

## OLD POLITICAL MACHINES, HI-TECH RIDERS

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It has been a month since we finally learned that George W. Bush will be the next president of the United States. Pundits have issued their solemn assessments of the presidential-selection process and moved on to comment on the next wave of momentous events in our adrenaline-charged political universe. But in their rush, they've missed a key lesson behind the fracas in Florida.

It's important to be clear about what Florida didn't teach us: we didn't learn anything decisive about the need for Electoral College reform, about whether states require common voting procedures, or even about the politicization of U.S. courts. But we did learn something about the effect of new information technologies on politics.

I received a sharp introduction to this new reality in my Toronto office, of all places. A few days after the U.S. election on November 7, an email from an American friend popped onto my computer screen. Although I was far removed from events in the Sunshine State, the email contained the text of the Florida statute dictating that a ballot's punch holes should be to the right – not to the left – of candidates' names.

To obtain such information twenty or even ten years ago, I might have spent hours on the phone, sent multiple letters and faxes, and even paid money to someone in Florida to locate and send me a copy of the law. Now, this information flashes around the world in the blink of an eye.

New information technologies – including email, the Web, and computerized blast-faxes and phone calls – have fundamentally changed the landscape of political competition in our modern democracies. They've done so in three ways: by dramatically boosting the access of individuals and special interests to politically potent information, by making it easier for such people to coordinate their activities and exert political power, and by greatly increasing the pace of events within our political systems. As people learn that key information – such as an obscure Florida statute on ballot design – is easier to access, and as they find it easier to mobilize

themselves, their political expectations rise. They become acutely sensitive to events affecting them, and they know far more about their rights. Moreover, because the Internet makes it much easier for them to join together to raise a ruckus, they have greater expectations that they can protect their rights.

Yet rising expectations have run headlong into the third consequence of modern information technologies – the ever-greater pace of political events. As things happen faster in our political world, there's less time for reflection and less time to produce the complex bargains that legitimate democratic politics often requires. In other words, there's less chance that rising expectations will be satisfied.

In Florida, we glimpsed exactly these unsettling realities of the hypermedia age. In the early hours of November 8, as it became clear that the presidency hung in the balance, advocates were already launching email campaigns and laying down HTML code for dozens of new Web sites. In only three days, just one politically active company in San Francisco mobilized its customers to generate 600 protest calls an hour to the U.S. Department of Justice and to send 100,000 email messages that filled mailboxes throughout Florida. Meanwhile, partisans on both sides instantly filed lawsuits across the state.

As Americans watched events unfold minute-by-minute on CNN and MSNBC websites, a kind of mass electronic hysteria took hold. And when the Supreme Court finally brought events to a shuddering halt (with a decision of dubious legitimacy), many Americans felt that their democratic system had failed them – that it had rendered them voiceless, in some indistinct yet profound way.

Herein lies the essential paradox of politics in the hypermedia age, a paradox that all of us in high-tech democracies must heed: our marvelous new information technologies boost our political power and opportunities for political engagement, but they can also disempower us, by contributing to extreme political mobilization that sometimes overwhelms our democratic institutions. These institutions were designed for rural societies operating at a tiny fraction of today's speed and with a citizenry vastly less capable than today's. It's unclear how they will change to adapt to the new reality, but change they must.