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ITB9428

Chapter III

Teledemocratic Innovations that Public Officials Ignore — At Our Great Peril

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author tackles the major problems plaguing representative democracies around the world. Importantly, these problems originate from the alienation of citizens. The problems manifest themselves, for example, in the dramatic decrease of voting turnouts particularly in the United States. There is a disconnect between the citizenry and political power in the field of public administration. Becker maintains that despite much talk about the needs to develop citizen-centered public administration, little practical change can be seen in this respect and by and large, the attempts to make governmental services more accessible by ICT have not lessened citizen's feelings of estrangement and apathy. Having diagnosed the ills of representative democracy and public administration, Becker discusses new methods to bridge the gap between government and citizens and to fight political apathy. One of the methods of empowering citizens is scientific deliberative polling which has been experimented with successfully since the 1970s. The author also reviews the experiences of electronic town meetings, for example, AmericaSpeaks which was organized in New York in July 2002 to discuss how to rebuild the World Trade Center.

INTRODUCTION

What's a piece of the Berlin Wall worth these days? Instead of being a valued symbol of the triumph of democracy over brute totalitarianism, it's just a gray chunk of concrete that symbolizes...what? Where's the sense of jubilation that representative democracy and corporate globalization won a great victory over authoritarian, Soviet-style Communism? Where's the new distribution of great global wealth and a new era of goodwill and world harmony promised by this "end of history"? (Fukuyama, 1989).

Instead, what do we find in the early years of the 21st century regarding representative democracies around the world? It seems to be corruption everywhere all the time. Politicians who sold their public trust for lucre are a dime a dozen. In the past several years, polities that have seen such disgraces include Germany, France, the European Commission, Peru, Korea, Colombia, the Philippines, the United States, Argentina, Japan, and Israel. The "free market" has prevailed, but what's being traded in the marketplace is political power and economic favoritism.

By way of example, Ralph Nader and Lori Wallach (1996) see the birth of such transnational trade agreements like NAFTA, and such global trade organizations as the WTO, as the institutionalization of "a global economic and political situation that places every government in a virtual hostage situation, at the mercy of a global financial and commercial system run by empowered corporations. This new system is not designed to promote the health and well-being of human beings but to enhance the power of the world's largest corporations and financial institutions" (p. 93).

The famous futurist Hazel Henderson (1999) put it like this:

"Money has become the curse of democratic political processes in many OECD and developing countries aspiring to become more democratic...in Europe and elsewhere, many other scandal-ridden governments put their taxpayers' funds on the global auction block, along with their workforces and natural environmental resources, in the new global bidding war to lure (bribe) corporations, banks, and financial institutions to locate in their countries...Cronyism is endemic...many governments have become corporate 'cash cows' while some have sunk into 'kleptocracies'" (p. 7).

If that were the only thing wrong with modern representative democracy, the problem might be seen as episodic. At least, it would just be the ethical failures of leadership, not the imminent collapse of the theory and practice of republicanism. In truth, there are several "systemic" failures to add to the pandemic corruptibility of this system.

First, the general public must have enough confidence in their representatives to vote for them in elections. The formula is: size of voting turnout = the degree of legitimacy of the system. The numbers here are clear, and the downward trend is steep. Citizens in almost every representative democracy are opting out of the electoral process at increasing rates. Worse yet, this alienation from the quintessential "democratic" process of voting is particularly acute among young voters. Thus, the future promises more nonvoting and a proportional decrease in systemic legitimacy.

The worst offender in this category is the United States. Presently, slightly more or less than 50% of eligible voters show up to elect the President, and only 35% to 40%

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