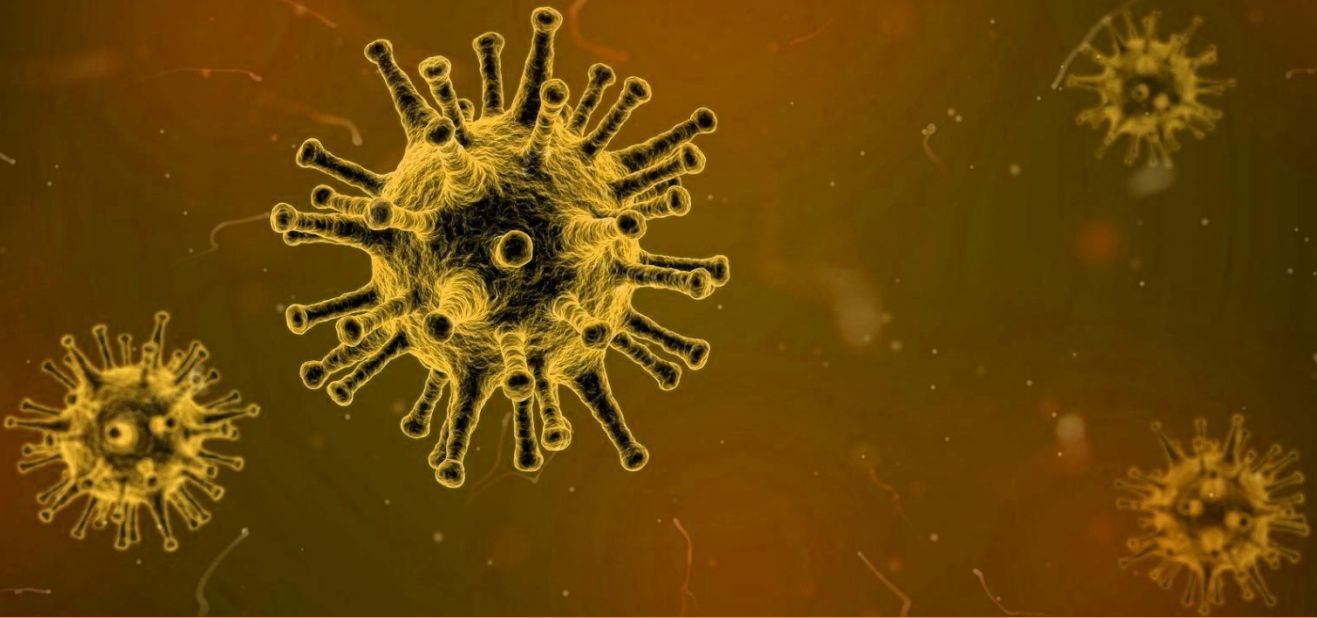


Solonian  
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# Digital Democracy & COVID-19



**Abstract:**

This article describes some of the ways technology is being used to facilitate governance during the coronavirus pandemic, and highlights particular problems around centralization and hacking vulnerability.

**Keywords:**

Coronavirus, blockchain, hacking, horizontal participation, transparency

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed governments' openness to conducting some of the procedures of representative democracy online, particularly council meetings and parliamentary sittings. These sittings are usually facilitated using commercial software like Zoom or Microsoft Teams to conduct video conferencing among elected representatives who are unable to meet in the same physical space.<sup>1</sup>

These applications also have the ability to incorporate polls and organize break-out sessions into small groups, and could be supplemented by tools like Slack that allow fluid chats between public representatives and their assistants. Theoretically, therefore, these tools offer a large degree of horizontal participation to users.

This potential, however, may not be realized for two reasons:

- 1) Most governments aim merely to recreate a pared back version of representative democracy involving the minimum possible interaction to maintain some functionality of parliament
- 2) The technology used by most governments was not designed to facilitate large numbers of participants engaging in complex decision-making scenarios

