

Push-button Populism: The Reform Party and the Real World of Teledemocracy

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Abstract: The past decade in Canadian politics has been marked by a growth in citizen dissatisfaction with traditional methods of political representation and the development of sophisticated communications technologies promising increased grass-roots participation in policymaking. In a series of recent teledemocratic exercises, the Reform Party of Canada has positioned itself at the centre of these trends. This paper examines the democratic quality of Reform's use of these technologies to date and suggests that a performative analysis of these events reveals their deeper ideological character. Finally, it is argued that a performative focus on their deliberative potential might help to inform a more robust democratic application of these technologies.

Résumé: La dernière décennie de la politique canadienne a été marquée et d'un mécontentement croissant de la part des citoyens qui récusent les méthodes traditionnelles de la représentation politique, et d'une croissance des techniques avancées de la communication qui promettent une participation populaire plus étendue dans la création des statuts. En prônant une série récente d'exercices «télé démocratiques», le Parti Réform du Canada s'est positionné au centre de ces tendances. Cet essai examine la qualité démocratique de l'usage du PRC de ces techniques jusqu'à présent, et suggère qu'une analyse performative de ces événements révèle leur caractère idéologique plus profond. Finalement, nous proposons qu'un regard performatif sur leur potentielle délibérative pourrait contribuer à la création d'une application démocratique plus robuste de ces techniques.

"We're building the Athens of the 21st century."

—Preston Manning, Leader,
Reform Party of Canada

Canadian democracy is not what it used to be. The resounding rejection of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990, at least partially a result of widespread suspicion

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of the cloistered crucible from which it emerged, was the first signal of a polity awash in a swelling tide of dissatisfaction with traditional modes of democratic representation. Since that time, citizen alienation has manifested itself in a number of related ways, among them a fervent and burgeoning distrust of political elites. But perhaps more important has been the growing tension between escalating demands for increased citizen involvement in policy and law making, and a simultaneous decrease of faith in the ability of traditional mechanisms of representation to act either as effective conduits for meaningful participation, or reliable instruments of interest articulation.¹

Concurrently, a series of sophisticated technologies of communication and information gathering have developed, which might hold the key to alleviating this chronic democratic *malaise*. As Christopher Arterton suggests: "By making participation easier for all, communications technologies may be able to reduce the inequalities that now severely grip different avenues for citizen involvement in policymaking" (Arterton, 1987, p. 51). Insofar as they purport to overcome the vast barriers of time, space and scale that have previously confounded extensive, direct citizen participation across a broad range of policy issues, these so-called teledemocratic technologies have raised the possibility of a reinvigorated civic political culture in Canada.

The Reform Party of Canada has positioned itself at the intersection of these various currents (Laycock, 1994). In a number of recent exercises—a telephone referendum concerning the *Young Offenders Act*, and nation-wide electronic town hall meetings on federalism and the public debt—the Reform Party has attempted to make good on its promise to increase the quotient of "direct democracy" in the Canadian political calculus through the use of "more efficient and less expensive" electronic communications and voting technology.² The intent of this paper is to assess the democratic potential of these technologies using recent Reform Party experiences with them, and to illustrate potential abuses of these techniques. I will suggest that these abuses are consistent with a particular vision of political representation and participation, and that alternative uses of such technology should be based on a different set of democratic expectations. A spate of similar experiments throughout the world have effectively raised concerns about the necessary conditions for the effective application of interactive technology to more traditional democratic practices.³ This concern has been brought home via the recent rush by Canadian political parties to adopt televoting in their leadership selection processes.⁴

Media and scholarly analyses of these initial forays into the world of electronic democracy have generally focused on high-profile technological glitches, or consideration of the quantitative differences between these exercises and the more traditional method of leadership selection by delegated convention.⁵ The Reform Party's application of this technology calls for a

more nuanced examination. The use of electronic technology to enfranchise a greater number of party members in the process of leadership selection is decidedly different from an exercise which seeks to translate public opinion directly into legislation or policy. The former is a matter of internal party politics, suited to quantitative measurement: how many more party members participated in choosing their leader as a result of this technology? The latter is an issue of public policy and governance, and so must also be subjected to scrutiny in terms of the *quality* of the democratic participation enabled by the technology involved. In this case, the question to explore is whether the application of this or related technology could result in a qualitatively better democratic practice than is common through the medium of Canadian party politics.

A sufficient answer to this question requires that we move beyond the sort of traditional qualitative critiques typically levelled at referenda in general, and at electronic plebiscites in particular. We will see that the exercises under consideration fail to meet the standards minimally acceptable to democrats and social scientists alike. I also wish to consider how a focus on the ability of teledemocratic practices to construct and reinforce certain discourses suggests why this technology is attractive to the Reform Party. Finally, I will contend that an emphasis on these "performative" dimensions of teledemocracy can contribute to a richer appreciation of the conditions necessary for more democratic applications of these technologies.

Referendum '94, Canada Speaks, and the National Tax Alert

In mid-June of 1994, North Vancouver Reform Party MP Ted White, in co-operation with Maritime Telephone and Telecommunications Technologies of Nova Scotia (MT&T), sponsored *Referendum '94*, a telephone referendum on proposed changes to Canada's *Young Offenders Act (YOA)*.⁶ The impetus for this exercise was twofold. First, White was seeking to gauge his constituents' opinions on the current state of trial and sentencing practices for youth criminals, with the intent of drafting and tabling a Private Member's Bill in the House of Commons, proposing amendments to the *YOA* which would reflect these opinions. However, shortly before *Referendum '94* was to take place, federal Minister of Justice Allan Rock tabled his own set of amendments to the *YOA*, prompting White to suggest that his results would be used "to confirm the approach in Mr. Rock's Bill, or to suggest amendments to the Bill during committee stage in Parliament" (White, 1994b).⁷ Secondly, the telephone poll in North Vancouver was intended to represent the Reform Party's first attempt to "show all of Canada how the occasional use of electronic referenda can ensure that MPs are much more responsive to the wishes of the people they represent" (White, 1994c). Calling this the "first ever electronic referendum" and an opportunity for his constituents to "show the world how democracy can be improved using the very latest technology," White presented *Referen-*

dum '94 as an example of "government with due regard to the views of the majority. In other words, true democracy" (White, 1994d, p. 1).

This claim is based on the contention that *Referendum '94* was an exercise carried out in observance of the principle of "universal suffrage," rather than merely a poll of randomly selected opinions (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14, 1994). Each registered voter in White's North Vancouver riding was mailed a confidential, randomly generated Personal Identification Number (PIN) which granted them a single access to MT&T's computerized vote counting system. Constituents intending to vote were asked to call a 1-900 number, enter their PIN, and answer "yes" or "no" to a series of questions pertaining to proposed changes to the *YOA*—all via the keypad of their touch-tone telephone.⁸ Students in the riding were issued a special set of PINs so that their votes could be tabulated separately from the general electorate. A similar arrangement was made for federal Members of Parliament, who were also encouraged to register their opinion. Finally, citizens across the country were able to cast their votes in a separately counted opinion poll which used the same questions but a different telephone number; no PINs were required for participation in this part of the exercise, which meant that people with a particular interest in the outcome of the poll could, conceivably, vote as often as they pleased. The average duration of the local voting process was approximately two minutes, and participants were responsible for the \$2 cost of this telephone time.⁹

Public response to the telephone poll was less than overwhelming in terms of numbers participating, and predictable in terms of results (see Table 1). Voters were asked three questions: Should the minimum age at which a charge could be laid under the *YOA* be reduced from 12 to 10 years of age?; Should young offenders charged with "serious" crimes be automatically transferred to adult court?; and, finally, Should violent or repeat offenders be subject to harsher sentences under the *YOA*? Of the 70,000 registered voters in North Vancouver, approximately 4,600—roughly 6%—took part in the referendum.¹⁰ A strong majority of voters (67%) expressed agreement with the proposal in Question 1 to reduce the minimum age for charges under the *YOA* to 10 years of age. It should be noted that a significant number of callers to the Referendum Help Line indicated that they voted "no" to this question because they felt the minimum age should either be *lower* than 10, or eliminated altogether. Support among registered voters for the amendments proposed in Questions 2 and 3—automatic transfer to adult court for serious crimes and increased sentences for repeat violent offenders—was a staggering 97% and 99% respectively.

