# The comprehensive electronic town meeting and its role in 21st century democracy

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The phrase "town meeting" is used in a wide variety of ways. In general, it refers to a gathering of citizens in a locality (village, town) to discuss some political/economic/social issue(s) of vital concern to those in attendance. If discussion and debate are all that transpires, then this is most properly called a "public forum". If the meeting was called by officials to listen to what the public has to say, then it might best be termed a "public hearing". If the citizens themselves also get to *vote* on the matter — and the result is *binding* — then it is akin to Athenian-style direct democracy or its American cousin, "The New England Town Meeting", where assemblies of citizens make law. The truth, however, is that in the USA, "town meeting" is usually used imprecisely to cover all three.

Those who first developed and tested the concept "Electronic Town Meeting" (ETM) in the USA in the early and mid 1980s [1,2] explicitly intended to utilize a wide variety of electronic media and random selection tools to reinforce and enhance the ultimate citizen-empowerment features of Athenian democracy and New England Town Meetings [1]. After all, there were two major undemocratic trends they were trying to reverse: (1) the increasingly obvious flaws and dysfunctions in representative democratic systems around the world and (2) the weaknesses in the New England Town Meeting format that were making it less and less appealing to citizens in the fewer and fewer New England towns where it is still in use.

Since then, the term "Electronic Town Meeting", as its forebear "town meeting", has been adapted by others to include such diverse events as televised public forums, televised public hearings and unscientific telephone polls conducted by TV stations and networks. Perhaps the most dismal example of something called an ETM was one held in the mid 1990s by Ross Perot, the American billionaire who garnered 19% of the vote in the 1992 US presidential election.

During that campaign, he talked a great deal about how, if he were elected president, he would hold regular "electronic town halls" on tax matters and use the feedback from the American public to help him decide tax policy. Of course, that made it a more of an electronic public forum or hearing on the subject. Worse yet, during the interim period between his 1992 and 1996 runs at the US presidency, he tested

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his concept on the American people via an "infomercial-style" television presentation which was linked to an unscientific public opinion survey published in a national magazine (TV Guide). This was the absolute "worst-case scenario" for the original ETM proponents and experimenters since it reeked with the personal and political agendas of the ETM sponsor (Perot) and was blatantly biased and poorly produced.

Despite the fact that the American mass media and political elite insist on misusing the term "Electronic Town Meeting" and point to the Perot fiasco as a failure in the ETM concept itself, we think it is important to: (1) insist on employing it correctly; (2) continue to innovate successful experimental work on the ETM process; and (3) demonstrate how it can be utilized in helping transform representative democratic processes into more citizen-friendly, authentic 21st century participatory systems.

## 1. What a comprehensive electronic town meeting must include

In order to: accurately reflect the deepest and most widespread values, opinions and desires of the public; be a process that genuinely empowers the entire citizenry; and democratically transform the system in which it is being used, a comprehensive ETM must include the following elements.

*First*, *the very core of a comprehensive ETM must contain a randomly selected group of citizens that closely mirrors the population from which it is selected*. This can best be done by replicating modern public opinion polling methods to select a sound scientific baseline of what any sample of people is comprised (its demographics) and what it believes (like Televote). The precise number of citizens involved, then, would be $N$=384 (which yields a margin of error of ±5%) but any number between 350 and 400 would provide a fair enough representative sample. In the New Zealand Televote model of ETM, we used a sample of 1000 (±3.5%). In the Honolulu ETM and the LA Televote we used samples of between 375 and 425. The Bay Voice experiment in San Francisco used samples of 1000 and the Reform Party of Canada used district-wide samples of approximately 400–500 in the Calgary ETM on physician-assisted suicide.

*Second*, *the informational and deliberative aspects of the ETM process should extend over a prolonged period of time*. There have been a number of experiments along these lines and the variation between the times given for deliberations by the random or stratified sample of citizens is great. The Hawaii Televote process, which allows the random sample to be informed and deliberate at home and/or at work, gave its Televote samples between one and three weeks before voting by phone. The Bay Voice and Reform Party of Canada models permitted its random sample of TV viewers to watch a televised information and deliberation process for a short time (between one and three hours) and then vote immediately by phone. The Deliberative Poll developed by James Fishkin uses approximately 200–300 randomly selected citizens and its period of deliberation is 2–3 days.

