

The Estonian experience shows that while online voting is faster and cheaper, it hasn't increased turn-out

By Democratic Audit

*Estonia is the only country in the world where citizens have used remote internet voting in the municipal, national and European elections. Here **Meelis Kitsing** offers a brief overview of the last five elections, highlights key elements of voting process and discusses briefly some major debates concerning the internet voting in Estonia. He argues that though online voting is faster and cheaper, it doesn't necessarily work to the benefit of all citizens.*

The first possibility to vote online was

offered in the municipal elections in October 2005 when almost two percent of all voters (see the table below) – one percent of the electorate – took advantage of this new system. This experiment was followed the parliamentary elections in April 2007, where 5.4 percent of votes were submitted online. In June 2009, the European Parliament Elections were held where close to 15 percent of votes were submitted online. In the last municipal elections in October 2009 almost 16 percent of the votes were cast online. In the 2011 elections to the Estonian parliament, internet votes made up more than 24 percent of all votes.

Table. Internet Voting in the Estonian Elections (2005-2011).

The key element in the internet voting is the national identity card which can be used in both online and offline environments. The government introduced ID-cards in 2002 to provide a more secure and

Type of elections	Date	Internet votes (% of all votes)	Turnout (% of electorate)	Internet voting turnout (% of electorate)	First time users of ID card online (%)
Municipal elections	Oct 2005	1.9	47.4	0.9	61
Parliamentary elections	April 2007	5.5	61.9	3.4	39
European Parliament	June 2009	14.7	43.9	6.5	19
Municipal elections	Oct 2009	15.8	60.6	9.5	18.5
Parliamentary elections	March 2011	24.3	63.5	15.4	N/A

Source: Created by the author on the basis of data from the Estonian National Electoral Committee.

sophisticated substitute for older online identification methods. Even though the government had issued half million ID-cards by March 2005, many people did not use ID-card for online transactions because they used older identification techniques. As the table shows above, 61 percent of all internet voters were the first online ID card users in the 2005 elections. The 2007 elections was the first time online users of ID-card users made up 39 percent. Overall, only 25 000 ID card-owners used their cards online in 2006. In 2009, the number of online users of ID-card had increased ten-fold to about 250 000. Subsequently, the percentage of first time online ID-card users in the European elections dropped to 19 percent and in the municipal elections to 18.5 percent. Internet voting is a story of a typical adoption process where early adopters proved the ID-card to be a reliable way to vote online and conduct other transactions. As more and more people began using their ID-cards for daily transactions (e.g. banking, government services et al), then they felt increasingly comfortable in using the card for voting, too.

The costs and benefits

The data shows that higher turnout is correlated with higher use of internet voting in the municipal and parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, there is no strong evidence that internet voting has led to higher turnout in the elections. Empirically, it is difficult to establish causality between availability of internet voting and turnout because of the overdetermination. In other words, there are too many variables, which may be correlated with higher or lower turnout and internet voting is just one aspect. Scholars who have used survey data in their analysis have found that internet voting mobilizes casual voters and 10-15 percent of internet voters probably would not have voted without this option. At the same time, methodologically more sophisticated work, which accounts for substitution effects, has shown that the internet voting has not led to higher turnout.

Conceptually, it is clear that electronic voting reduces transaction costs and enhances efficiency in the voting process. Citizens find it easier to cast their vote and they face lower costs of voting. The core outcome of the Estonian internet voting is that the provision of these online channels for voting removes another barrier by making voting more “convenient” for existing voters.

However, benefits of electronic voting such as reduced transaction costs are only one side of the coin. On the other side, electronic voting also has costs – e.g. reduced civic engagement, privacy and security concerns. Most importantly, making voting cheaper and faster may not be necessary and clearly is not a sufficient condition for encouraging higher participation in the elections. For those who do not believe in the elections process for whatever reasons, the transactional nature of internet voting does not offer any compelling arguments to change their views. For those who consider voting time-consuming and confusing, internet voting may reduce some of the transaction costs affiliated with the voting but not enough.

Even though 80 percent of the Estonian population uses the internet, online voting also carries a distributional impact. As internet-connected computers are widespread in many public places and smart phone usage is also on the increase, the question is not so much about access to technology but about different skill levels in its use. Naturally, older and less educated segments of the population can experience significant barriers in exploiting internet voting. The distribution of online votes does not correspond to the overall distribution of votes. Two main centre-right parties which make up the current coalition government tend to get a significantly higher share of internet votes than the populist Center Party. Unsurprisingly, the beneficiaries of new system were actively pushing for the implementation of remote electronic voting, while the losers have criticised and highlighted its shortcomings.

To conclude, an increasing number of Estonians have taken advantage of internet voting primarily because it makes voting faster and cheaper. The Estonian experiment does not only benefit those voters but has created a real world laboratory for improving our understanding of both the advantages, and disadvantages of internet voting.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://buff.ly/1faHkaK>

Note: This article is based on the following research paper; [Kitsing, Meelis \(2011\). Online Participation in Estonia: Active Voting, Low Engagement](#). It represents the views of the author and not Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

Meelis Kitsing is director of the Center for Free Economic Thought and a lecturer at the Estonian Business School. He earned his MSc in Politics of the World Economy from LSE in 2001.



This post is part of Democratic Audit’s **Democracy Online** series, which explores how the internet is transforming democracy and the way citizens engage in political activity. To read more posts in this series [click here](#).



