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<center>Elderly Populations and Digital Voting Accessibility</center>

Introduction

By the year 2050 the United States is projected to have over 83.7 million people over the age of 65

(Ortman, 2014); this increasing proportion of elderly is not limited to the United States. The current

global leader in proportion of elderly to other demographics, Japan, is projected to have nearly one third

of its population over the age of 65 by 2050 (Haas, 2007). As the US and world prepare to accommodate

such a drastic shift in age proportions, little attention is being paid to the **negative externalities**

associated with how technology will impact an increasingly large segment of the population. One of the

most substantial of these externalities is the disenfranchisement of elderly voters through the

digitization of democratic processes.

Electronic Access and Elderly Populations

Today it is common to visit a restaurant, grocery store, or pharmacy and be forced to interact with a

computer or mobile device instead of a person. These systems act as gatekeepers to many essential

items and services. In many cases, if one is unable to interact with them effectively, they are deprived of

a product or good. Currently, the concept of these machines acting as a gatekeeper is not very evident

as they work in tandem with their human counterparts. For example, there are still attendants watching

over the self-checkout at a grocery store. This may not always be the case though, and soon the elderly

population will be facing these electronic gatekeepers alone, this time with greater implications beyond

shopping in a store. In a potential violation of the principles of **access for all**, voting in many

democracies appear to be moving steadfast towards electronic systems (Alters & Kooreman, 2009).

There are two primary electronic systems which have been proposed or implemented that could

change the way in which people access voting systems. The first option, electronic voting machines

(EVMs), are similar to traditional systems where people are forced to turn out in person. The difference

is in how the ballot is cast; with EVMs voters must navigate an electronic kiosk where their vote is

digitally tallied. The second option, which appears to be slightly further on the horizon, is mobile voting

through personal devices. Such systems have already been deployed in states like West Virginia where

they are used to allow midterm votes from government employees currently serving overseas

(O'Sullivan, 2018). Both of these systems alter the fundamental ways in which citizens are able to

participate in and access democratic processes like voting.

Digital Access and Disruption of Current Voting Practices

In Eszter Hargittai and Gina Walejko's (2008) article 'The Participation Divide', the authors examine the

rate at which people share content or participate in online forums with regards to their gender and skill

level. They conclude that once data is controlled for skill, there were no observable differences in

participation between men and women. If rates of participation are based more on skill rather than

gender could the same be said for age? More specifically, if older people are less able or willing to learn

new skills, might they be less inclined to vote as these new technological systems replace more

traditional methods? This question is posed in Gary Roseman Jr and Frank Stephenson's (2005) paper

'The Effect of Voting Technology on Voter Turnout: Do Computers Scare the Elderly?'. The authors

conclude that every 1% increase in the elderly population is associated with a 0.3-0.4% decrease in

turnout when electronic voting technology is implemented. In addition to the statistical evidence that

the elderly are less likely to vote given greater technical requirements to do so, these technologies also

pose an **ethical dilemma** as the pros and cons of digital voting bring **access** to some groups while

simultaneously taking it away from others. There are several valid points being made on both sides of

the argument. Those in favor of digitization and the eventual mobile option would argue that people

who have physical issues or disabilities, like the elderly, would be able to participate in democratic

processes with much less physical exertion (Kshetri & Voas, 2018). However, this benefit is not without

consequence: "Elderly voters, for example, might be familiar with the old voting machines but

apprehensive about computerized voting. If this is the case, the fear of new voting technology might

cause the turnout of elderly voters to decrease." (Roseman & Stephenson, 2005). While technology may

reduce the physical requirements associated with voting, it props up a whole new barrier, a knowledge

based one where understanding use of the technology replaces physical distance as a gatekeeper. As

many portions of the elderly population are disabled and reliant on others for transportation the

digitization of voting truly appears to be a double-edged sword for the entire elderly demographic.

Reduction of Negative Externalities Through Policy Decisions

The benefits and drawbacks of electronic enabled voting are so numerous and apparent that effective

and clear policy will be critical in its successful implementation. If digital voting is not implemented

properly then an entire portion of the population is at risk of having their voices unaccounted for. A

threefold approach for handling the transition to digital voting could reduce the scope of negative

consequences associated with it. The first part of the policy would involve setting up educational

programs where voters could receive training on the proper use of the systems. This includes the

creation of extensive accessible documentation combined with community outreach and personal

training sessions. When the state of Georgia rolled out electronic voting, the systems came with an

expense of 4.5 million for training the users. The results of this training were not studied carefully and

thus it cannot be said if such training further scared elderly voters or helped them to turn out in greater

numbers (Roseman & Stephenson, 2005). In order to create a successful digitization policy, the

uncertain effectiveness of these training sessions will need to be controlled through the second part of the policy. The second part of the policy dictates that data must be collected and analyzed for variance in voter turnout over time. This analysis includes studying other democracies and establishing a **global knowledge partnership** where ideas, processes, and technologies can be exchanged openly. The final and most necessary step of the policy involves providing options to those who wish to participate in democratic processes. According to a paper written by Robert Stein and Patricia Garcia-Monet (1997) early and absentee voting "reduce the cost of voting by increasing opportunities, affording candidates more time to mobilize their supporters". The authors conclude that options provided as alternatives to election day polling increase democratic participation especially among the disabled and elderly. With a proven track record of increasing voter turnout, providing options to voters will be a cornerstone of the successful digitization of voting. It is important to note that unforeseen externalities may only surface when digital voting implementation is well underway. For that reason, it is important to maintain a **veil of ignorance** when updating policy, being especially sure to avoid assumptions relating to technical skill level.

Conclusion

As technology and the age of populations rapidly increase, societies will be forced to realize and confront issues as they develop through innovative policy. When combined with properly designed and implemented policy the benefits of digital voting counteract any potential downsides involving marginalization of the elderly demographic.

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