In 1994, a conference was held in San Francisco to design an "advanced" model of ETMs, which was attended by a number of experts in the field. It recommended that the ETM process — which would maintain and engage the random sample core

group for its duration — should take *several months*. Given the complexity of this "advanced" or "comprehensive" model of ETMs, that would probably be the most efficient period of time for the random sample to gather facts, think them through, discuss them, and arrive at some degree of consensus on setting the public's agenda, planning the future, making policy and/or implementing some law.

*Third*, *there should be a multitude of various media and deliberative processes utilized to engage and involve the entire citizenry in the lengthy ETM discussion and to facilitate a significant interaction between the random sample and the general public*. Even though the comprehensive ETM process relies heavily on what the core representative sample concludes, it is equally important to activate a large part of the entire citizenry in the process so as to give them a stake in it and its outcome. Also, the core sample must be encouraged to participate in the public discussion via tuning into ETM-related TV and radio shows; reading newspaper articles and other polls; attending community meetings, citizens juries, planning cells and other face-to-face gatherings; logging on to Internet informational sites, moderated chats that are dedicated to this subject, organizational activities; etc.

The comprehensive ETM, then, is a multi-phased, multi-media process designed to gain as accurate and reliable a sense of in-depth, enlightened, scientific public opinion on major issues of concern as is possible given the unprecedented capabilities afforded by modern communications technology (ICT) and techniques.

*Fourth*, *the primary goal of the comprehensive ETM process is to try to divine the largest working consensus that exists among the populace on how to plan for the future or solve critical societal problems*. One of the major failures of modern liberal democracy — whether in its representative or direct democratic forms — is an over-reliance on majoritarian assumptions (51% wins, 49% loses). What this leads to is excessive polarization and conflict within modern societies and this is aggravated by the fact of ever-increasing diversity in almost all societies. Using win–win techniques throughout the process to maximize consensus is an important feature in the comprehensive ETM model.

## 2. Applications for transforming representative democracy

A powerful way to transform representative democracy is to directly empower the whole society to develop the future of their civic journey together. This can be done by: (1) compelling elected representatives do what the public wants them to do or not do; and (2) giving the public a means to bypass the representative system by voting directly on issues.

In the first case, random samples of citizens have already been used to deliberate on issues confronting government agencies or legislatures and their final view on what should be done has served as either a virtual or absolute mandate on what government should do. In the United Kingdom, a variety of local branches of the national health authority contracted to use "citizens juries" to help them decide on policy implementation. This contract *bound* them to either "act upon them or explain publicly why not" [3]. In Canada, five Reform Party Members of Parliament volun-

tarily and publicly agreed in advance to be *bound* by the results of random samples of citizens who participated in a simple ETM (TV discussion+voting by phone in one evening). It should be clear that the comprehensive ETM model would provide a more accurate and more thoughtful public voice to mandate the votes of representatives and government officials than a citizens' jury of 16–24 people meeting for a few days or a simple one-night ETM (both of which fit well into the comprehensive model as part of the public deliberation).

In the second case, almost all citizen initiative processes permit self-selected groups of citizens to decide on what kinds of issues should be put to the citizenry on the next ballot. This process has worked well enough for scores of years as a grass-roots balance to big-money's domination of representative legislatures, but it is now coming into some justifiable disrepute. Using the comprehensive ETM process to frame the issues to be voted upon by the general electorate would eliminate most of the problems associated with the current "adhocracy" approach to formulating ballot issues for citizenries around the globe. In addition, the core random sample group who set up the ballot using the ETM process, already being representative of the population, and already having deeply deliberated the issue, would more than likely write propositions that a vast majority of the public would agree with. This would make the citizens' initiative process much more efficient, and much less subject to politics-as-usual, than it is at the present time.

## References

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