

WebRoots Democracy submission to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy

Introduction.

[WebRoots Democracy](#) is a pressure group campaigning for the introduction of an online voting option in Local and General Elections in the United Kingdom.

In addition to this, we are an organisation that intends to reverse growing political apathy and low electoral turnout in the UK, particularly amongst young people.

Whilst political apathy has a variety of causes, we recognise that we live in an age of distraction and rapid technological advances. As such, we are also campaigning for an accessible, informative, and interactive election website to help reach out to new voters.

We are working with youth organisations, disability charities, academics, electronic voting providers, political parties, politicians, and other public individuals to achieve the aims of our campaign.

WebRoots Democracy is an independent, non-partisan organisation.

Recommendation.

WebRoots Democracy recommends that the Speaker's Commission supports the introduction of an online voting option in UK elections so as to help create an accessible democracy fit for the 21st Century.

Initial findings.

WebRoots Democracy is currently conducting research into online voting before publishing a detailed report on the subject later this year. As part of this, we are asking people across the UK to take part in our survey into online voting and internet usage.

We would like to share our initial findings with the Commission to help inform their view.

Current sample size: 164 respondents. 151 of these have completed the survey online.

The results from the online survey are detailed below; those from the paper version are not yet available. 54% of respondents are aged 16 to 25.



90% are interested in politics

90% of respondents said they are **'interested in politics'**.

Of these respondents:

- 89% use Facebook and 87% use Twitter.
- 53% use Instagram and 45% are on Snapchat.
- 90% said the internet has made it easier for or been used to encourage them to take part in political action.
- 96% have signed an online petition before.
- 71% said they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online.
- 88% think there should be the option of being able to vote online in UK elections.
- 53% of these respondents are female.
- 58% are aged between 16 and 25.

Only 12 respondents said that they are not interested in politics and is thus a figure that currently holds little statistical significance.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the following:

- 11 of these respondents believe the internet has made them more aware of political issues.
- 8 said the internet has made it easier for or been used to encourage them to take part in political action.
- 10 have signed an online petition before.
- 11 said they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online.
- All 12 said that they think there should be the option of being able to vote online in UK elections.
- 10 of these respondents are female.
- 7 are aged between 16 and 25.



72% voted in the May 2014 elections

72% of respondents said they **voted in the May 2014 Local Council and European Parliament election.**

Of these respondents:

- 91% use Facebook and 87% use Twitter.
- 49% are on Instagram and 42% use Snapchat.
- 93% said the internet has made them more aware of political issues.
- 90% said the internet has made it easier for or been used to encourage them to take part in political action.
- 97% have signed an online petition before.
- 68% said they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online.
- 88% think there should be the option of being able to vote online in UK elections.

Of the 28% that did not vote in the May 2014 Local Council and European Parliament election:

- 86% use Facebook and Twitter.
- 64% are on Instagram and 60% use Snapchat.
- 93% said the internet has made them more aware of political issues.
- 83% said the internet has made it easier for or been used to encourage them to take part in political action.
- 88% have signed an online petition before.
- 83% said they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online.
- 91% think there should be the option of being able to vote online in UK elections.



91% believe the internet has made them more aware of political issues

91% of respondents believe **the internet has made them more aware of political issues.**

Of these respondents:

- 89% use Facebook and 87% use Twitter.
- 54% are on Instagram and 47% use Snapchat.
- 89% said the internet has made it easier for or been used to encourage them to take part in political action.
- 95% have signed an online petition before.
- 73% said they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online.
- 89% think there should be the option of being able to vote online in UK elections.



93% have signed an online petition before

93% of respondents have **signed an online petition** before.

Of these respondents:

- 89% use Facebook and 87% use Twitter.
- 53% are on Instagram and 46% use Snapchat.
- 93% said the internet has made them more aware of political issues.
- 88% said the internet has made it easier for or been used to encourage them to take part in political action.
- 71% said they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online.
- 88% think there should be the option of being able to vote online in UK elections.



71% would be more likely to vote if they could do so online

71% would be **more likely to vote if they could do so online**.

Of these respondents:

- 91% use Facebook and 87% use Twitter.
- 60% are on Instagram and 51% use Snapchat.
- 94% said the internet has made them more aware of political issues.
- 94% said the internet has made it easier for or been used to encourage them to take part in political action.
- 94% have signed an online petition before.
- 100% think there should be the option of being able to vote online in UK elections.
- 56% of these respondents are female.
- 60% are aged between 16 and 25.



88% believe the UK should introduce an online voting option

88% believe the UK should introduce an online voting option.

Of these respondents:

- 91% use Facebook and 87% use Twitter.
- 53% are on Instagram and 49% use Snapchat.
- 93% said the internet has made them more aware of political issues.
- 91% said the internet has made it easier for or been used to encourage them to take part in political action.
- 94% have signed an online petition before.
- 81% said they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online.
- 56% of these respondents are female.
- 57% are aged between 16 and 25.

What have people been saying?

“It would make voting more accessible. Half the battle isn’t persuading people why they should vote, it’s actually about ensuring they take the time to have their say.”

“Online voting would be a more convenient, easier and familiar experience.”

“More people are likely to engage and the country’s leaders would be more reflective of the UK’s opinions.”

“Modern life revolves around computers and the internet, it’s time the political system caught up.”

