

Email-Embedded Voting with eVote/Clerk

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1 Motivation

In a democracy, political power lies only nominally in the vote. The primary power is proposing the subject of the vote. The secondary power is being listened to, getting your points considered. The weakest power is listening and voting. We are accustomed to the weak power, to listen and vote. Email lists and a plethora of Web-based collaboration tools provide the secondary power, to be listened to.

The focus of the eVote®/Clerk software project was to provide a tool for dispersing the primary power: the power to compose a poll that a group of people can vote on. Embedded into an email list, eVote gives each member of an online community all three powers.

2 Petition Plebiscites

The software has been used for a few plebiscitary petitions. In a petition, most community members are not involved in discussion or creating the text of the declaration, they only read and sign. EVote/Clerk petitions feature a webpage that facilitates participation by generating and sending an Email message to the email interface. Typically, half the signatures have been gathered via the Web interface and half from direct email.

Notable among the eVote petitions were Zapatista Consulta and Kopilli Ketzalli.¹ However, participation in these petitions was meager. Zapatista Consulta drew 210 votes, compared to a million votes collected in the streets. Kopilli Ketzalli has drawn 235 votes thus far, while several hundred thousand have been collected for this cause. Nevertheless, many of the few who did participate online commented that they were grateful for the opportunity.

While there has been considerable academic interest in the primary power available through eVote, such as composing a poll, very few people have actually used it. Laurent Chemla translated eVote/Clerk to French and implemented it for the AUI (Association des Utilisateurs d'Internet), the French Internet Society. Opposition to eVote was immediate and strident. First there was opposition to the dispersion of the primary power, especially by the president of the group. In response, the group decided that only committee members could poll the email list. Also, there was surprising opposition to the fact that, until a poll is closed, members can change their votes. John J. Jacq in Australia runs a successful eVote email list for his extended family. Different members of the family have set polls, and John has made nice webpages to accompany them.

3 Election Voting

Interest in the eVote/Clerk software took an unexpected turn toward election voting because of the security features inherent in its architecture. 'The Clerk' is a specialized vote server, a database server designed solely for vote-keeping. Because there is no flexibility in the types of data that it serves, it enables extreme flexibility in 'eVote', the user interface that communicates with The Clerk. In addition to handling polls and storing ballots, The Clerk also stores a link to the voter's identity with the ballot. Storing the link with the ballot is important so that a vote can be changed at the voter's instruction and votes can be made visible for external checking and recounting.

The practice of storing votes with the voter's identity is antithetical to a common assumption about voting: a vote must be secret, therefore, the link from the ballot to the voter must be broken. However, if we do not break the link to the voter, and if we trust technology to keep the link secret, then voting run by cooperating Clerks provides absolute accuracy of the vote tally. An election administrator is not able to tamper with an election (Davis 2001). Even without secrecy, networked Clerks provide a perfect medium

¹ See <http://www.deliberate.com/consulta> (last accessed September 22, 2008) and <http://www.deliberate.com/aztec> (last accessed September 22, 2008).

for signature gathering for ballot referendums, because secrecy is not needed for our direct democracy facility (Davis 2000). A simple solution to providing secrecy is for each voter to be given an anonymous email address for voting. This method, along with EVote/Clerk, was successfully used for online elections for Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility in 2006.²

4 Conclusions

EVote/Clerk has been used successfully, technically, for a number of groups. However, almost always, it brings much discomfort and opposition. Possibly this is because many people, especially powerful people, are firmly attached to a hierarchical model of social organization. EVote/Clerk displaces that model with the 'cooperative' model (see Eisler 1987). This sudden displacement of the older, more violent model is disturbing for many. However, cooperation with people, while using a computer, is an increasingly important skill. Through the electronic medium, which is our collective organ for communication and collaboration, the cooperative model is growing. I believe that democracy will emerge.

References

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² See <http://www.deliberate.com/cpsr> (last accessed September 22, 2008).

