frontiers. In this journey, it has spotlighted the efficacy of internetization in advancing the frontiers of democracy on many levels and in new directions. More specifically, internetization has enabled a positive impact

on electronic democracy, civics education, social media, non-governmental organizations and the interface between civil society and governance institutions.

While internetization has revealed the potential for electronic voting, it remains an elusive ambition because of the risk of security breaches and the inadequacy of safeguarding anonymity. In effect, cybersecurity fault lines have exposed electronic vulnerabilities that detract from the many positive contributions of internetization on the democratic landscape.

The overarching purpose of public policy in the mission of this paper is to harness the empowerment of internetization for the purpose of enhancing the democratic process. At the outset, public policy should recognize the scope and substance of the digital ecosystem as well as its global context. Furthermore, the speed of structural change requires embracing a proactive approach to public policy.

This paper concludes that public policy has a central, strategic, and purposeful role to play in empowering the contemporary mission of democracy. The efficacy of public policy at the micro level should be directed towards ensuring access by government and its citizens to electronic capacity. In addition, public policy should be focused on accelerating investments by the public and private sectors in digital infrastructure and enhancing electronic connectivity between citizens and their governance institutions.

At the macro level, public policy should resort to internetization as an ally in achieving transparency and accountability in governance. It should also foster the strategic deployment of internetization for the purpose of enhancing mass communication and civics education. In effect, public policy has an important role to play in protecting the integrity of democratic institutions and electoral outcomes. Finally, public policy must confront the fault lines in cybersecurity and encourage the development of a fail-safe cybersecurity system that will protect the scope and mission of democracy in the digital age.

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