Results for the other three categories of respondents generally mimicked those of registered North Vancouver voters, both in terms of low participation rates and preferences. The nation-wide poll elicited approximately 2,200

responses, while merely 44 of a possible 700 North Vancouver student voters, and only 16 federal MPs participated in the televote. Despite these small numbers, the distribution of opinions across all categories of voters was relatively consistent with those indicated by White's constituents. One exception to this general rule was the MP response to Question 1, which produced a much higher number of "yes" votes (94%) than any other category of participants. White attributed the low rate of participation to a number of factors, including a lack of media attention due to news competition with the Stanley Cup riots in Vancouver and Father's Day. According to White: "The most commonly given reason for not voting was that the Government had already announced amendments and that those amendments would be rammed through Parliament so there was no point in voting" (White, 1994e, p. 1). Nevertheless, White praised those who did participate for being "pioneers," and indicated that he was confident he had received a clear enough indication of his constituent's feelings on this issue to act as directed (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 22, 1994).

Table 1
Referendum '94 Results
June 15-20, 1994—North Vancouver, BC

| Question 1: Should the age be reduced to 10 for charges to be laid under the <i>Young Offenders Act</i>? | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| | Yes | No |
| Registered voters | 3,067 (67%) | 1,539 (33%) |
| Student voters | 29 (66%) | 15 (33%) |
| MPs | 15 (94%) | 1 (6%) |
| Canada opinion poll | 1,508 (69%) | 678 (31%) |
| Question 2: Should there be automatic transfer to adult court for serious crimes such as murder? | | |
| | Yes | No |
| Registered voters | 4,474 (97%) | 125 (3%) |
| Student voters | 38 (86%) | 6 (14%) |
| MPs | 16 (100%) | 0 (0%) |
| Canada opinion poll | 2,105 (97%) | 73 (3%) |
| Question 3: Should there be a special category in the <i>Young Offenders Act</i> for repeat and dangerous offenders? | | |
| | Yes | No |
| Registered voters | 4,539 (99%) | 53 (1%) |
| Student voters | 40 (91%) | 4 (9%) |
| MPs | 15 (94%) | 1 (6%) |
| Canada opinion poll | 2,151 (99%) | 20 (1%) |

In October of 1994, the Reform Party embarked on an even more ambitious experiment, sponsoring an exercise billed as "Canada's first, live, nationally-televised, interactive Electronic Town Hall meeting" (Reform Party of Canada, 1994). Similar to the North Vancouver referendum, *Canada Speaks* served two purposes for the Reform Party. On one level, this combined television program and telephone poll provided the Reform Party with an opportunity to both publicize and elicit feedback on its plans to "reconstruct our federal system and rebuild the principles by which we govern ourselves" (Reform Party of Canada, 1994, p. 1). On a second level, this was yet another occasion for the Reform Party to enlist the aid of sophisticated communications technologies in fulfilling its rhetorical commitment to increased citizen participation in major policy decisions. Accordingly, *Canada Speaks* was portrayed as a "citizen participation project" designed to facilitate "consultation between elections," affording "a unique and historic opportunity for you to participate in this electronic town hall meeting from the comfort of your own living room" (Reform Party of Canada, 1994, p. 4).

The *Canada Speaks* exercise was organized as a week-long national telephone poll, culminating in a panel discussion held in Fort Calgary on October 3, 1994, televised live by approximately two thirds of Canada's cable networks.¹¹ In the week prior to the telecast, for an average cost of \$2, anyone with access to a touch-tone phone could call Reform's 1-900 line and offer their opinion on three questions regarding the future shape of Canada's federal system. First, callers were asked to respond with a "yes" or "no" to the question of whether "Canada [has] reached a point in its history when the issue of national unity must be resolved once and for all." Next, callers were asked to choose which of the following four courses of action they thought "best for Canada": "complete separation of Quebec from Canada"; "a special association between Canada and an independent Quebec"; "changing the federal system for the entire country"; or "continuing the present federal system." Finally, respondents were presented with two options as to "who should set the framework for Canada's future?": "the Canadian people through a bottom-up process"; or "governments and political leaders."

The telecast, dubbed an "electronic town hall meeting" by its organizers, gave viewers the opportunity to call in their response to these questions one at a time, after the issues had been discussed by participants in the televised forum. Panelists leading the discussion included Reform Party Leader Preston Manning, hailed as "the uncontested parliamentary pace-setter in the race to the brave new world" (Gold, 1994, p. A5); a handful of political scientists and economists; a constitutional adviser; an opinion researcher; and a former adviser to the Bloc Quebecois. In addition to these experts, viewers at home and the 140 audience members in the studio were treated to recorded testimonials from a number of prominent members of the country's political and

media elite.¹² The telephone lines remained open for a short time after the forum, for those who wished to register their opinions in a single call after having seen the entire telecast.

Following the exercise, Reform Party Leader Preston Manning indicated that he was "encouraged by the response" (Lunman, 1994, p. A1). Of the 9,406 "total registered responses," 92% favoured resolving the national unity issue "once and for all," and 58% echoed the Reform Party's preference to do so via a comprehensive overhaul of the entire federal system.¹³ The "complete separation" of Quebec was advocated by 29% of callers, 10% were inclined to accept the status quo and, most gratifying for the Reform Party, only 3% were prepared to accept special status for Quebec. Similarly, in a reflection of Reform's populist rhetoric, 92% of the responses to Question 3 indicated that this overhaul should be directed by "the Canadian people through a bottom-up process" rather than by "governments and political leaders" (see Table 2).

Table 2
Canada Speaks
September 26-October 3, 1994—Fort Calgary, Alberta

| Question 1: Do you think the issue of national unity must be resolved once and for all? | | |
|--|-------------|-----------|
| | Yes | No |
| Canada opinion poll (COP) | 2,011 (95%) | 102 (5%) |
| Control group (CG) | 681 (84%) | 131 (16%) |
| Question 2: Which is the best course of action for Canada? | | |
| | COP | CG |
| A. Complete separation of Quebec | 873 (32%) | 146 (17%) |
| B. A special association with an independent Quebec | 72 (3%) | 43 (5%) |
| C. Changing the federal system for all of Canada | 1,639 (60%) | 446 (52%) |
| D. Continuing the present federal system | 143 (5%) | 221 (26%) |
| Question 3: Who should set the framework for Canada's future? | | |
| | COP | CG |
| A. The Canadian people through a bottom-up process | 2,022 (96%) | 639 (81%) |
| B. Governments and political leaders | 86 (4%) | 151 (19%) |

Aside from their predictability, by far the most interesting aspect of the results of the *Canada Speaks* televote was the manner in which they were portrayed to and by the mass media. Numerous print and broadcast media took for granted that 9,406 "total registered responses" meant that "about 10,000 Canadians reached out and touched Preston Manning's national unity telethon" (Lunman, 1994, p. A1).¹⁴ Actually, a closer look at the numbers would indicate that this is far from the case. Firstly, PINs limiting participants

to a single vote were not distributed before the poll, and this means that interested parties could potentially have voted several times. But even more compromising is the fact that each answer to any of the three questions was counted as a distinct "caller." During the forum telecast, viewers were asked to respond to the questions in three separate telephone calls, and it is conceivable (though unlikely) that each response during this period was registered by a different person. However, in the week before the television broadcast and in the hours following it, when the bulk of responses were registered (70%), callers likely addressed all three questions in a single call. Nevertheless, each answer to every question during this time was also counted by the Reform Party and the mass media as coming from a distinct respondent. Furthermore, a randomly selected control group was solicited in advance to participate in the exercise as a measure of the statistical validity of the telepoll's self-selected sample population. This control group was also included in the total number of participants, again with each response to every question being tallied as a distinct caller (which is probably even less likely in the case of the control group than in the general sample). The result of these unorthodox calculations was a vastly inflated perception of the level of public participation in *Canada Speaks*. As it stands, it is statistically impossible to make an accurate determination of how many people actually participated in this exercise.¹⁵ The significance of this misrepresentation will become clearer in light of a performative assessment of these events.

The Reform Party's second national electronic town hall meeting and televote was broadcast from Toronto in February of 1995, and provides a good précis of their teledemocratic program in action. Timed to capitalize on growing public anxiety just prior to the release of the federal budget, the *National Tax Alert* demonstrated how Reform is able to use this technology to reduce democracy to the level of spectacle and performance. The electronic town hall consisted of brief responses by a panel of experts to three questions about taxation and deficit reduction. The panel was nearly uniform in its general support of the Reform position on these issues. Panel responses were supplemented by alarmist "tax facts" presented entirely without context or discussion of the possible social repercussions of massive spending cuts, and pre-recorded, cleverly edited testimonials from "the streets of Canada" decrying taxes and the cost of social programs. Audience members prepared to ask questions were known to organizers in advance of the event, and those with impromptu questions were summarily overlooked by the moderator. In one case, an obviously enthusiastic, but repeatedly ignored, audience member with an unscheduled question was approached by the event organizers off camera, asked about the nature of his question and the contents of his handbag, and encouraged to "settle down." At no time was spontaneity, citizen-to-citizen contact, or critical consideration of the issues encouraged. This supposed exer-

cise in direct democracy ended with one of the young event organizers slipping into a reserved seat near the platform and asking Reform Leader Preston Manning, as if on cue, the event's final question: "... will lower taxes help or hurt the average Canadian?" Following Manning's "non-partisan" response, the results of the televote were announced—approximately 95% of respondents indicated that they felt current levels of taxation were too high, and advocated deficit reduction through spending cuts and a legislated cap on tax increases—all of which mirror the Reform Party's previously held positions on this issue.