The following pages will explore these reasons in more detail and identify downsides of the current approach, such as increased marginalisation and greater vulnerability to outside influences, i.e. hacking. Contrasting this approach with the opportunities offered by decentralised, digital democracy, the article assesses the long-term impact of COVID-19 on democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Canadian House of Commons (Joan Brydon and Mia Rabson, 'Coronavirus: MPs pull off 1<sup>st</sup> virtual session of House of Commons despite glitches' *Global News*, 28 April 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6876502/coronavirus-andrew-scheer-house-of-commons/>); the Washington D.C. Council (Mitch Ryals, 'The D.C. Council's First Virtual Legislative Meeting went Smoothly. How Disappointing', *Washington City Paper*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/loose-lips/article/21127217/dc-councils-first-virtual-legislative-meeting-went-smoothly-how-disappointing>) and the British Parliament (William Booth, 'UK's Zoom Parliament launches with a few glitches but shows virtual democracy may work for a while' *Washington Post*, 22 April 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/uk-zoom-parliament/2020/04/22/d3a38682-8496-11ea-81a3-9690c9881111\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/uk-zoom-parliament/2020/04/22/d3a38682-8496-11ea-81a3-9690c9881111_story.html)).

## How Governments Are Using Technology During Covid-19

Thus far, during the pandemic, most governments have taken a ‘keeping the lights on’ approach that focuses on facilitating the minimum necessary interaction to maintain legislative processes. Not only does this generally not envision a greater role for citizens, it has the potential to minimize the impact of backbench parliamentarians and centralize power to an even greater extent in cabinet as total activity is cut back and backbench representatives have less opportunity to influence the debate.

In addition, tools like Zoom and Slack were primarily designed to facilitate remote work in a typical non-democratic workplace setting, and thus tend to mirror traditional top-down management approaches. In particular, the focal point of communication and impetus for discussion does not originate intrinsically in the tool, but rather in the hierarchical nature of the enterprise using it: workers are given tasks they must complete in order to get paid; elected representatives adhere to a set pattern for debating and passing legislation that generally originates from cabinet with formal critique issued by a shadow cabinet. Tools like Zoom or Slack facilitate the execution of these tasks remotely, but do not bolster participation, and indeed, by streamlining current processes, may even lessen democratic participation compared to face-to-face meeting.

The potential of these tools to slim down rather than widen democratic participation is a key reason as to why the very idea of ‘digital democracy’ is rejected by so many politicians and activists.

It has even been suggested that during the pandemic the party whip could cast votes on behalf of British MPs (although the author making this suggestion considered it to be too difficult to implement).<sup>2</sup>

In a similar development when Irish party Fianna Fail chose to enter coalition with rivals Fine Gael during the pandemic, party members were simply deprived of their right to vote in an approval process that would normally have taken place at a convention.<sup>3</sup>

This centralization of power in the hands of key party officials is unnecessary.

Members of the Italian Five-Star-Movement were voting remotely on policy questions, including coalition agreements well before the pandemic using the party software Rousseau,

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah White, *How Could a Virtual Parliament Work?*, Institute for Government, April 2020, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/virtual-parliament.pdf>, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Gabija Gataveckaite, “We don’t think it’s feasible’ – Fianna Fail leader Martin doesn’t expect party postal vote on deal with Fine Gael’ *Irish Independent*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/politics/we-dont-think-its-feasible-fianna-fail-leader-martin-doesnt-expect-party-postal-vote-on-deal-with-fine-gael-39132456.html>.

which facilitated approximately 80 000 votes to be cast on a coalition deal last fall.<sup>4</sup> Other software, such as Polys, PolCo and democracy.space easily facilitate votes to be cast online.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, we see a tendency in Anglophone nations to use technology only to facilitate a slimmed-down version of representative democracy rather than grasping the opportunity to widen decision-making to a larger group of participants.

Thus, 'digital democracy' as it is coming to be used during the pandemic would seem, at least in some cases, to have the potential to further centralize power with the executive and top party members.

While this is regrettable from a lost opportunities perspective, it is also concerning because centralized systems are more vulnerable to exploitation and to being hacked.

The only way to ensure this threat isn't realized is to tighten control over the circle of participants throughout the process so that outcomes are more or less foregone conclusions. For example, in the case of parliaments, if party whips cast votes for their MPs, there is virtually no danger of the result being influenced by hacking, since the party position is easy to determine and uniformly imposed.

There is a limit to the extent that one can simply seek to exactly replicate the offline world online, and that is why one tends to see participation either narrowing or widening depending on how technology is used, as it forces the users to make modifications to the usual practices.

In particular, widening the circle of participants has to rely on decentralizing rather than centralizing the participation and voting process. This is in particular the case when it comes to elections, referenda, and other forms of mass decision-making.

