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MyFairElection.com: A Modest Proposal for Popular Election Supervision¹

1. Summary Introduction

In the upcoming 2008 elections and in elections in other countries, it would be desirable to have a machinery of election monitoring that allows (i) anyone to post reports about election conditions (e.g. long lines, no machines, poll places closed, harassment, etc.) in various precincts and polling places, (ii) in rich media format — including video, pictures, and text, and (iii) anyone to view election conditions in real time based on these data at multiple levels of aggregation (i.e. by polling station, precinct, town, county, metro area, state, or nation).

This machinery applies the popular and by now well tested technology and insights of product and service rating sites such as amazon.com, imdb.com, epinions.com, and tripadvisor.com to democratize the assessment of the quality of our nation's electoral institutions.

Election reports would be provided by conventional election monitors (those working for good government and clean election organizations that now conduct monitoring and perhaps staff from the campaigns) and by other observers who have no prior connection to MyFairElection.com.

The site would be used on election day by curious politics junkies, journalists, and campaign activists in order to assess election conditions and respond to them in real time. In the months following the election, data on the site might be used to identify the precise character and location of electoral problems and to help document the case for election reform. At a more general level, MyFairElection.com might enlarge popular interest in the quality of our election machinery and help to generate a greater sense of popular ownership over our election machinery; it may move election reform from an arcane topic of legal specialists into the public eye (touching chords in a way similar to the recent HBO documentary "Recount").

¹ MyFairElection.com is an application of ideas about "Third Generation Transparency" that I developed with Mary Graham and David Weil for our book *Full Disclosure* and in discussions with them following it, though they bear no responsibility for the numerous difficulties of this idea. This concept also draws heavily on conversation with Jorrit de Jong and his article "Trends and Challenges in Election Monitoring" (*Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization*, Vol 3(2) 2008, pp. 159-64). As is appropriate in rapid development, brief but highly valuable conversations with Joshua Cohen, David Gartner, and Heather Gerken have helped me to articulate and fill out some of the gaps in this still sketchy proposal.

2. Current Arrangements and the Contributions of MyFairElection.com

Election monitoring currently follows a regulatory model in which monitors (serving governmental agencies, political campaigns, and nongovernmental organizations) file reports through paper, telephone, or Internet based on first hand observation. The data gathered by these monitors flows upward in their organizations to serve specific organizational purposes. Monitors serving political campaigns, for example, issue real-time alerts to campaign lawyers or activists who then respond using whatever tools are available to them. Data gathered by non-governmental monitors is collected and, in due time, finds its way to public, administrative, or legislative reports.

There are at least six ways in which MyFairElection.com would supplement the contributions of current election monitoring practices.

- *Monitoring capacity* would be dramatically expanded by inviting anyone who cares to issue a report to do so. It would aim not just to randomly or strategically sample polling places, but to generate multiple reports about every single polling place in the country.
- *Real time*. Data generated by MyFairElection.com would be available in real time rather than being stored up in reports issued weeks or months later.
- *Civic engagement*. Currently, citizens participate in elections by casting a vote (or trying to). MyFairElection.com would allow them to participate also by sharing their experiences, observations, and assessments in engaging and entertaining ways.
- *Legitimacy*. MyFairElection.com would have greater legitimacy as a trusted source for some audience who perceive reports from NGOs, political campaigns, and even some professional media. The clear objection is that the quality of reports in MyFairElection.com will be inevitably uneven. But some people prefer amazon.com ratings to consumer reports, and vice versa.
- *Vivid depictions in an updated medium*. Data generated by MyFairElection will be more vivid — not just text but also pictures and movies — and will be delivered (map based web interface) in a technologically up-to-date way for contemporary news hounds, politicians, and other citizens.
- *Transparent analysis and accessibility*. One reports are collected, data will be available for anyone to analyze in any way they like. To the extent there is hand-waving in any interpretive exercise of assessment, others can easily check and verify.

3. System Architecture

The technical architecture of MyFairElection.com consists of two components: (i) a facility to enable monitors to file polling reports and (ii) a facility to enable users to view those reports in useful ways.

3.1. Filing Monitoring Reports

Who Reports?

I envision that polling reports would be filed by registered monitors. First tier monitors would be professional or semi-professional monitors who currently work with NGO organizations and perhaps the political campaigns. In exchange for contributing data, these organizations would gain privileged access to the data on the site (unfiltered, disaggregated data, for example). These first tier monitors would have verified identities and pre-registered accounts. Tier two monitors would consist of others who wish to file reports. They would register by providing name, address, and email, but MyFairElection.com would not seek to verify that information because doing so would create an undue barrier to participation.

What Do They Report?

A polling report would consist of the following fields:

- username (user database will contain contact and organizational affiliation data)
- location (provided automatically by location-aware devices when available)
- polling place, precinct
- time of report (a user, especially quasi-professional monitors, might file multiple reports throughout the day)
- numeric scale (1-5 stars, for example) of ease of voting [specific guidance to be developed]
- closed menu, with “other,” of common problems: poll not open, long lines, too few machines, machines broken, people turned away due to names not on list, people turned away due to ID check, etc.)
- open text description
- option to upload or link pictures or video

- option to report a problem fixed
- option to indicate willingness to be contacted by official group for follow-up

How Do They Report?