Evaluating teledemocracy

The Reform Party of Canada is not alone in having seen the future of democracy in technology. Indeed, it is widely conceded that "there seems to be no insuperable technical obstacle to having the Athenian assembly in our living rooms and workplaces" (McLean, 1989, p. 93). Towards this end, a number of attempts have been made at using communications technology to increase citizen involvement in the political arena, particularly in the United States.¹⁶ Perhaps the most comprehensive and ambitious set of teledemocratic experiments were conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, based on a televoting system designed by a group of social scientists at the University of Hawaii (Slaton, 1992). As expressed by one of the developers of the *Hawaii Televote* model, televoting was conceived as a way of addressing some of the inadequacies of the current system of democratic representation: "Televote was seen as a useful means to communicate the views of the citizenry to the representatives and to provide a clearer view of the entire range of citizen opinion than they receive from a small, but vocal and organized, minority or from random samples using conventional polling techniques" (Slaton, 1992, p. 184). Thus, televoting is intended as an alternative medium of interest articulation—a sort of "electronic plebiscitarianism"—that enables more immediate citizen direction of elected officials, in line with what has been traditionally understood as the "delegate" model of political representation.

Setting aside for now the issue of whether this is a sound or sufficient basis for democratic practice, we can consider whether televoting based on the plebiscitarian model has been judged to achieve the goals it sets for itself. In his critical appraisal of these experiments, Christopher Arterton (1987) has expressed scepticism in this regard. Arterton sets out eleven conditions for a successfully democratic televote, and determines that the Hawaii televote model is suspect in many respects including access, agenda setting, sample validity, and eventual impact on policy outcomes.¹⁷ Consequently, while Arterton recognizes that new technologies can indeed overcome the simple barriers of time and space that have always made direct democracy impracticable, he observes that televoting on this plebiscitarian model has difficulty ful-

filling some of the more meaningful procedural and qualitative conditions for a vigorous and inclusive democratic practice.¹⁸

Recently, the emergence of sophisticated interactive and network technologies has revived interest in electronically enhanced democratic practices that extend beyond simple televotes. One result of this interest is the availability of government and political documents "on-line." In the United States, Republican House Leader Newt Gingrich has led the way to a "virtual Congress" by making Congressional documents available to citizens through a computer network named "Thomas," after Thomas Jefferson.¹⁹ President Clinton and Vice-President Gore, in the interest of "forging a new Athenian age of democracy," can be reached by citizens via electronic mail.²⁰ In Canada, many legislators are accessible via e-mail, and the federal government, as well as a number of national and provincial parties, make information available via the National Capital FreeNet. A handful of parties have even produced "home pages" on the World Wide Web of the Internet.²¹

A second manifestation of the increased interest in interactivity has been a proliferation of electronic town hall meetings, particularly since the populist candidate Ross Perot used them to such great effect in the 1992 U.S. Presidential election campaign (Schwartz, 1992; Wright, 1995). Since that time, government leaders throughout the United States and Canada have been involving themselves in similar efforts to bolster their profiles as open and responsive representatives. Thus far, scholarly analysis of these exercises has been limited, but some early commentary on the American cases can be found in a report by Jeffrey Abramson (1992). Based on his observations of electronic democracy over the past three decades, Abramson identifies several issues pertaining to the democratic character of mediated town meetings. These include: sample validity, equality of access to participation, citizen input on issue selection and agenda setting, the depth of prior educative activity supporting the exercise, and whether the kind of interaction enabled is genuinely empowering or merely plebiscitarian in nature.

The Reform Party's teledemocratic program is substantially similar to that employed in both the *Hawaii Televote* model and the recent electronic town halls in the United States, and can be measured according to similar democratic criteria. More than other Party representatives, Reform MPs portray themselves as delegates, bound by Party policy to transmit the opinions of the majority of their constituents, and are committed to exploring communications technology as an instrument likely to enhance their ability to fulfill this role. In contrast to the Party discipline and partisanship that causes "old-line politicians" who "don't care what their voters think" to misrepresent their constituents, Reformers have been quick to embrace televoting technology as a means to "facilitate the public will" in a way that other parties can or do not (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14,

1994).²² Similarly, by re-enfranchising the private individual, the Reform Party believes this technology mitigates the “tyranny of the minorities”—the ability of “special interest groups” to “get everything they want, to the detriment of the people paying the bills” via the disproportionate influence they exert over the policy process (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 22, 1994). Again, deferring the question of whether this constitutes, or even contributes to, a sufficient foundation for the construction of a rich democratic discourse, it is helpful to evaluate Reform’s recent applications of this technology in terms of the minimal qualitative conditions standards they set for themselves.

If the intent of these exercises is to usher in “a type of government that more accurately reflects the will of the people” (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14, 1994), it must first be established whether the swath of opinion cut by this technology represents that will reliably. Understandably, social scientists have consistently dismissed the statistical validity of the results garnered by the Reform Party/MT&T televote model.²³ In each case under review here the sample population was self-selected rather than randomly generated, which compromises the validity of these samples in two ways. First, because PINs were not distributed in either the *Canada Speaks* televote or the national opinion poll portion of *Referendum '94*, there was nothing to prevent interested parties able to pay the user fee from registering their opinion multiple times.²⁴ Granted, the registered voter portion of the latter exercise was restricted to single access PIN holders. However, neither it nor the other sample populations escape the tendency of self-selected samples to exaggerate the preferences of those with strongly held beliefs or established opinions on the issue under scrutiny. It is ironic, given the Reform Party’s goal of using this technology to negate the undue influence of well-organized “special interests” by generating an accurate portrait of majority opinion, that these exercises could really only be counted on to amplify the voice of a specially interested minority.

The Reform Party’s position on the issue of sample validity is ambiguous. In the wake of *Canada Speaks*, Preston Manning recognized that “these, of course, are responses calling in to a television program. They are not a scientific sample” (Delacourt, 1994, p. A3). Nevertheless, he was content to accept the results as a clear indication of the people’s will. How does Reform reconcile this apparent incongruity? To answer this question, one must understand that the Reform Party is keenly aware of the meddlesome influence of experts who, using statistical methods, mould and distort the views of ordinary Canadians to suit the purposes of the mandarins and special interest groups that commission their services. In the Reform Party’s view, randomized opinion polls may be “scientifically valid,” but they are still suspect precisely because *not* every citizen with a strong opinion or interest gets to participate. The Party

appears convinced by MT&T's proposition that their model of opinion gathering is less prone to error and more representative than traditional methods, simply because the opinions of the self-selected sample are registered and tabulated immediately, without any intermediary interpretation or methodology to distort them.²⁵ However, the unambiguous, accurate registration of a self-selected sample's opinion does not eliminate the fact that the sample is self-selected and therefore seriously unrepresentative of the population as a whole. Why the Reform Party is willing to countenance what it knows to be a lack of scientific validity should become clear later, when a performative analysis of these exercises reveals the payoff for this compromise.

It could be argued that the Reform Party values the "universal suffrage" made possible by televoting more than the reliable capture and accurate characterization of the popular will. In fact, one of the selling features of the MT&T televoting system is that it is "designed so that everyone who wishes to participate, can" (Michael Pollard, marketing director for teledemocracy services, MT&T, North Vancouver, personal communication, June 14, 1994). Or can they? At the very least, citizens interested in participating in these exercises must have access to a touch-tone telephone, a television set, and basic cable services—admittedly, a low-property qualification in the current context, but a property qualification nonetheless. More seriously, those who wish to be counted in a Reform Party televote must be willing and able to pay for the privilege of doing so, and in the cases where PINs are not distributed, those who have the wherewithal to finance multiple calls can ensure that their particular voice is heard more often than the voices of their less affluent neighbours. Despite the fact that in the case of *Referendum '94* a significant minority of North Vancouver residents appear to have been deterred from participating because of the user fee, the Reform Party does not see this as seriously challenging their claim regarding "universal suffrage" in televotes.²⁶ Instead, they appear content to use ability-to-pay as a means test: those with the means to pay for it qualify for political representation, while those without means do not. In the opinion of MP Ted White: "If somebody's not prepared to pay \$1.95 to cause their MP to carry out their will in Parliament, then why do I owe them any representation?" (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 22, 1994).

