Ágora: democracy 2.0 in the Cuban municipality

Rogelio Díaz-Méndez[1]*, Julio Antonio Fernández Estrada[2] and Adrián Hernández-Méndez[3]

Abstract

In this document we project the construction of an interactive platform named Ágora to assist the citizens in the electoral process at municipal level in the Republic of Cuba. The platform is designed to take advantage of the overlap between the elements of the so-called democracy 2.0 and the extensively participative features of this municipal electoral process. The increase of internet penetration observed in the recent years suggest the possibility of an organization of the political discussion online, grouping the actors according to their own terriorial electoral structures, in which their nominations and votes will have real power at the moment of the nomination assemblies and later suffrage. Additionally, we consider that the inclusion of the "election of ideas" as an essential functionality of the platform extends the necessity of the debate beyond the electoral period, keeping a constant influence over and feedback from the structures of the municipal government. The relevance of this project is consistent with the new legislation on municipal autonomy, in a modern and particularly healthy exercise for the Cuban democracy.

Keywords

Cuba — Democracy 2.0 — Municipal Assembly

[1] PhD in Physics from the University of Havana, former professor at the Technological University of Havana (CUJAE), researcher at the Department of Physics, KTH - Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden.
[2] PhD in Law and former Full Professor from the University of Havana, columnist at On Cuba and El Toque, member of the board of Centro Cristiano de Reflexión y Diálogo de Cárdenas and of Laboratorio de Ideas Cuba Posible, Havana, Cuba.
[3] MSc in Informatics from the Technological University of Havana (CUJAE), PhD student at the Technical University of Munich and senior software developer at Lean Information Exchange (LeanIX), Bonn, Germany.
* nep2n0@gmail.com

Contents

1. Introduction

The main scenario of political debate has clearly and visibly moved to the cyberspace in the last years, in a shift that has been widely studied [1, 2]. A process of decentralization of the political narrative started with the extensive use of internet through, among others, the proliferation of blogs with political, social and economic content, from which a wide variety of messages are spread with unused reach and speed in large scope of ideological positions [3, 2]. But it is with the boom of social networks, particularly facebook and twitter, that the exchange of opinions and consequently the validation of information sources has predominantly moved to the online world, being the personal meetings in real space way less frequent and almost always planned online.

In this context Cuba is a belated case. Well behind most countries regarding connectivity and internet penetration, the Cuban blogosphere has developed in a roughly unbalanced political ground that is still characterizing the online discourses. This unbalance, that thrives on the extreme political polarization between two opposed country visions and eclipses the valuable contribution of a myriad of non-radical positions, has permeated the debate in social networks as well. In the latter, however, since political exchange is not the primary function, a higher level of tolerance can be observed. It is likely to expect that the quality of the political debate online and the general tolerance to new proposals and viewpoints will improve as connectivity extends within the country.

Moreover, at this point it make sense to provide new online spaces for the Cuban citizens that can temper and upgrade the political exchange. As we discuss here, this enhancement can be done by closely linking the online political debate with the grass-root electoral structures of the process.

1.1 Democracy 2.0 and Cuban municipality

The non-well-defined concept of democracy 2.0 (D2) is based precisely in taking advantage of the integration of the electoral actors via online mechanisms [4, 5]. In the context of the capitalist representative democracy, the spirit of D2 introduces a double novelty. Firstly, it uses technology as never before to organize the debate and validate the popular expression. And secondly, this scheme generates an active empowerment of the electoral basis that is inconsistent with representatives nominated a priori and with predefined discourses. From this point of view, it is understandable that the current conceptions on D2 has been developed more from a legislative direction, as election of ideas via citizens' initiative, than from a purely political approach involving election of representatives. Nowadays, however, valuable attempts of practical experiments in both directions witness some success and begin to accumulate a knowledge based on experience about the concrete ways of implementation [6, 5].