Reports would be filed via Internet. The site should provide a variety of interfaces that allow people to file reports via PC web browser, smart phone/PDA, and cell phone WAP protocol. We should also consider a Short Message Service interface, though many fewer fields would be collected.

3.2. Data Access

Data access screens should serve users with multiple purposes. Some will aim to compare conditions in different parts of a country, their state, or metro area. For those users, a color coded map-interface, resembling a temperature weather map, is probably most useful.

Other users will be interested in the conditions of specific polling places. For them, they should have a screen that allows them to see the aggregate rank (average stars) of a place, to view the number and distribution of reports (histogram format), and to scroll through individual reports to read text or view video or pictures.

There will also be a range of politics junkies and election night curiosity seekers. For them, the site should offer the most interesting or outrageous reports. The site might also offer real time selections from best and worst polling places.

Because it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness, the site should also offer a range of reports on problems that were solved in real time.

4. Short- and Long- Term Benefits

On election day, MyFairElection.com might produce several immediate benefits:

- *deterrence*. Some who might perpetrate some of the more egregious forms of intimidation or harassment might be dissuaded from doing so in the knowledge that video images of their actions will be on the Internet.
- *additional information*. The site might provide campaigns and legal advocates with additional information that escape their own monitoring efforts.

- *spontaneous response*. If political junkies learn about some access problem in nearby precincts, some may self-organize to take corrective action.
- *issue visibility*. Following Marshall McLuhan, the intrinsic dynamics, as well as the content of the site would draw attention to the mostly subterranean issue of fairness in election administration and raise its priority in the public mind.

Over the longer term, the site has other potential benefits:

- *popular ownership of elections*. By creating a role (and perhaps for some a civic responsibility) to assess and take action on the quality of opportunity to participate in elections, the service of electoral access becomes in part something that the users of MyFairElection.com come to own rather than just a service that is provided well or poorly.
- *common knowledge about the quality of electoral machinery*. There is now polarized disagreement about exactly how fair or unfair elections are. Very few people know the details of what occurred in, say, Florida or Ohio in 2004. Even then, every account is suspected of partisan bias. MyFairElections.com would produce a common base of knowledge for further debate and discussion.
- *continued reporting and analysis*. After the election, especially if larger controversies arose, these data would provide a rich source for media analysts and perhaps social scientists.
- *mobilization for reform*. The publicity, mass of material, and its vividness would potentially aid local, state, and perhaps national efforts for election reform by allowing advocates to pinpoint and sustain pockets of unequal access and to richly document their claims with many on-the-street, eyewitness accounts.
- *naming and shaming*. Officials in low ranking (one or two star) precincts — those where users report great barriers to voting — may be shamed by public comparison into improving ballot access.²

5. Data Quality Concerns

The quality of poll reports gathered through MyFairElection.com will naturally be uneven compared to assessments provided by highly trained professional election monitors. A two pronged approach addresses these concerns.

² Following part of the reasoning in Heather Gerken's Democracy Index.

First, several measures seek to assure data quality without erecting barriers to participation. The two tiered system of users — with the first tier consisting of trained election monitors — will allow users to see just reports from quasi-professional monitors if they like (i.e. reports will allow second tier user data to be filtered out). An open research question is whether the reports of first and second tier monitors will be materially different. Furthermore, a minimal system of registration — requiring users to provide an email address — will deter some portion of spammers. Finally, those who use the data will be able to audit it *post-hoc* to search for indications of spamming such as multiple posts from the same user or IP address in short time periods.

Second, these data are being offered “as is.” We have reached a point in the social development of information consumption at which users of sites such as MyFairElection.com realize that information is provided by people like themselves, with their own idiosyncratic foibles and interests, and so interpret these sites (such as amazon ratings of books or imdb ratings of movies) with that weakness in mind.

Presumably, the ratings have value despite this weakness for the reasons given above. There is reason to trust the “wisdom of crowds” because it is often accurate in the aggregate though individual observations are noisy and because some regard the popular pedigree of information provided through “crowd-sourcing” to have advantages over more expert assessments. Someone once said, referring to the production of battle tanks, that quantity has a quality of all its own. That adage may also apply to the complete picture of election conditions — of the opportunity to vote — that MyFairElection.com hopes to provide through highly decentralized user generated reports.

6. Challenges of Outreach

MyFairElection.com will only be successful if many, many people file reports and use it to view election conditions. If all you do is build it, they certainly won't come.

Perhaps the most daunting obstacle to this proposal is outreach and advertising. Internet projects spread over time through buzz that is generated by users who have positive experiences. As is appropriate, they must prove themselves to leading users in order to spread. But a national election occurs on one day, and so there will be no time (at least in the first iteration) for good news to spread as a result of positive user experience.

Therefore, it will be critical to spread the word about this site through all available means. At the core, it will be most important to develop good relationships and partnerships with national and local non-governmental organizations who now field election monitors. Outside of that, relationships with the campaigns will be critical.

Then, it will be important to identify critical audiences — mailing lists of the campaigns, memberships of organizations such as moveon.org, political interest groups of social networking sites — and to develop outreach strategies for them.

7. Replication

Once built, the machinery of MyFairElection.com would be useful in many other elections. In particular, its value might be far greater in politically developing societies with less stable and mature electoral machinery. It would therefore be a mistake to think of this concept as a one-shot effort for the 2008 U.S. election, or even as useful for only the United States.