It would not be unreasonable to suggest that those deterred by the user fee were responding more to ideological concerns than economic limitations and that, for all but the most disadvantaged, a one-time \$2 fee is not a major financial obstacle to participation. This may be true, if all we are talking about is the odd televote now and then. But if, as the Reform Party seems to predict, televoting becomes a more regular feature of Canadian political life, the accumulated expense of repeated user fees may compromise the ability of those on fixed incomes to participate fully and vigorously at a level consistent with

those for whom these fees do not force difficult economic choices. Providing the infrastructure for a televote is not cheap, but serious consideration must be given to whether the methods employed to finance such endeavours compromise their democratic character. When financing entails participation predicated on economic means, democratic criteria inevitably suffer.

It should be clear that this is not an indictment of the process of televoting itself, but rather a charge against the pay-per-vote model of funding democratic participation. An obvious alternative would be to publicly fund televotes through taxation, but this is an option that runs counter to the spirit in which the Reform Party envisions this technology being used. One of the main attractions of televoting carried out through this model is that it "reduces the unit costs of democracy" by eliminating the need for the costly bureaucratic administration and subsidies accompanying general elections in Canada (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, press conference, June 24, 1994). Public funding would probably also necessitate a degree of regulation that private corporations providing the technology used in these exercises would be reluctant to accept (Michael Pollard, marketing director for teledemocracy services, MT&T, North Vancouver, personal communication, June 14, 1994). Removing the financing of such public exercises from the private realm would also likely curtail the ability of opposition interests such as the Reform Party to freely wield and configure this technology to suit their own purposes. Certainly, private interests should not be barred from using these technologies, nor should they be prevented from financing their projects in whatever legal ways they please. As it stands, any "special interest" group can pay to sponsor a self-promotional teledemocratic event, just as they can disingenuously manipulate public opinion using traditional polling techniques in ways the Reform Party finds offensive. The point is that when it comes to public actors such as political parties using televotes to affect public policy, and when these actors make claims about the democratic nature of these processes, they must be held to a higher standard than the one reached by the user-fee model.

Teledemocracy, in fact, holds great potential for individuals or groups to make specious claims about public opinion in order to legitimize their established ideological positions and policy demands. The only difference between this model and traditional opinion polling in this regard is that here the wielders of public opinion can make claims, again specious, that the process by which preferences were gathered was more democratic and less distorting than random sampling. This assertion is difficult to sustain in light of the fact that this model of televoting is prone to exactly the same sort of manipulation based on agenda setting and question orientation that plagues most opinion polling. So far, the Reform Party's endeavours in the field of teledemocracy have been unable to escape this criticism.

One of the most convincing critiques of the *Hawaii Televote* model is that it does not involve citizens in setting the agenda of issues to be addressed either in televotes or electronic town hall meetings (Arterton, 1987).²⁷ Democracy involves not only giving citizens choices on issues determined by elites, but should also encourage communities to decide for themselves which sets of issues require their collective attention. Despite their apparent gravity, and near-saturation levels of coverage in the Canadian mass media, it is not clear that the subjects of the Reform Party's electronic town halls to date—national unity and the public debt—were those which citizens themselves saw as pressing concerns requiring immediate, direct democratic attention. In the case of *Referendum '94*, it is clear that the selection of violent youth crime and the YOA as topics for community consideration had little to do with a thorough effort to solicit from citizens a sense of which issues most concerned them. When asked how he came to identify this issue as significant enough to merit the application of an electronic referendum, MP Ted White listed a number of indicators. These included: the volume of coverage the issue of violent crime receives in the mass media, the testimony of a teacher who had noticed an increase in discipline problems in the classroom corresponding to the cessation of corporal punishment, personal observations of declining levels of respect for authority amongst the younger population, and anecdotal accounts of youths loitering and spitting at the entrance to the local McDonald's restaurant (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 22, 1994). Capitalizing on a vague and unsubstantiated "general feeling that there is some order that has broken down" (Ted White, personal communication, June 22, 1994), constitutes neither an appreciation of the actual gravity of the issue, nor a genuine attempt to glean community priorities from an open and comprehensive process of prioritization and agenda setting. The Reform Party has indicated that it intends to reserve the application of teledemocratic technologies to "major concerns" and "serious issues" (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14, 1994). In the absence of a clear enunciation of the criteria involved in making such determinations, and if the procedure employed to date is any indication, it is difficult to see how the formation of political agendas by citizens through a bottom-up process is integral to the Reform Party's application of teledemocratic technologies.

The Reform Party states a preference for the "universal suffrage" of teledemocracy over traditional opinion polling partly because, in the latter practice, it is too easy for partisan pollsters to find exactly what they are looking for by embedding a bias in the questions posed to respondents. However, in each of the experiments under consideration here, the questions posed to respondents seemed highly unlikely to produce results other than they ultimately did. For instance, given the tumultuous uncertainty characterizing the

Canadian federation in recent decades, it is highly unlikely that the *Canada Speaks* question asking respondents if they wished to see the national unity issue "settled once and for all" would elicit anything other than an answer of "yes." Similarly, in the current climate of distrust in political institutions, it would be unreasonable to expect Canadians to opt for "governments and political leaders" over "the Canadian people" as the architects of this settlement. What is the value of these questions and the predictable responses they produced if nothing new or unexpected was learned through them? What does "once and for all" mean? Who are "the Canadian people"? And what is a "bottom-up process"? That *Canada Speaks* suggested neither answers to these questions nor a coherent policy direction is of little concern to the Reform Party because these were clearly not the goals of this exercise. The goal of this exercise was, instead, the legitimization of policy positions already held by the Reform Party. By asking questions lacking in specificity, the Reform Party could be confident of evoking responses that could be easily construed as supportive of their established agenda in this area. Even in the case of *Referendum '94*, where the questions asked were somewhat more clearly defined, there was little danger of a result that ran counter to the Reform Party's expectations or current policy. Questions posed to voters all dealt with either violence or increased incarceration, neither of which represent the full range of issues and/or possible solutions pertaining to youth crime.²⁸

Certainly no set of questions, on their own, could encompass the entire range of considerations required to make a sound democratic decision on any issue. It is generally conceded by even the most pretentious democrats that any solicitation of the public will should be accompanied by a concerted effort to encourage the thorough edification of that will prior to its expression. One of the criticisms often levelled at direct democracy initiatives is that rather than being exercises in conscientious participation, they merely exploit the unreflective, irrational reactions of an overwhelmed and underinformed populace. The Reform Party appears to strike an ambivalent posture in relation to these charges. On the one hand, they are justifiably reluctant to stipulate that certain bases for democratic judgment are more legitimate and worthy of attention than others. According to MP Ted White: "I don't feel that it is my duty to make a judgment about the reasons people choose to vote . . . if they vote on religious grounds or emotional grounds, that's just as valid as somebody who does it totally by logic" (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14, 1994). Yet, like any party engaged in public discussion, Reform wishes to be seen educating the voters whose opinions they are soliciting.

Did a substantial level of civic education occur in these exercises? The evidence would suggest not. Despite an acknowledgment that "you need lots and

lots of public discussion to make sure everybody is ready for the vote when it comes" (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14, 1994), it does not appear that the Reform Party made a concerted effort to contribute to this readiness. In the case of *Canada Speaks*, aside from the brief televised forum itself (which took place at the end of the voting period), pre-poll education on the issue under consideration consisted of a Reform Party advertising broadsheet that "was not widely distributed" (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal correspondence, October 28, 1994) and a tour by Reform Party Leader Preston Manning organized primarily to promote the event itself, rather than to engage the arguments surrounding the national unity question. The householder distributed prior to *Referendum '94* was somewhat more comprehensive, but unfortunately it also suffered from distribution problems.²⁹ Callers to a 24-hour helpline were directed to various social agencies and victims' advocacy groups for more information, but no concerted effort was made to encourage satisfactory public consideration of the complexities involved in the policy area under scrutiny. Apparently confident that "there is tons of information out there" (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 22, 1994), the sponsors of *Referendum '94* did not organize any public meetings or forums where citizens could engage one another on this issue. Time constraints were cited as the reason for the inability to organize ongoing educational sessions (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14, 1994). However, it is difficult to imagine what the source of these constraints might have been, other than a desire to capitalize on the currency of the issue or to keep the entire exercise compressed to enable its easy packaging as a discrete news event.³⁰ It seems that the Reform Party's enthusiasm for the technology of direct democracy overreaches its understanding of the political and educational foundations of conscientious civic engagement in democratic decision-making.