“It will attract a younger generation to vote for whom the idea of going to a school or parish hall is anathema.”

“An online process would be really beneficial to those who can’t be there to vote in person.”

Reasons for not voting last May.

"I was still at work, unable to get to a polling station."

"I was away on a business trip."

"Couldn't be bothered."

"I don't know enough about what I'm voting for."

"Disability issues."

"I was at work during the day and didn't have childcare to go out and vote."

"Family emergency."

The UK's digital landscape.

The UK's current digital landscape ([Office for National Statistics - ONS - figures](#))

- 37.6million adults log onto the internet every day which is more than double the figure in 2006.
- 74% of people aged 55 to 64 use the internet daily compared to 36% in 2006.
- 42% of over 65s use the internet daily compared to 9% in 2006.
- 86% of 25 to 44 year olds use the internet daily as do 79% of 16 to 24 year olds.
- 84% of UK households have access to the internet compared with 49% in 2004 (when Facebook was founded) and 9% in 1998 (when Google was founded).
- 58% of people use the internet on their phones, 34 percentage points higher than 2010.
- 87% of young people use the internet on their phone.
- 11% of over 65s use the internet on their phone, and increase of nine percentage points compared to 2010.
- Figures of 'on-the-go' usage are higher when laptops and tablets are taken into account, with 68% in total using the internet on-the-go.
- 96% of 16 to 24 year olds use the internet on-the-go as do 80% of 25-34 year olds.

- 75% of people send emails.
- 74% of people shop online (87% of these transactions involving the provision of credit or debit card details over the internet).
- 55% of people access news online.
- 54% of people use social network websites.
- 53% of people bank online (an increase of 23 percentage points compared to 2007).
- 32% of the adult population have used the internet to complete and submit official forms.
- 23% of people use the internet for selling goods and services.
- 10% of people book GP appointments online.
- 91% of 16 to 24 year olds use social networking.
- 73% of 25 to 34 year olds access news online.

Concluding comments.

Comment from Areeq Chowdhury, WebRoots Democracy founder and chief executive:

The method of voting in the UK has remained largely unchanged in the past 142 years since Hugh Childers was re-elected as an MP in the first ballot box election in 1872.

Since that time, the way that people live their lives and interact with society has undergone dramatic advances allowing greater ease, efficiency, and accessibility.

No longer do people travel by horse and carriage; they use cars, buses, trains and planes.

No longer do people prefer homing pigeons, landlines and letters to communicate; they can Skype, WhatsApp, and Facebook each other.

And as we have seen from the ONS data provided in this submission, more and more people in the UK, year on year are utilising the opportunities that the internet provides for education, information, and financial transactions.

It is time therefore, that we recognise this cultural shift, one which has become greater in recent decades, and adapt our electoral system accordingly.

The ideal has to be to create a system where every citizen votes and votes willingly. Online voting can help move the UK towards this ideal.

Whilst it certainly isn't a silver bullet to the political apathy, the introduction of an online voting can help enable millions of the current population (in addition to the future more digital population) have their voice heard in the political process.

Issues such as political scandals, foregone elections, and out-of-touch politicians definitely do turn some people away from politics, but we must not ignore the changing culture of the modern age.

We live in a society that increasingly turns to email instead of the Royal Mail, is banking online instead of queuing offline, and is communicating with each other at unprecedented levels.

I hope the initial findings from our survey provided in this document serves to be a useful indicator of how people, particularly young people (the future of this country), learn about and engage with political issues through the internet.

Almost 9 out of 10 of our survey respondents are in favour of online voting, and almost three quarters believe it would make them more likely to vote. Whilst we have not finished this research, our initial findings are reflective of similar studies both carried out this year by Sky News but also in 2007 within the Citizenship Foundation Survey on the issue.

Online voting has a plethora of benefits not only for accessibility, but for creating more informed voters, eliminating accidentally spoilt ballots, and boosting turnout and legitimacy not just in national elections, but for smaller elections such as by-elections and PCC elections.

However, what I believe to be the most important consideration on this issue is that an online voting option would not simply provide another way to tick a box, it could revolutionise the way we run elections and future-proof them for the generations of UK citizens in the rest of the 21st Century.

I would urge to Commission to consider the concerns about security and risk with an online voting option that those who are against the reform are likely to highlight. However, risk and security issues exist in every corner of life and society. What is important is mitigating that risk and weighing it up against the benefits. There are numerous examples of electronic elections that have been secured across the world and within the UK. There are even more examples of sensitive online services used such as online banking, but also within the Government. The 2011 Census is a good example of this, but also the Government's use of cloud storage services for sensitive documents across Whitehall.

In addition to this, the tens of millions of UK citizens that use social media, online banking, and online shopping is strong evidence that citizens have trust in internet services.

Going back to the beginning of this statement, at every stage of technological cultural advancement, there will have been questions of risk and security. History has shown that these issues can be overcome and that the benefits have been immense.

The UK is often pointed to as a leader in democracy. However, with regards to digital democratic reforms, in particular with the introduction of online voting, the UK has been noticeably lacking.

I hope the Commission's recommendations can spark the beginning of the UK's leadership in this area.

WebRoots Democracy will be releasing a report later this year that will look into the potential for online voting in greater detail, in particular looking at costs, benefits, pilots, and security.

Kind regards and good luck.

Areeq Chowdhury