On the other hand, this bottom-up approach that can be transgressor for the democracy of a representative establishment, has a very different reading from a participative democracy, as it is the case of the municipal elections in Cuba. Cuban municipal assemblies are elected according to a non-partisan process in which delegates are not only voted in their circumscriptions, but also directly nominated by the community in public open meetings. In such an scheme, the essential elements of D2 fit gently and naturally with the actual electoral process. The electoral idea in the Cuban municipalities has in principle no contradiction with the fundamentals of the strategies of online representatives election. In this way, and unlike most countries, the implementation of D2 in the Cuban circumscription could be basically a matter of time. Unfortunately, even if convincing the institutional will, the required time and infrastructure cost to implement a D2 system for each municipality, with digital votes that can be validated by the national electoral council, are disappointingly large for the country at this point.

The municipal electoral process would of course benefit from a D2 approach. In general terms, the strong polarization of the political discourse has negatively influenced the quality of the debate in the community, and particularly the quality of the representation. Thus, electors that in small inter-personal exchange display a rich scope of ideas and proposals, do not find a ground for communal validation of these positions as could happen by a more wide and sustained debate. As a result, this lack of collective confirmation translates into a tacit mistrust at the moment of the nominations. A D2 strategy, promoting in advance the exchange of opinions and visualizing nominable electors, would strongly contribute to shape a well-informed elector that can individually form a clear opinion on, for instance, what the motivations of a critic candidate are or why shouldn't be nominated herself.

But a D2 strategy can be conceived as an additional element to the process, and not necessarily implies the full implementation of a D2 electoral system. It is with this aim that emerges the idea of build up, from the civil society, a platform inspired in D2 that runs parallel to the municipal electoral process. The platform presented below includes many of the most relevant characteristics of previous implementations of D2 systems and suits without conflict to the Cuban process with the goal of improve the quality of the democratic praxis in the community.

1.2 The platform

Ágora is the word used in the ancient Greece to name the square where citizens used to meet and discuss becoming the political center of the city [7]. Ágora the platform, will try to emulate this very circumstance but including at the same time the technical and conceptual advances on democracy obtained in the last centuries. This sort of ágora 2.0 will have an open and public code in github.com and will be hosted under the domain agora2.org.

In our context, it is maybe convenient to start by letting clear what Ágora is not. In particular three essential points:

1. It does not correspond to any particular ideological system, though it respects what it is explicitly regulated in the Cuban constitution.

2. It is not a parallel electoral nor propagandistic system, but an interactive system of debate and feedback for the Cuban citizen.

3. It does not obtain funds from any source other than natural persons with voting rights in Cuba, through voluntary, regulated and transparent contributions.

The main goal of the platform is to organize the public debate of the community in the cyberspace, so that the visibility of all the actors can be boosted in a highly interactive environment. As we show below in detail this will be done by means of chat rooms, surveys, sets of questions and answers to electors and other type of interactions. There will be a protocol of supports to leaderships that allows the electors to (collectively and individually) identify and validate their preferences in order to perform a well-informed electoral process.

Every Cuban citizen with voting rights and internet connection will be able to access the platform via the website or the mobile application and look for the portal of her own circumscription. There will be a debate, of the same kind of that of the neighborhood, where she can identify potential candidates with which it will be possible to interact in order to get a reliable idea of how do they think, if they want to be nominated to the municipal assembly, etc. Each elector, including those willing to be nominated, will have a profile with information that is optional and includes answers to a number of pre-defined questions from the platform as well as others that any user can pose. The tonic of the debates of course will be on topics related with political, economic and social issues both local and nationwide. Additionally, Ágora will include an implementation of an election of ideas, that is,

the online creation and validation of proposals for legislative initiatives at municipal level.

It will be important to keep an active feedback in the debates, updating the electors with the most important metrics regarding ideas, topics and leaderships. There is a fundamental type of feedback that will be naturally established when every delegate of the municipal assembly have its own active account in Ágora. There will be also upated information of the activity of the delegates in the sessions of the assembly, what have them voted, what have them proposed, etc. In this way the specific design of the platform will try to encompass and boost the political debate.

2. Characteristics and functionalities

To interact with the platform a user account is required. There will be two types of users: electors and observers. Any citizen with vote rights can have an elector account after proper verification. On the other hand, any person connected to internet can have an observer account. An observer can do many of the things an elector can as participate in the debates, explore all the site, make direct questions to the electors, etc. but can not "give supports" nor "receive supports". Only a elector can give or receive support.