In 1992, a meeting of academics, politicians, and technologists on the subject of electronic town hall meetings produced a "report card" against which such events could be judged (Firestone, 1992). The criteria for a successful democratic exercise of this kind were as follows: that participants should be as fully prepared and educated prior to the event as possible; that the meeting should be equally accessible to all citizens concerned; that the agenda and responses should be free from outside manipulation; that participation should extend beyond simple "yes or no" type questions; and that deliberation be encouraged over instantaneous judgment. It seems clear that the Reform Party televotes and electronic town hall meetings to date have failed to meet all of these democratic standards.

A performative assessment of teledemocracy

The foregoing analysis was based on the assumption that under certain ideal conditions, teledemocratic technologies can be used to elicit and communicate a clear, unambiguous expression of community will in a way that is conscientious, inclusive, and undistorted by manipulation. The Reform Party televotes were judged in terms of their status as constative utterances, or descriptive expressions, of citizen preference, subject to assessment according to their truth-value.³¹ Thus, it was determined that because these televotes did not meet the aforementioned ideal standards of inclusive, unmanipulated, and conscientious participation, the resulting iteration of community preferences was not as accurate, reliable, or "true" as it would have been had these conditions been met.

The measurement of actual practice against a set of democratic ideals was useful insofar as it revealed the extent to which the Reform Party neglected to satisfy the requisite conditions for the sort of meaningful direct participation to which it is rhetorically committed. However, the partisan and electoral exigencies of contemporary political life, coupled with the availability of increasingly sophisticated techniques of opinion management, make it highly unlikely that such conditions will ever be met in the teledemocratic spectacles organized by elected, partisan policymakers. The political momentum yielded by the appearance of synchronicity with public opinion is too valuable to be left to the contingencies of an open, conscientious, and unmanipulated process. Accordingly, the modern science of opinion management is geared not towards the discovery of the "truth" about the public will, but rather towards its creation. In this climate, the conditions required for a confident and credible statement of what the whole of the people *truly* want in any given case may be so demanding as to be effectively impossible to realize.

Yet it is probably safe to predict that the profile of spectacles such as those under consideration here will continue to grow and will become a more significant element of our political life. If we concede that teledemocracy in the real world suffers from a disinclination, or perhaps even an inability, to facilitate a clear locution of democratic will, then simply proving the point over and over again by measuring actual exercises against this expectation will not enrich our understanding of either their current function or their potential. Instead, we must accept that these are not the expectations which inform these practices, and we must re-orient our investigation to a more pertinent set of questions. For instance, where should we begin to look for the source of this technology's appeal to neo-conservative, populist political actors like the Reform Party? What does it achieve for them? Furthermore, if we are resigned to this shortcoming, then at what level can we hope to retrieve a democratic use for these technologies? In what sense can they be used to encourage and nurture a more, rather than less, democratic political culture?³²

In this section, I would like to suggest that the answer to these questions and, indeed, the key to a deeper appreciation of the significance of teledemocratic politics, lies in an account of the performative aspects of this set of practices. In its linguistic usage, a performative utterance is a type of sentence that prompts an action to be performed by virtue of its expression.³³ Such utterances are not judged by veracity of their locutions, but rather according to the illocutionary effects they implicate—the climate they inspire, the forces they motivate, and the discourses they shape—often merely by indirection or insinuation. It is via these performative iterations that language actively constitutes and constructs social and political reality, rather than merely acting as a neutral medium for its description or representation.³⁴ The same can be said of teledemocratic practice: unable to act as passive, transparent media for the expression of civic will, electronic town halls, televotes, and other similar technological devices are useful primarily as instruments for the construction and maintenance of political cultures and democratic discourses of one variety or another. The particular cultures or discourses that are fostered and sustained depend on the way that these practices are carried out, and the manner in which their technologies are deployed.

The Reform Party appears to be well aware that the primary value of teledemocratic exercises is performative rather than constative. In fact, the evidence suggests that the Reform Party is relatively unconcerned with either the inadequacy of these exercises as reliable and accurate opinion-gathering devices, or even the veracious portrayal of the responses they do receive. In each of the cases under scrutiny here, the Reform Party has been quick to point out that it is aware that the process involved is not “scientific,” and that the resulting sample is not “statistically valid” as a representation of opinion at large.³⁵ Nonetheless, the Reform Party promises to act on the basis of these responses, which can only be construed as an indication that they are relatively unconcerned about whether these techniques help them to direct their actions according to the wishes of the majority of Canadians or not, and that their interest in conducting these exercises must lay elsewhere. This was illustrated in the case of a locally televised forum in Calgary on April 17, 1994, in which Preston Manning sought direction on the issue of assisted suicide, a practice to which he was personally opposed. When most respondents indicated a preference for legalization, the Reform Party Leader failed to commit himself to voting in favour of such a measure. This equivocation led at least one Party insider to suggest that Manning “is not serious about voting according to the consensus of the constituency” (Flanagan, 1995, p. 171).

The same could also be said of *Referendum '94*. Prior to the televote MP Ted White insisted that at least 50% of the 70,000 registered voters in his North Vancouver riding would have to participate before he could be confident of having received a decisive direction from his constituents (Ted White, MP,

North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14, 1994). Despite this seemingly firm threshold, when less than 10% of voters actually registered opinions, White had somehow “come to feel comfortable with the results” and decided to act upon them anyway (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 22, 1994). Once again, a commitment to adhere only to a thorough expression of citizen preferences was clearly not a priority of this exercise. Similarly, a disregard for the need to communicate an accurate portrayal of public opinion may also account for the Reform Party’s spectacular inflation of the actual rate of participation in the *Canada Speaks* televote. Apparently, creating the illusion that 10,000 people were involved in this exercise was more important to the Reform Party than either a truthful account of the real numbers or an accurate estimation of Canadian opinions about national unity and federalism.

Why might this be the case? Why would a party publicly committed to the unmediated representation of majority opinion solicit and depict it so carelessly? The answer is that an accurate representation of public opinion is not the goal motivating the Reform Party’s use of teledemocratic technologies. Instead, it is the performative aspiration of creating a democratic discourse conducive to the realization of other aspects of the Reform Party’s ideological agenda that directs these applications. Before making a case for how the technological exercises discussed here were configured to achieve this, a brief characterization of the main elements of Reform’s ideological program is necessary.

Investigations into the ideological foundations of the Reform Party have yielded a high degree of consistency. According to David Laycock, an expert on Canadian populism, “the major thrust of the Reform party project is to redefine Canadian public life by substantially contracting political—and often democratic—modes of decision-making in policy spheres that deal with distributional issues” (Laycock, 1994, p. 214). Richard Sigurdson agrees: “For Manning, the crucial goal is to dismantle the federal bureaucracy and privatize as much government activity as possible” (Sigurdson, 1994, p. 273). It appears that the Reform Party’s core ideological commitment is to the protection of the “natural” market distribution of economic, political, and social values. In this view, attempts by the state to use re-distributive policy instruments in order to redress substantive inequalities are condemned as unnecessary interventions in the market, which in turn necessitate taxation regimes that unduly burden individual property-holders. The chief beneficiaries of this public largesse are the “special interests” and the “new class” of bureaucrats who are their patrons. In the Reform Party’s estimation, “a special interest is seen as any group that requests publicly provided benefits that require governments to skew market distributions of resources” (Laycock, 1994, p. 217).³⁶ Special interests so defined are juxtaposed with “ordinary Canadians”—the

people who pay taxes to a government that ignores their demands as individual citizens. The Reform Party positions itself as the "representative of the unrepresented," ready to champion the cause of the silent majority of individual citizens battling the tyranny of vocal and organized minorities (Laycock, 1994, p. 220).

Given this self-image, it is curious that the Reform Party has pursued a strategy that results in a contraction of the public sphere of democratic decision-making. By portraying traditional representative structures as captured by organized interests bent on perverting the market allocation of value, the Reform Party is able to make a seductive case for diminishing the political arena in which these interests operate. In making appeals directly to "the people," Reform performs an end-run around the mediating/meddling influence of organized interest groups, public institutions, social agencies, and advocates. Once free from the nefarious charms of organized interests and the bureaucrats beholden to them, "ordinary Canadians" are able to exercise their discretion as consumer-voters and express their wishes in a free market of political and economic options. As if by magic, public, collective, and political concerns are properly converted into isolated, individual, private choices, and an entire layer of relations between civil society and the state spontaneously vanishes (Laycock, 1994). Considered in this context, Reform's campaign on behalf of direct democracy emerges as simply instrumental to their broader goal of reducing the role of organized interests, state bodies, and representative structures in the public policy process. This reduction of citizens in communities to individual consumers in markets is a key element in the Party's strategy to depoliticize and privatize public life.