**Digital democracy should not be used to merely mimic representative democracy. It is imperative that digitalization is accompanied by decentralization.**

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<sup>4</sup> 'Italy's Five Star Movement approves coalition with old foe' *Al Jazeera*, 3 September 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/italy-star-movement-approves-coalition-foe-190903184355760.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See *2020 Digital Democracy Report*, Solonian Democracy Institute, [http://solonian-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DigitalDemocracyReport\\_Final.pdf](http://solonian-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DigitalDemocracyReport_Final.pdf).

## Why Digital Democracy Needs to be Decentralized

Winning an election (or referendum) confers benefits to the winners and those benefits accrue through manipulating a very narrow window in time. Merely voting online does not change this fundamental issue.

Thus, 'hacking' elections in the sense of tilting the playing field in one's favour through bribes, party networking, media domination, smear campaigns, keeping undesirable candidates off the ballot, etc. is endemic to elections in general. Online voting without changing this modus operandi would merely open a new front in this ongoing 'hacking' war.

While the Estonian i-voting system and blockchain-based applications have proven robust against hacking (and are certainly more secure than the electronic voting machines used in some countries), they do not of themselves reduce the **incentive** to hack an election or any other vote.

There are several ways this may occur: between parties within a State, between States (for example between superpowers or, more likely, between superpowers and their client States), or by non-State hackers, who often either wish to fight against what they view as authoritarian power or simply show off their skills.

Whether or not hacking actually occurs, however, there will almost certainly be **allegations** of hacking. This is particularly the case, as merely using digital tools to replicate representative democracy does not mitigate partisanship and nothing could be easier for partisans than to start rumours of hacking.

Votes need to be accepted as legitimate, and if citizens have doubts about that process, this is a serious concern.

By using digital tools that do not alter the basic power structures of 'democracy' as we know it, we run the danger of fulfilling exactly those fears that have been behind resistance to digitalisation: increased centralization of power as processes are streamlined while the ability of citizens to access representatives and representatives to access party power-brokers is limited, along with the problems of real and perceived legitimacy (hacking).

Considering these downsides, why don't governments use the opportunity the pandemic presents in terms of digitalization to increase citizen participation in democracy?

## Institutional Lethargy vis-à-vis Citizen Participation

Citizen-based digital democracy tools are distinguishable from more conventional democracy tools by two main characteristics.

One is that they create focal points for discussion and voting from the input of participants. This means that rather than having the process determined outside of the tool and the tool itself being used purely to facilitate remote (rather than face-to-face) implementation, the solution itself guides participants through a constructive, peer-to-peer decision-making process. Rather than a purely formal process (e.g. pre-formed parliamentary statements followed by pre-determined, whipped votes), citizen-led democracy starts from the premise that a wide-range of outcomes is possible and that participants should consider their own personal decision during the process. There is, in other words, ideally, a willingness to engage with other participants and be affected by the process rather than just running through it as a necessity. This means that the process is more participatory, but the outcome is less certain. In a citizen-led democracy, unexpected decisions may be taken and this causes many people to feel some trepidation.

The second characteristic of citizen-led democracy solutions is their high-level of transparency. Citizen-based democracy tools force more interactions into the public domain and leave clear records of those interactions. This means that digital tools can be extremely effective, but it also means that they are unforgiving.

A lack of progress or failure to meet goals is easily swept under the rug in face-to-face meetings. Countless reports, papers and inquiries have been heralded as great successes by politicians who fully intended to abandon them and leave them to gather dust in the archives. This is not possible when using fully transparent digital tools.

The transparency that digital tools provide leads to more accountability and therefore potentially a loss of face. The pressure to always come out a winner and to always have been right are toxic attributes of modern representative democracy and frequently skew decision-making, yet the leap to a more accountable and humble method of decision-making is one few have the courage to make. Citizen-based digital democracy would likely involve starting fewer projects, but completing more of them, as the non-viability of pet projects becomes apparent at an earlier stage in proceedings. This harsh reality is at odds with the conventional political wisdom of attempting to please everyone and keeping up the appearance of progress on as many projects as possible for as long as possible.

Transparency also means that governments would potentially be forced to adopt outcomes they do not like. Traditionally, consultation has occurred as a two-way process between citizens and government. A citizen knows what their own input was and perhaps the input of a few of their friends, but they have no way of knowing what the total input into the consultation was. This has allowed governments large leeway in interpreting and utilizing the

outcomes of consultations. In a citizen-based digital democracy, this would no longer be the case.

