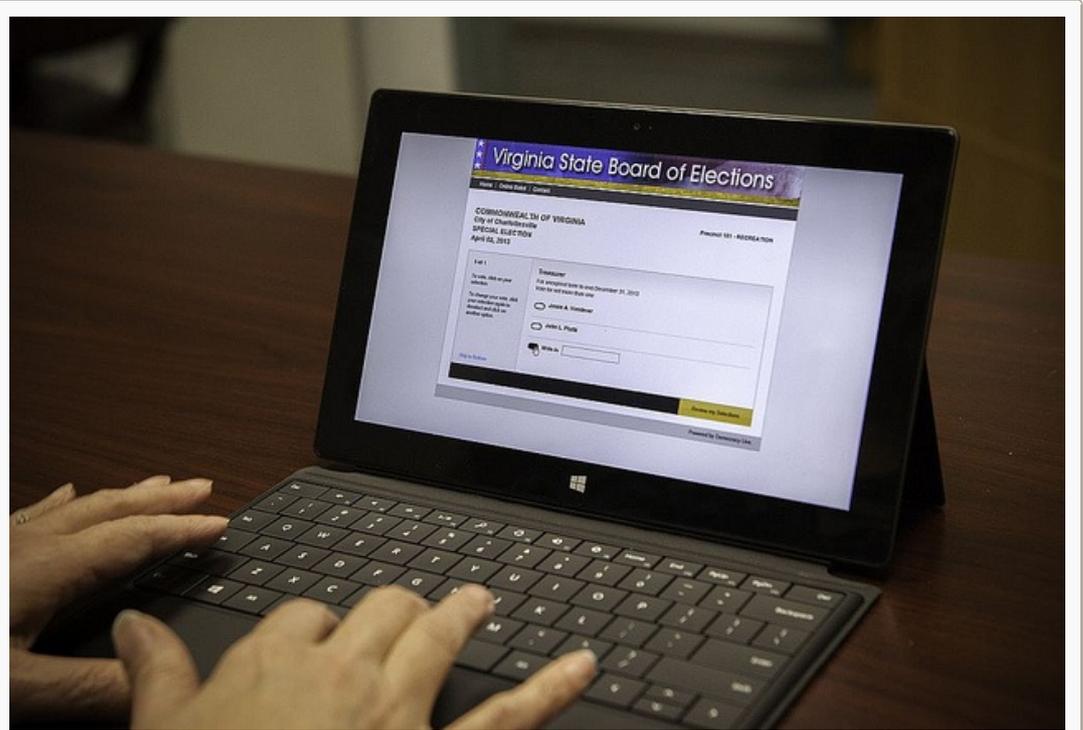


eVoting is a good idea, but it won't happen any time soon

By Democratic Audit

*The 2010 UK General Election vividly illustrated the plight of Britain's electoral infrastructure. But despite the clear need for modernisation, there is an overwhelming suspicion of the reliability and integrity of electronic voting system. **Dr Andy Williamson** argues that while the case for introducing e-voting is strong, a lack of public interest and concerns about ID verification make its introduction unlikely in the near future.*

Society continues to change with increasing rapidity. We are now mobile, social (in a digital sense) and connected in ways that we have never before imagined. We consume news online. We bank, shop, date and maintain friendships via the internet. Even the government is 'digital by default'. Electronic voting offers flexibility, supports people with access and mobility issues, can increase voter turnout and offers speed and accuracy in the counting process. So why isn't how we vote part of the digital revolution too?



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The British voting system is creaking. It is an archaic throwback to Victorian Britain. But whilst our network of Victorian sewers and water pipes are being systematically replaced and upgraded, nothing is being done about the way we vote. I am not talking about 'first past the post' versus AV or proportional electoral systems, I am talking about the mechanical process of voting and the counting of those votes.

I wonder how the vast majority of the 50,000 people who back in 2010 fell for Electoral Commission advertising and tried to enrol to vote on the last day felt when they realised they had to print off their forms, sign and post them! It didn't get any better after the election either, with [numerous complaints](#) from people unable to vote and everyone involved ducking for cover. Is it acceptable in 21st Century Britain that those responsible have done nothing to fix a voting system that one of our first-ever international observers described as 'worse than [Kenya](#)' and '[possibly the most corruptible in the whole world](#)'? Could eVoting be a viable alternative, give us greater flexibility and overcome the physical limitations of the Polling Station and paper ballot?

It should be blindingly obvious in this digitally enabled age of technology-led process transformation, social media and internet everywhere. We should be able to register, vote and count those votes so much more efficiently and reliably if we use the right tools and develop better processes to support them.

In my mind, the arguments against electronic voting fail every possible test of logic. We demand nothing less than perfection from new systems when the current one is so flawed and open to failure and fraud. It's not just those locked out of Polling Stations but also the 14 year old boy who received voting papers and [managed to vote](#) without any challenge as well as those who couldn't enrol in the first place.

However, eVoting has some fundamental problems. The first is that people don't understand it and the second is that people don't trust it. Both of these problems could be overcome if there was any appetite for change. And that's the third problem, there is no public or government desire to reform the voting system, no great appetite for eVoting. It remains the poor cousin in the digital democracy family for the simple reason that people don't want it. Elsewhere, the New Zealand Electoral Commission found that one third of New Zealander's said [they would](#) vote online if they could and concluded that eVoting had the potential to moderately increase voter turnout. Similar research by Elections Canada found that [57% of online Canadians](#) would have considered voting online at the 2011 General Election if the option had been available.

Numerous US electoral debacles, the realisation in Ireland that voting machines had to be securely stored [between elections](#) at enormous cost and the slightly flawed nature of local government e-Voting [pilots](#) in the UK might not have helped the cause either. [In the Philippines](#), new machines designed to prevent fraud were rejecting legitimate ballot papers and the cellular links to the central host were unreliable, constantly dropping out.

All of this even before we get to voting via the internet. Whilst internet voting is working well in countries such as Estonia, there remain concerns over security and the risk of hacking that will hold back its widespread [adoption](#). One way around these legitimate security concerns is transparency. Estonia's system is seen as largely successful because it uses a dual-password system linked to your national identity card, however, concerns over the legitimacy and reliability of the platform have persisted. To overcome this, the Estonian Government has now released its eVoting source code into the public domain, [publishing](#) it via online open source repository GitHub.

There are serious issues to be addressed with e-Voting and these cannot be under-estimated. But they can be managed and mitigated. As the [Electoral Reform Society](#) put it, 'the answer does not lie in an absolutist rejection of risk, but a clear policy about where on the spectrum of risks one decides to draw a line.' In reality the barriers to eVoting aren't really technical or procedural, they are cultural.

If it's designed properly (and that's a big 'if' looking at those responsible for the current system in the UK), eVoting can be more reliable, efficient and flexible. We can limit this to voting machines in polling stations but if we want to encourage increased voting we should take the polling station to where people are and consider internet and text voting. This can be done in conjunction with extended voting periods and by making voting easier and more accessible.

I am convinced about the merits of eVoting but I don't expect anything to happen soon. Even though our democratic system was left wanting in 2010 and the public clearly lost faith in it, there appears little persistent momentum for change. And there's one big elephant lurking in the shadows: the biggest challenge to 21st century voting technology in ID-averse UK will be verification!

Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our Comments Policy before posting.

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