Teledemocracy as practised by the Reform Party is tailor-made for this contraction of the public sphere. Traditionally, plebiscitarian televoting schemes have identified the shortcomings of the representative system—most notably the influence of special interest groups—and have explicitly targeted these perceived deficiencies (Hollander, 1985; Slaton, 1992). This is consistent with one of the featured benefits of MT&T's teledemocracy services package, namely, that "it has the capability of removing special interest groups" (Michael Pollard, marketing director for teledemocracy services, MT&T, North Vancouver, personal communication, June 14, 1994). This coincidence of the technology's strengths, and one of the key points in Reform's ideological agenda, probably accounts for much of the Party's enthusiasm for teledemocracy. This goal was publicly affirmed by the Party prior to each of the televotes under scrutiny here, and when asked about his affinity for this technology, MP Ted White readily confirmed its primary appeal: "It is going to break down special interests" (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 14, 1994). Indeed, plebiscitarian teledemocracy

removes the practical need for any type of group or institutional mediation in the formation and articulation of individual preferences.

When individual voters are able to express established private choices directly from the isolation of their homes, the social processes and political institutions which moderate particular interests in light of the needs of the community as a whole are effectively eliminated (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988). This negative consequence of plebiscitarian teledemocracy becomes a strength in the Reform Party's view because it is precisely these institutions and processes that foment special interest group claims which implicate the state as something more than a protector of property and enforcer of market freedom. By locating Reform's priority in these exercises in the marginalization of the mediating institutions and interests that involve the state in distributional decisions, we begin to understand why democratic values such as educating and enriching citizens by encouraging *ongoing* participatory processes are unimportant to them.³⁷ We might recall the Reform Party's lack of serious effort in engaging voters *prior* to the televotes. When asked what ideas he had for continued citizen involvement in finding a solution to the problem of youth crime *after Referendum '94*, Ted White responded by saying: "I think they've done their piece on this. . . . I think this process is pretty much over" (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, personal communication, June 22, 1994). Clearly, he could not have answered otherwise, because to recognize the educative value of ongoing participation is to endorse precisely the role that mediating groups and institutions play in a vibrant democratic political culture.³⁸

The reduction of democratic participation to a series of isolated transactions in an open market where votes are currency also explains the Reform Party's mistaking "pay-per-vote" for universal suffrage. In its neo-conservative guise, democratic equality consists of an equal right to accumulate and dispose of one's property in the marketplace as one sees fit; it does not necessarily entail equal access to political participation regardless of means. This market orientation, shared by the Reform Party, explains the Party's willingness to "reduce the unit costs of democracy" by enfranchising only those who pay to participate (Ted White, MP, North Vancouver, BC, press conference, June 24, 1994). Citizens who hold strong opinions on a particular issue should be willing to pay to have that opinion heard. On the other hand, special interest groups and costly state agencies simply artificially amplify the interests of people who do not value their opinion sufficiently to finance its expression on their own. Appropriately, in the Reform Party's view, user fees for participation merely enable the invisible hand of the market to naturally muffle the voices of those who are overly reliant on the intrusive hand of the state.

The most appealing performative benefit of these technologies is that they enable political parties to diminish democratic public life while claiming to

enhance it. As practised by the Reform Party, teledemocracy is reduced to an elaborate and safe public relations performance. Without risking an elicitation of responses that do anything other than vindicate pre-established positions, plebiscitarian teledemocracy allows its practitioners to present themselves as champions of citizen empowerment and consultation.³⁹ Tom Flanagan, former Reform Party Director of Policy, Strategy, and Communications, described the *Canada Speaks* exercise as a "nationally televised forum with phone-in questions designed to elicit a show of support for [Manning's] strategy" (Flanagan, 1995, p. 195, emphasis added).⁴⁰ Genuine grass-roots participation in the formulation of agendas and questions becomes unnecessary in light of this goal. In terms of issue selection and question design, the Reform Party's teledemocratic agenda appears oriented towards "the construction of problems to justify solutions" to which they are already ideologically committed (Edelman, 1988, p. 21). By using this technology, the Reform Party is able to raise issues and manufacture opinions conducive to shrinking the public sphere, using a process that itself embodies this goal, while appearing to do exactly the opposite. Contrary to claims regarding their celebration of the potential of "ordinary Canadians," Reform Party televotes and electronic town hall meetings amount to little more than carefully managed spectacles.

It might be argued that the conduct of a few Reform Party MPs surrounding the federal government's controversial gun control legislation in 1995 (Bill C-68) indicates that the Party is somewhat more committed to the will of the people, "come what may," than I have argued here. Indeed, three members from urban ridings—Ted White of North Vancouver, Ian McClelland of Edmonton, and Jim Silye of Calgary—voted against the party line and in favour of the gun control bill, in accordance with scientific polls conducted in their constituencies (Hansard, 1995). However it should be noted that gun control is not a "distributional issue" to which the Party is committed as a core ideological value, and can therefore be more safely submitted to the vagaries of scientifically solicited public opinion. Also, it is instructive to note that, in this case, two of the Party's leading figures—Preston Manning and Stephen Harper—voted against the legislation despite the fact that their seats are in the same urban area as the one in which Silye's polling data indicated popular support for the bill. Manning declined to poll his own riding on the issue because he was confident his constituents would not be willing to pay for a gun registration program, and he dismissed a national Angus Reid poll showing that Canadians were 2 to 1 in favour of firearms control (Ha, 1995). Thus, I would argue that support for gun control by these three MPs acting as delegates represents the exception, rather than the rule, when it comes to the seriousness of Reform's commitment to genuine direct participation. Consequently, this isolated incident is not a good indicator of the dominant thrust of Reform's teledemocratic endeavours.

Conclusion: Towards a deliberative theory of teledemocracy

In this paper I have argued that while the Reform Party's practice of teledemocracy can be criticized insofar as it fails to meet the standards commonly applied to exercises of direct democracy, a deeper understanding of what is at stake in their use of this technology requires a performative analysis. It was found that teledemocracy as practised in spectacles like *Referendum '94*, *Canada Speaks*, and the *National Tax Alert* is well suited to a democratic discourse that seeks to contract the public sphere by marginalizing mediating state and interest group influences in political decision-making processes. It was also found that this performative orientation could be traced to the Reform Party's neo-conservative ideological commitment to the market distribution of economic and political values. In this sense, teledemocracy emerged as the perfect tool for eliminating opportunities for meaningful democratic participation, under the guise of creating them.

In my estimation, the model employed by the Reform Party in their activities to date does not provide us with a suitable basis for exploring the possibilities of qualitatively democratic applications of telecommunications technologies. The question remains as to what the basis for such a model might be. As I suggested previously, the modern tendency to harness sophisticated techniques of opinion management to partisan political goals makes it unlikely that the conditions necessary for the procurement of a reliable, undistorted, constative iteration of the public will through technological media will be fulfilled in the foreseeable future. This reality, however, does not diminish the performative capacity of teledemocratic practices. Recognizing this, the Reform Party has configured this technology in a particular way, in order to achieve one set of performative goals.

Is it just as possible to make teledemocracy serve a different set of performative values? A comprehensive articulation of an alternative model reaches beyond the parameters of the present discussion; however, I would like to suggest that discovering the democratic potential of these technologies may hinge on their being deployed pursuant to the performative goals of expanding the public decision-making sphere and encouraging a more deliberative political culture.⁴¹

Critics of direct democracy have pointed to its tendency to amplify unreflective, unrefined, irrational, and uneducated opinions on what are really complex issues requiring more sophisticated consideration (White, 1994a). Similarly, recent considerations of the increasing role played by electronic communications in bringing citizen pressure to bear on the policy process have complained that the necessary deliberative role of political elites is being dangerously eroded (Wright, 1995). Both of these positions imply that deliberation by qualified elites is a process intended to offset the deleterious effects of direct citizen participation in political life. By contrast, I will proceed under

the assumption that deliberation is a democratic process that is most beneficial when it takes place *between citizens* rather than among or by elites. None of the Reform Party televotes and electronic town halls encouraged citizen-to-citizen engagement in the formation and consideration of alternative perspectives on the issues raised. Instead, these exercises were conducted on the model of elite deliberation—supposedly qualified experts engaging in mock solicitation of public input, embracing those opinions which support their own, and dismissing contrary preferences as the sentimental longings of an uninformed electorate.

