

Submission to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy – electronic voting

The Electoral Reform Society has over 100 years of experience and knowledge of democratic processes and institutions. As an independent campaigning organisation working for a better democracy in the UK, we believe voters should be at the heart of British politics.

Electronic voting

Measures to make voting easier, more convenient and more in tune with modern life are welcome but e-voting is not a panacea to the long-term decline in political engagement and participation.

ERS research¹ into e-voting pilots in the UK found that offering electronic voting options resulted in only minimal increases in turnout. The data also suggested that many of the people using e-voting would have voted by standard means were e-voting not available.

Ten local authorities piloted e-voting in 2003² experimenting with one or more of the following options: internet voting, telephone voting, digital tv voting and text message voting. Four additional authorities piloted combining e-voting with postal voting.

In the ten e-voting pilots, participation increased significantly in only one council (Vale Royal) from 31% in 1999 to 44% in 2003. Turnout fell in seven of the pilot areas (though three of these had used e-voting previously). In the combined all-postal and e-voting pilots, turnout rose in two areas and fell in the two other areas. The two areas in which turnout fell had piloted all-postal voting at the previous election.

Take up of e-voting varied between 9 and 25% across all the pilots. The limited increases in turnout, where they occurred, were exceeded by the proportion of people using e-voting. This, alongside the decline in turnout seen in all other pilots, suggests that many of those who used e-voting would have voted without it.

We cannot assume that people are not engaging in democracy simply because they don't like the tools for doing so. People aren't engaging because they don't feel that politics is worth engaging with. There is an urgent need to address the underlying symptoms of voter disengagement in addition to exploring ways of improving access.

¹ Electoral Reform Society (2003) Piloting Alternative Voting Methods in the 2003 Local Elections, June 2003.

² E-voting pilots: Ipswich, Kerrier, Norwich, Rushmoor, St Albans, Sheffield, Stratford-on-Avon, Stroud, Swindon, Vale Royal

Combined pilots: Chorley, Shrewsbury and Atcham, South Somerset, South Tyneside

International examples

Norway

Norway trialled internet voting for local and national elections in 2011 and 2013. The Norwegian government has since ended the programme following security concerns and a report into the trials which demonstrated that turnout had not increased.

The report into the Norwegian internet voting experiment³ found that, though internet voting was popular (between 33 and 37% of ballots were cast online - compared to 24% in Estonia in 2011), turnout did not increase. The research found that the increases in turnout in trial areas were in line with increases in the rest of the country.

Demographically, internet and paper ballot voters were similar, but there is some evidence to suggest internet voting appealed to younger Norwegians. Internet voting was slightly more popular amongst newly mobilized young voters (i.e those who did not vote in 2011 but did in 2013) than paper ballots.

Estonia

Internet voting has been used in Estonia for municipal, parliamentary and European elections. In the 2009 Parliamentary election 24% of Estonians voted online. Whether internet voting increased turnout at these election is debated⁴ but more importantly, major security concerns have been raised about the online system itself.

A team of independent experts observed the operation of the system in the 2013 municipal elections and then examined the system under laboratory conditions⁵. They found it to be vulnerable to attack on a number of levels as well as uncovering weaknesses in the operational side with election officials failing to follow security protocols (for instance, downloading software over insecure internet connections). In light of their findings, the team recommended withdrawing e-voting for all forthcoming elections.

Citizen-led politics

As with e-voting, the internet is not the silver bullet for citizen engagement, but it can be used to expand the ways in which people can get involved in politics. Any experiments should however give consideration to equality in participation. Access to the internet is not universal in the UK (17% of British households did not have internet access in the latest census⁶) and access varies according to age and wealth. Likewise, citizens' ability to engage with these platforms varies. Creating the right infrastructure is key but so too is educating and empowering people to get involved.

Crowdsourcing legislation

In 2012 the Finnish government amended the national constitution so any proposed legislation supported by at least 50,000 signatures (1.7% of the voting population) must be put to a vote in the parliament.

³ Signe Bock Seggaard, Dag Arne Christensen, Bjarte Folkestad and Jo Saglie (2014) 'Internettvalg Hva Gjør og Mener Velgerne?' http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KMD/KOMM/rapporter/ISF_Internettvalg.pdf (Summary pages in English)

⁴ <http://www.democraticaudit.com/?p=1499>

⁵ <https://estoniaevoting.org/>

⁶ ONS, census data

The system is supported by Open Ministry, a non-profit organization, which supports proposals getting through to the parliament. The project has cost just 30,000 Euros. Two proposals have so far reached debate (one on marriage equality and one on copyright laws). Democracy campaigners in Finland say the strength of this system lies in crowdsourcing actual draft legislation rather than simply instructing the parliament to discuss a broad topic.

Deliberative democracy

Following the Scottish Independence referendum there have been calls from politicians and civil society for a constitutional convention. Recent examples of constitutional conventions (notably Iceland) have used the internet to facilitate wider engagement with citizens (outside of those selected for the body of the convention). Utilising the technology available to encourage the widest possible citizen engagement in such a project should be a key consideration of any future UK-wide constitutional convention.

Online information hubs

This year ERS Scotland, in partnership with the Academy of Government at the University of Edinburgh, held a deliberative discussion event with Scottish citizens. The subject matter was how to strengthen local democracy in Scotland. One of the outcomes was the suggestion of online information hubs. Participants wanted easily accessible, party neutral sources of information about politics. This is one area where technology could be used to create a better environment for politics.

Research (forthcoming)⁷ on young voters in the Scottish referendum suggests that younger citizens sought out more information and from a wider range of sources than any other age group. This suggests that there is an appetite for political information but also a concern to get the full picture.

Conclusion

The growth in internet access and expanding technologies present new opportunities to expand the ways citizens can engage with politics. However, changing the way people engage is not a substitute for addressing the underlying reasons for disengagement. Technology is a channel of communication not the communication itself. It needs to be used appropriately and in response to need. Many of those disengaged from politics will not be active online.

ERS supports making registering to vote and voting more in tune with people's lives in the 21st Century. There are many options for doing this including motor-voter style registration, Election Day registration and expanding the places where people can vote. The introduction of online registration this year is an important first step but could go further. Election Day registration in particular has been shown to increase registration amongst those least likely to be registered. However, the case for e-voting is less clear with evidence suggesting that e-voting does not significantly increase turnout (if at all).

Despite the suggestion that e-voting has particular appeal for younger citizens, if young people don't feel their vote is worth anything, they won't vote by any method. Getting people engaged in politics in the first place is the more important task. Strengthening citizen education, bringing politics to the classroom, is likely to do more for that aim than simply moving voting online.

Additionally, in moving aspects of democratic practice online it is vital that equality of participation is given due consideration; ensuring that everyone has equal access in terms of both infrastructure and skills.

⁷ Scottish Centre for Constitutional Change

Some innovations are worth exploring particularly in facilitating a more active role for citizens in policy making (see Finnish example). However, using online technology is only a means of *facilitating* better citizen involvement and there are other ways of engaging citizens in politics such as conventions, citizen juries, mini-publics and participatory budgeting.

The starting point should be a desire to improve engagement and a willingness to bring citizens into political decision-making; the internet is just one way of helping make this happen.