2.0.1 Supports

The supports can be seen as a sort of potential votes. If an elector user gives support to, say, Paula Alí, it means that she agree with Paula in general terms. Or maybe that she would like Paula to be her delegate, or another position within the electoral process, eventually don't need to be clear. What is clear is that the elector has a political identification with the support recipient, Paula Alí in this case.

Any elector can give (receive) support to (from) any elector. Any elector and can give support to as many electors as she wants. That means that a single elector can receive many supports coming from the same number (or the same number minus one) of other electors. A support can be withdrawn anytime exclusively by the elector that gave it.

For each elector there will be a distinction between the supports received from electors of her own circumscription, appearing in color red in the web interface, and the supports received from electors of other circumscriptions, appearing in color blue. Red supports will be very useful for everybody to have information on the state of the circumscriptions and to promote the debate. Blue supports will also feedback the circumscriptions from a more general perspective.

Supports can be anonymous. That is, at the moment of giving a support, the elector can choose to remain anonymous, so that nobody knows whom the support is coming from. The platform, nevertheless, will properly classify these anonymous supports in blue or red.

2.1 The profiles

Every user with an elector account has a public profile that all other users can see. In this profile two items are mandatory:

Name and Availability (yes or no) to be nominable. For an elector user to be nominable it requires for him to have marked yes in the profile and to have at least one red support. This is done in correspondence with the rules of the actual nomination meetings of the communities. Whoever has one or more red supports but has marked no in the profile will be called pre-nominable. The availability can be changed in the profile anytime.

In the public view of the profiles it will be visible the number of red and blue supports the electors have. In all cases it will be also explicit the fraction of the supports that comes from anonymous electors and, as an option, the names of the electors that gave its non-anonymous support to this candidate.

In the profile of the electors an item will be the circumscription to which the candidate belongs, which may or may not be public depending on the desire of the candidate. If this information is not public the platform will perform accordingly, so that for this elector all the supports received will be blues and all the supports given will be anonymous. This candidate will not be (pre-)nominable.

The profile of the electors will have additionally other non-mandatory items as, for instance, foto, short bio, short intro and personal links. Additionally the electors can voluntarily answer the official survey (OS) of the platform as well as direct questions (DQ) from other electors. These answers will be visible in the elector profile and she can edit it any time. Any elector or observer can formulate DQ to any elector in her profile. No one will be forced to answer them.

The profile of users with observer accounts will have only the items of name (mandatory), foto, short bio, short intro and personal links. Observers can not be object of DQ, but they can formulate DQ to electors.

2.2 Election of ideas

The mechanism of election of ideas is organized in Ágora on the basis of a supports system similar to that of the nominable electors. In the case of ideas, they have to be presented in the form of proposals of laws, lwas-project or decrees of municipal or territorial reach and will be stored in the ideas bank (IB) of the site. This bank will be accessible by all users, and the electors will be able to give and withdraw their support to any of the ideas anytime.

Any user with an elector account will be able to propose and write down an idea that will be automatically stored in the IB and publicly shared. The platform will dispose special forms for the elaboration of ideas. As an option, it will be also possible to write it collaboratively through a wiki server.

2.3 Interface structure

In the Ágora web site, each of the circumscriptions of the country will have its own page. Each of them will have a chat room, open for all users. These chat interface will have an option to visualize separately (with columns or tabs) the contributions from observers, electors and electors from the

corresponding circumscription.

In the page of a circumscription will also appear the list of nominables and prenominables, ordered by number of supports or other criteria. The list of all electors of this circumscription will be visible as well, except for those who don't want her circumscription to be public. Additionally, in the page will appear the list of ideas from the IB that has supports from or were created in this circumscription.

A page will be devoted to every municipality, showing statistics of the corresponding circumscriptions: electors, nominables, prenominables, ideas, activity and other metrics of the debates. Eventually extracts of debates, ideas or short texts related to the local context. Just with the aim of fueling the debate and always avoiding to become a news media. Every municipal page will have its own debate (chat) room.