One model of deliberation that might help orient technological possibilities toward the performative goal of a more democratic political culture involves what Claus Offe & Ulrich Preuss (1991, p. 167) have referred to as “a radicalization of the principle of democratic participation.” According to Offe & Preuss, deliberation requires the “introduction of procedures that put a premium upon the formulation of carefully considered, consistent, situationally abstract, socially validated and justifiable preferences” (Offe & Preuss, 1991, p. 167). The key here is that this process occurs among citizens. Expressed another way, “The process of deliberation may be summarized as a ‘probing of volitions’ . . . [citizens] forming and reforming their conceptions of their own good, the good of the groups to which they belong, and the good of the larger polity” (Mansbridge, 1992, p. 35).

Intrinsic to this notion of deliberation is the belief that preferences are considered, formed, and changed *through* deliberative activity and not prior to it. In the Reform Party experiences with teledemocracy, participation amounted to the registration of previously established opinions, the fixity of which enabled the easy manufacture of pre-determined quantitative results. Instead, democratic deliberation should be seen as the moment that *precedes* choice, in which outlooks are often changed before they are fixed (Mansbridge, 1992). As a result, a properly deliberative exercise should embody a genuine openness to the contingency of a variety of potential outcomes. As expressed by Bernard Manin (1987, p. 347): “What is evident, simple and luminous does not need to be *deliberated* in the strong sense of that term. On the contrary, deliberation is necessary for what is uncertain, when there may be reasons to decide one way but also reasons to decide another way.” Realistically, we cannot expect (or require) every participant in a democratic decision-making process to have a well-articulated, clear, thorough, and coherent set of previously formed political preferences on every issue to which they may wish to contribute (Manin, 1987). We can, however, construct participatory exercises that enable and encourage citizens to reach conscientious conclusions on a wide range of issues through the process of deliberation itself. Thus, **deliberative political practices should facilitate consideration of not only the opposing points of view held by citizens confronting one another, but also a perusal of**

the multiplicity of viewpoints that may exist within individual citizens themselves on any given issue. In this way, the monological isolation of registering private preference through voting is replaced by the dialogical formation of public priorities through deliberation (Offe & Preuss, 1991).

The performative benefit of basing teledemocratic practice on this set of deliberative priorities stands in stark contrast to that initiated by the Reform Party's application of these technologies. As David Laycock argues, the Reform model of atomized democratic participation "reduces opportunities for broadening political perspectives or developing social decision-making skills. Citizens are left more entrenched, often no further ahead in comprehending issues of public significance, and with diminished incentives for engaging in the public sphere of genuine dialogue" (Laycock, 1994, p. 245). Furthermore, tethered as it is to their own idiosyncratic ideological program, the Reform Party's brand of teledemocracy ultimately de-legitimizes the decisions and outcomes produced via their televotes and electronic town hall meetings. Teledemocracy configured on a deliberative model could potentially reverse these regressive and anti-democratic effects.

Deliberation has the capacity to relieve the threefold alienation that has thrust the representative model of liberal democracy into a state of crisis: the alienation of citizens from the processes by which the decisions which most closely affect them are made, as well as from the people who make them; the alienation of citizens from one another; and the alienation of individual citizens from the social knowledge required to make conscientious and community-oriented political decisions (Offe & Preuss, 1991). Significantly, the educating and informing of discussants that takes place in a deliberative setting need not occur at the behest of elites "enlightening" ignorant voters, but rather can be the product of citizens encountering considerations beyond their particular private life-world through contact with other citizens whose views, needs, and priorities may differ markedly from their own (Manin, 1987). Aside from being confronted with differences that may cause them to reshape their own views, citizens in a deliberative setting are also likely to discover and generate bases for commonality that may have gone unnoticed in a competitive, plebiscitarian accounting of private preferences (Mansbridge, 1992). Finally, this sort of serious engagement of citizens in public decision-making processes has the potential to confer legitimacy on those processes and their outcomes, to a degree that traditional forms of democratic representation, as well as Reform's electronic plebiscitarianism, have seemingly been unable to achieve or sustain (Manin, 1987).

Noticeably absent in this enumeration of the performative features of deliberative political practice is the assertion that deliberation is likely to lead us to the "truth" of various matters, or even to more rational or optimal policy decisions. If we are to take the possibilities of deliberation seriously, we must be

prepared to accept the sobering fact that the quality of its *outcomes* will not always be improved according to the standards—standards of economy, rationality, and efficiency—we customarily apply to policy decisions (Offe & Preuss, 1991). If rationality of results was the condition for engaging in a deliberative enterprise, then very few people would be admitted into the process, thus negating the very grounds upon which open, public deliberation is predicated. Indeed, the minimum premise a deliberative political culture must be prepared to accept is that “in many cases there is no ‘right’ answer” to be culled from the myriad of incommensurable viewpoints, needs, and priorities extant in contemporary democratic societies (Burnheim, 1985, pp. 112-113).

Deliberation does not seek necessary conclusions that cannot be rejected because they are absolutely true. On the contrary, deliberation involves the constant undermining of this very conceit by confronting the possibility that, in many cases, the “right” answer is not always the best one. If the goal of democratic politics is simply the procurement of universally acceptable, “right” answers to policy questions, then deliberation becomes superfluous—there is no need to weigh and consider that which is self-evidently true. Casting democratic decision-making as an exercise in rational truth-seeking effectively disenfranchises those whose contributions do not fit this mould, and in performative terms debases the notion of active and engaged citizenship. As Offe & Preuss put it: “The social and political world in which we live is much more complex than the attitudes and value-judgments that it still permits us to get away with. This imbalance amounts to our being less intelligent and responsible citizens than we might wish to be” (1991, p. 169). By eschewing the exclusive certainty of rationally established truths in favour of the open consideration of stronger and weaker arguments, democratic practices that encourage meaningful deliberation would enfranchise those who are neglected in decision-making processes aimed at reaching necessary conclusions (Manin, 1987).

This framework of assumptions does not, in itself, provide for the practical and material conditions of deliberative political practice. Indeed, the establishment of viable deliberative institutions will be difficult given the degree to which elite-driven, non-dialogical forms of communication continue to dominate principal sites of political socialization such as the mass media, the workplace, and public government. At a minimum, such practice would require extensive and open citizen-to-citizen engagement on issues of their own selection, under conditions they set for themselves, over an extended period of time, on an ongoing basis. Citizens should also have a reasonable expectation that their deliberations will actually have an impact on the determination of the policy issue under consideration. Recall that none of these minimal conditions were met in the Reform Party exercises: issues were selected by the party elite, citizen-to-citizen contact was not encouraged, participation consisted of

single iterations of opinion in highly circumscribed time periods, and the exercise served only to reinforce previously established policy positions. To be meaningful, deliberative exercises must also nurture the kind of robust argumentation and articulation of differences that the Reform Party's rather sanitary plebiscitarian model seems designed to studiously avoid (Arterton, 1987). Finally, it seems clear that for participants in deliberative endeavours to enjoy the benefit of making informed determinations, some type of mediating structures—most probably interest groups—are required to do the work of gathering and disseminating relevant information and experiential resources, and to supplement citizens' own knowledge reservoirs (Mansbridge, 1992).

This preliminary enumeration only begins to confront the practical necessities of a deliberative, dialogical political culture and practice. A more comprehensive consideration of these issues is clearly necessary. Proposing deliberation as the core of a procedural ethos for teledemocratic practice does not, in itself, provide for the substantial structural requirements of putting this ethos into effect. Up to this point, all I have suggested is that the deliberative model represents a performative goal for teledemocracy that is, in qualitative terms, more worthy of that name than the simple plebiscitarian tallying of manipulated private interests. Further, I have argued that it is at least plausible that deliberative teledemocracy can contribute to the stimulation of those democratic capacities which now lie dormant in a substantial portion of the citizenry.⁴² On the way to this conclusion, I have also argued that attention to the deliberative model reveals the shortcomings of the Reform Party's use of these technologies more thoroughly than was possible without measurement against this performative standard.

This does not mean that teledemocratic technologies *themselves* are incapable of being put to creative democratic uses. It simply means that they must be deployed with the performative goal of encouraging meaningful deliberation in mind, rather than according to the more limited horizons envisioned by the Reform Party. It is indisputable that telecommunications technologies have the potential to bring citizens together in genuinely democratic encounters on a scale previously impossible and to put more relevant information at their disposal so that they might make informed and conscientious political decisions.⁴³ These technologies become particularly exciting in democratic situations where the currency of exchange is dialogue, rather than simply votes. But nothing in the technology itself will determine if it will be put to this constructive use or not. Instead, whether teledemocracy will be employed to enlarge or to shrink the public sphere remains contingent on the choices of those who configure its deployment.