A good example is provided by the Canadian government's consultations on altering the voting system in 2016. While the Liberal government favoured a change from first-past-the-post to the alternative vote that would have been more advantageous to it, it would seem that Canadian citizens were broadly in favour of proportional voting.<sup>6</sup> The Canadian government conducted town hall meetings across Canada, repeatedly claiming that there was no clear consensus on outcomes. Many Canadians who attended these meetings took to Twitter and other outlets to claim otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

Due to the fact that no transparent system for working through citizen input was in place, the situation ended in stalemate.

Had a citizen-focused software been used instead, the government may well have been forced into adopting proportional voting. At the very least a clear idea of Canadians' preferences vis-à-vis their voting system would have been attained and could have guided policy in this area in the future.

This is, unsurprisingly, precisely what governments wish to avoid.

Furthermore, parties are not always trying to satisfy the wishes of the nation in general, but rather their own base or even only a segment of that base, and many representatives must reconcile constituent wishes to party wishes. This often requires cherry-picking information about voter preferences and this, in turn, requires opacity.

There is therefore a fundamental conflict of interest between representative and direct democracy, and this is why representatives are so resistant to using tools that provide clear information on voter preferences and why they are so insistent on using them only for minor 'local' questions of little import.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Angus Reid Poll Shows Canadians think Trudeau was Wrong to Break his Electoral Reform Promise' FairVote Canada, 17 September 2019 <https://www.fairvote.ca/2019/09/17/angusreidpoll/>.

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Danielle Smith 'Trudeau quietly held town hall where most were in favour of proportional voting system' *National Post*, 31 October 2016 <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/trudeau-quietly-held-town-hall-where-most-were-in-favour-of-proportional-voting-system>; Peter Mazereeuw 'Feds to release data from electoral reform town halls: Monsef' *The Hill Times*, 14 December 2016 <https://www.hilltimes.com/2016/12/14/electoral-reform-town-halls-didnt-poll-preferred-voting-system/90790>; 'Electoral reform town hall data exposes big holes in Minister Maryam Monsef's talking points' *Press Progress Canada*, 3 November 2016 <https://pressprogress.ca/electoral-reform-town-hall-data-exposes-big-holes-in-minister-maryam-monsef-talking-points/>; *Strengthening Democracy in Canada: Principles, Process and Public Engagement for Electoral Reform: Report of the Standing Committee on Electoral Reform*, House of Commons Canada, December 2016 <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/ERRE/report-3>



## Long-Term Impact of Covid-19 on Democracy

Despite the fact that many of the ways technology is being used during COVID-19 are suboptimal from a democratic perspective, the pandemic has ensured that the idea that digital government is 'impossible' will be difficult to resurrect. In this respect, COVID-19 has blasted the doors of online participation wide open.

Furthermore, in comparison to the private sector, the digital capacity of government has been severely under-developed in many countries, and the pandemic is helping many representatives and senior civil servants become increasingly aware of the possibilities technology can offer today – an area they often previously lacked up-to-date information on.

Finally, if COVID-19 has the severe economic impact that is expected in many quarters, governments and regional authorities may come under pressure to become more efficient. Tools like Novoville<sup>8</sup> that minimize human contact while making the delivery of council services more efficient may benefit from these changes as increased automation of service delivery becomes more attractive for governments.

The pandemic may also encourage councils to move to a more online consultation process using tools like Ethelo and Civocracy.<sup>9</sup>

This would pave the way to extending the use of such tools for wider purposes in future.

Deep tensions between representative and citizen-led democracy remain. However, understandably, a global pandemic that relies on social distancing for mitigation has certainly boosted interest in 'digital democracy'. The difficulty is to try to ensure that digital tools are used in a way that empowers citizens rather than potentially marginalizing them still further, while ensuring a robust level of security.

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<sup>8</sup> See *2020 Digital Democracy Report*, Solonian Democracy Institute, [http://solonian-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DigitalDemocracyReport\\_Final.pdf](http://solonian-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DigitalDemocracyReport_Final.pdf), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> See *2020 Digital Democracy Report* Solonian Democracy Institute, [http://solonian-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DigitalDemocracyReport\\_Final.pdf](http://solonian-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DigitalDemocracyReport_Final.pdf), p. 10 and 20 respectively.