A similar page will exist for each province, with its respective statistics and chat room. Finally, the main page will show all the nationwide statistics of Ágora and an interactive Cuba map in which circumscriptions can be visually navigated. The platform will include help support, ethics rules, etc.

3. Technical points

3.1 Team and funding

The team in charge of building and maintaining Ágora will work pro bono. The list of the names and work content of its members will be publicly accessible in the web site. Each team member will be strongly committed with preventing her personal ideological bias to influence the purely democratic spirit of the platform.

The topic of funding will be of the greatest importance. The platform will be extremely transparent regarding the handling of money and extremely ethic regarding the sources of money. In particular there will be three basic rules to observe:

1. The founding will come exclusively from volunteer contributions of natural persons with vote rights in Cuba.

2. The sum of the contributions of a single person cannot exceed a fixed maximum value in a single month. This value is initially set to 100 euros.

3. The current state of the money account has to be publicly updated in the platform website every month.

3.2 Offline electors

One major problem for Ágora is the high number of electors with no internet connection. To partially overcome this issue the platform should include some functionalities for offline use. One is to develop a mobile application in which the last discussions, leaderships, statistics and feedbacks can be stored offline. This functionality will extend to the download of full profiles, with answers to DQ and OS, as well as ideas from the IB.

This of course will not directly impact the online debate, but the users will be able to easily take the information to their homes. This is instrumental, since most Cubans today connect from their work or from public wifi places. In this way the debate can be indirectly enriched and extended by the interpersonal daily exchange between the users and their family and friends. This has a double effect since it enriches the opinions of the users and boost the personal discussions of the offline environment.

3.3 Policies of debate control

There have to be a completely transparent policy to control the debate so that the ethic rules are observed. This is a particularly sensitive point in our context since debates are expected to become highly emotional on many points. An adequate policy of advices and sanctions to the user accounts will be established by the team. This will be done under the principle of maximization of the dialog and with the only aim of make Ágora to become a frame in which all opinions can find space and respect.

4. Conclusions

In a Cuba were everybody can connect to internet from home, the implementation of a D2-like electoral system will be the natural option for the municipal level. The participative, non-partisan democracy of the Cuban municipalities excels its representative counterpart in the possibility of using the technological advances on social interaction in a natural way, boosting an already existent mechanism that has, basically, the same structure than D2. Far from this ideal moment, a precarious connectivity and a low level of familiarization with the social networks are the main pitfalls to face in such an intent. It is a fact, however, that in one way or the other the connectivity gap has been constantly decreasing in the last years. In this way, what today seems restrictive, in ten, five or perhaps three years could be sufficiently general. Why should we wait?

Ágora is envisioned to shorten that time. Designed to run parallel to, and not to be, the electoral process, the platform will have the possibility of organize the political debate at the community level. Starting with online electors and expanding to homeplaces and streets with offline functionalities, Ágora will open a tempered space of discussion and validation of opinions and representatives reviving the democratic process.

References

[1] H. Zúñiga, E. Puig-I-Abril, and H. Rojas. Weblogs, traditional sources online and political participation: an assessment of how the internet is changing the political environment. *New Media & Society*, 11(4):553–574, 2009.

[2] J. W. Holmes and R. S McNeal. Social Media Use and Political Mobilization. *International Journal of Public Administration in the Digital Age*, 5(4):50–60, 2018.

[3] S. Valenzuela, Y. Kim, and H. Gil de Zúñiga. Social Networks that Matter: Exploring the Role of Political

Discussion for Online Political Participation. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 24(2):163–184, 2012.

[4] Jacob Devaney. The Dawning of Democracy 2.0. *HuffPost*, Octubre 2017.

[5] World Forum for Democracy. https://www.coe.int/en/web-/world-forum-democracy/democracy-2.0, 2019.

[6] L. Kortobi. Présidentielle 2017 : Charlotte Marchandise, candidate de la société civile. *Le Monde*, enero 2017.

[7] Wikipedia. Ágora — Wikipedia, La enciclopedia libre. https://es.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%C3%-81gora&oldid=114951525, 2019.