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Notes

1. Concise expressions of this trend can be found in Boyer (1992a, 1992b). For a good critical review of this and related literature, see White (1994a).
2. This sort of initiative is clearly advocated in Reform Party Leader Preston Manning's *The New Canada* (1992), pp. 324-325.
3. For a discussion of 13 such experiments in the U.S., including electronic town hall meetings, legislative teleconferences, televotes, and electronic referenda, see Arterton (1987).
4. The British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Alberta Liberals, as well as the Saskatchewan Progressive Conservatives, have all utilized this technology, with varying degrees of success. The federal Progressive Conservatives have also indicated that they will adopt televoting for their next leadership selection convention.
5. A possible, though limited, exception to this may be Wright (1995). A more typical media treatment of this issue can be found in Feschuk (1994). For scholarly analysis of recent leadership televotes, see Adamson, Beaton, & Stewart (1993) and Blake & Carty (1994).
6. It should be noted that MT&T was involved in each of the electronic leadership selection exercises alluded to in note 4 above. In its promotional material, MT&T's teledemocracy services division markets televoting as "democracy at your fingertips."
7. The Minister's amendments included increases in the maximum sentences for first- and second-degree murder to 10 and 7 years respectively, an automatic elevation of 16- and 17-year-old violent offenders to adult court, and an increase in the minimum time before youth murderers could seek parole from 5 to 10 years.
8. Constituents who did not have access to a touch-tone phone were encouraged to contact a 24-hour helpline to make alternate arrangements.
9. A charge of 95 cents was levied for each additional minute a voter spent on the line. The amount of the user fee was calculated as follows: the telephone company charged 35 cents per minute for use of a 1-900 line, as well as 10% of the total billing amount as a collection fee; the remainder of the fee was calculated on the basis of the costs involved in administering the referendum. In this case, MT&T assumed a substantial portion of these costs as a promotional expense, thus artificially deflating the cost borne by the voter.
10. This figure is approximate because the actual number of respondents varied from one question to another: 4,606 responded to Question 1; 4,599 to Question 2; and 4,592 to Question 3.
11. The event was broadcast in English, with simultaneous French translation available through some stations. Due to satellite specification problems, the French and English sound signals were temporarily reversed in a number of significant areas, including Vancouver, Ottawa, and parts of Toronto. This may have caused some viewers to switch the program off prematurely.
12. Although organizers estimated that only 50 out of the 140 audience members present were Reform Party members, assembled participants were characterized as "an overwhelmingly pro-Reform audience." See "Technical Woes Plague Reform TV" (1994, p. A3).
13. A few weeks prior to *Canada Speaks*, Manning issued a call for "a complete overhaul of the federal system" (Alberts, 1994, p. A9).

14. Similar characterizations were presented in "Technical Woes Plague Reform TV" (1994) and Woodard (1994). A Reform Party leaflet promoting the *National Tax Alert* town hall referred to *Canada Speaks* and asserted that "Almost 10,000 Canadians took advantage of this opportunity to voice their opinions."
15. It should be noted that a precise measurement in this regard was not *technologically* impossible. MT&T could have configured the system to isolate the exact number of callers but the Reform Party was apparently uninterested in this figure.
16. For a brief, uncritical overview of the early history of teledemocratic experiments see Becker & Scarce (1987). For accounts of similar experiments, see Barber (1984), Becker (1981), and Etzioni (1972).
17. Arterton's 11 criteria also include questions of cost, modes of participation (individual- or group-based), and educative value. Some of these criteria will be applied in the assessment of the teledemocracy experiments under consideration here.
18. See also Abramson, Arterton, & Orren (1988, pp. 19-22).
19. This network was an explicit part of Gingrich's "Contract with America." See Gingrich (1994, pp. 186-188). See also Phillips (1995, pp. 65-68). For more on Gingrich's views about computer technology and politics, see Dyson (1995, pp. 107-112).
20. President Clinton receives over 2,000 pieces of e-mail a day, more than anyone else on the planet. See "E-lectioneering" (1995, p. 213).
21. For instance, the federal NDP can be found at <http://www.fed.ndp.ca/fndp>. The Reform Party home page is at <http://www.reform.ca:80/index.html>.
22. It should be noted that while White's sentiments should not automatically be equated with Reform Party policy, his views on representation and direct democracy generally correspond to those of the Party and its leadership. Also, White is one of the Party's designated experts on democratic reform.
23. See Harry Joe's comments on *Referendum '94* in Morton (1994). For a similar assessment of *Canada Speaks* see Stan Drabek, as quoted in Barnett (1994).
24. Abramson (1992, p. 10) specifically cites multiple registration of opinion as one of the primary problems relating to sample validity. It should be noted that there is no way of determining whether multiple registrations actually occurred in this case.
25. According to Michael Pollard, MT&T's marketing director for teledemocracy services, "It's not 90% reliable 19 out of 20 times—it's fact" (personal communication, North Vancouver, June 14, 1994).
26. In a newspaper survey conducted shortly before the televote, 35% of those polled indicated that they would not participate because of the fee (Brown, 1994).
27. This point is also stressed by Abramson (1992, pp. 8-9).
28. For statistical evidence and expert opinion that violence figures in only a minor portion of youth crime and that increased punishment fails as a deterrent or rehabilitative strategy, see Howard (1994).
29. The *Referendum '94* broadsheet was not stuffed into individual mailboxes in apartments in the riding, but instead left in piles in the foyers. Given the significant number of apartment dwellers in North Vancouver, and the tendency of most people to avoid "junk-mail" when at all possible, this probably means a substantial portion of White's constituents did not even see the householder.
30. In fact, an unreleased report prepared by the Party's Special Projects Manager on the basis of the *Referendum '94* experience recommended that the period of time between public notification and the actual vote be reduced (O'Keefe, 1994, p. 2).
31. A constative expression is a descriptive statement that can be judged empirically as either true or false. For instance, the statement "the Earth is round" is a constative utterance. The constative utterances emanating from the Reform televotes would read something like "the people are in favour of harsher sentencing practices for juvenile offenders" or "the people prefer a comprehensive, grass-roots overhaul of federalism."

32. Here I am referring to a kind of democratic culture in which citizens enjoy a high degree of conscientious participation in the decisions which most clearly affect their lives. For contemporary theoretical expressions of this perspective, see Barber (1984), Kaufman (1960), Macpherson (1977), Mansbridge (1994), and Pateman (1970).
33. For concise outlines of the differences between constative and performative speech acts, see Crystal (1991), Harris (1992), and Malmkjaer (1991). For more comprehensive theoretical discussions of this area of linguistic theory, see Austin (1975) and Searle (1969).
34. This is the central claim behind the "linguistic turn" in philosophy, literary theory, and the social sciences. For a basic discussion of the relevance of this position to the study of politics, see Edelman (1988), especially chap. 6, "Political Language and Political Reality."
35. Preston Manning's comments to this effect have been noted above. Similar comments were made about *Referendum '94* by Ted White (personal communication, June 14, 1994) and by the moderator of the *National Tax Alert* electronic town hall, February 12, 1995.
36. According to this definition, feminist women's groups, aboriginal organizations, organized labour, multicultural and linguistic groups, directorates of crown corporations, gays, lesbians, students, environmentalists, public sector workers, and even the province of Quebec are all deemed by the Reform Party to be "special" interests.
37. Evidence of the Reform Party's indifference in this regard can be found in the unreleased "implementation guide" produced by the Party after the North Vancouver televote. While the guide goes into detail regarding technical configuration and strategies for increasing "revenue recovery" and "response rates," nowhere in its nearly 40 pages is there substantial discussion of improving voter education or encouraging deliberation in the build-up to a televote (O'Keefe, 1994).
38. For an account of the role interest groups play in democratic deliberation, see Mansbridge (1992). For examples in the Canadian context, see Dobrowolsky & Jenson (1993, pp. 45-46, 66, 68).
39. The initial Calgary town hall on assisted suicide was, of course, an exception to this rule. It would seem, however, that the Party quickly learned from this mistake.
40. Flanagan offers similar observations of other prominent "democratic" efforts by the Reform Party, such as the 1992 Winnipeg Assembly, which was "carefully designed to produce the desired results" (1995, p. 30); and the 1993 federal election campaign wherein Party platform literature was printed *prior* to the public meetings at which those platform positions were supposed to be established.
41. Abramson (1992) has also identified deliberation as a necessary element of a truly democratic electronic politics.
42. For an eloquent assertion of the likelihood that the majority of citizens have democratic capacities waiting to be developed, see Macpherson (1977, pp. 99-108). Despite agreeing on the existence of such capacities, Macpherson is more certain than I am that, in his words, "Electronic technology . . . cannot give us direct democracy" (p. 98).
43. For a preliminary discussion of the very real potential of these technologies in democratic decision-making, see Barber (1984).

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