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VOTING ON THE WEB

Election turnout has decreased in most states over the last few decades. Even Wisconsin, one of the leading states in turnout, has experienced a decline. Wisconsin's 57.4% participation in the 1996 presidential election was the 7th highest nationally, well ahead of the national 50-state average of 49.1%, but that figure was well below the 1960 presidential election when 72.9% of Wisconsinites voted.

Across the country, a variety of measures have been adopted to increase voter participation; many are aimed at making voting more convenient. For example, Wisconsin allows people to register at the polling site on election day; Texas leaves the polls open for several days; and Oregon is using mail ballots.

The newest attempt to boost turnout involves voting on the Internet, sometimes called "Web voting" or "e-voting". Political parties in Alaska and Arizona used Web voting in presidential preference primaries this year, and a number of companies have been formed to provide voting services over the Internet.

In some respects, voting over the Internet faces the same challenges as any type of balloting. Every voting system must ensure that: 1) only those eligible to vote do so; 2) individuals only vote once; 3) the vote is correctly recorded; and 4) the vote is secret and not coerced. In other respects, Web voting may be profoundly different. It raises different security concerns when compared with physically casting ballots through voting machines or ballot boxes located at a finite number of polling places. It presents different limitations on access and is susceptible to risks not encountered in traditional systems.

Given the rapid growth and evolution of the Internet, it will be important to carefully evaluate instances of Internet voting as they occur. Some of the pros and cons of Web voting are discussed below.

ADVANTAGES

Proponents of Web voting stress the convenience of voting over the Internet. Neighborhood polling places no longer serve the needs of many people. Many citizens commute to workplaces that are not in the same voting jurisdiction as their home. Getting to the polls is not easy. With e-voting, people would be able to vote whenever and wherever convenient. Weather and physical location would not be factors. The number of polling places would only be limited by the number of computers.

Proponents suggest that Web voting would appeal to younger voters, who are computer literate and comfortable with the Internet.

Another range of benefits centers around the operation of the polling place itself. Elections are costly to administer. The polls have to be staffed, and many jurisdictions are having

difficulty finding workers. Those in favor of Web voting suggest that significantly fewer staff would be required. In addition, because Internet voting would be conducted from a single location, tallying of the votes would be centralized and automatic. Results would be available very quickly after the polls closed.

Web voting could also provide a technical solution to a variety of common voter errors. For example, the system could be set up so the voter could not vote for two candidates for the same office, or it could alert the voter who failed to cast a vote on a referendum question. It would be easy to change a vote before submitting the ballot, and incomplete erasures and other mechanical mistakes would not be a factor.

Internet voting would also make it possible to assist the voter in decision making. Links could be provided to officially approved information about the candidates or issues. For example, the Wisconsin attorney general's explanation of the effect of a constitutional amendment would be immediately available to those who wished to read it.

Proponents claim security issues will be relatively easy to solve. They note the experience gained through a variety of private activities. Some corporations and private organizations are already using Web voting to elect officers and change by-laws.

Finally, proponents suggest that public Internet voting terminals would be made available for those who did not have access to computers at work and home, which could lead to providing basic Internet access to those who do not have it. Internet voting might be a means of alleviating the "digital divide", i.e., the gulf between those with and those without Internet access.

CONCERNS

Many who question Internet voting are not necessarily opposed to it, but they do advocate a careful approach to ensure that potential problems are adequately addressed.

Perhaps the major concern about Internet voting is security. Voters in the United States seldom worry about security, but experts, working to establish democratic governments in other countries, warn that the security of a person's vote is fundamental to the success of democracy. Voters must be able to assume that their vote will be properly counted. The results of the election must accurately reflect the choices actually made by the voters. Anything that calls the integrity of the voting system into question undermines the legitimacy of the political system itself.

How can voting officials verify the identity of the Internet voter? With traditional systems, the individual is physically present and can be challenged. Absentee voting systems allow comparison of a physical signature against a signature provided when the individual registered to vote.

How is it possible to ensure that voters vote only once and that the vote is aggregated to the correct candidate? What about protecting an Internet voting system from troublesome hackers or political factions who might have an interest in subverting the outcome? Success with private voting over the Internet does not preclude problems with public elections because the scale and significance are so different.

The privacy of Internet communications creates another major concern about Web voting. Will Internet voting be able to achieve the privacy of the traditional voting booth? Voting from home or a public terminal presents one set of privacy issues. Voting from the workplace is entirely different. Although it may be possible to convey data over the Internet with complete

security, Web voting is valueless if the voter's employer monitors the employee's computer activity before the vote is sent.

There are a number of other technical concerns raised by those who are uncomfortable with the idea of Internet voting. One is simply capacity: What happens to an Internet voting system if it cannot handle the number of voters at a point in time? Technical assistance is another problem. Many current election administrators may not have the experience to answer questions posed by Internet voting. Some questions may be almost impossible to answer in a cost effective manner, given the variety of hardware and software people use to access the Internet. Corporate Web sites have been subjected to what are called "denial of service" attacks where the site is flooded with more business than it can handle. How will election systems respond to this type of attack that prevents real voters from reaching the voting site?

Election laws will have to be modified to fit the new technology. Policing Internet voting will provide challenges. It may be necessary to impose penalties for electronic tampering, for electronic invasion of voters' privacy, and for electronic electioneering. What penalties will apply to an employer who monitors employee voting? Current law prohibits electioneering near polling places. Should Internet service providers be prohibited from displaying advertising from candidates on a voter's computer screen when it recognizes that the user is going to the Internet polling site?

Some commentators question the extent to which Internet voting will increase convenience. Will security prove more cumbersome than going to a physical polling place? Will some citizens' discomfort with computer technology prove a disincentive? They suggest the cost of designing secure systems and providing voter support will negate the cost savings of election administration.

Finally, some are opposed to Internet voting – and some of the other recent changes like voting by mail – because they see the "civic experience" of publicly joining other voters at the polling place as important to the health of the political system itself. They note that many of the "reforms" already instituted, like Texas' multiday voting, have not increased turnout and suggest that convenience may not be the cause of low turnout. The drive to make it easy to vote may even exacerbate the problem.

ARIZONA PRIMARY

The Arizona experiment involved the statewide Democratic Party primary. Registered Arizona Democrats were mailed a personal identification number several weeks before the election. To vote, party members had to access the election site where they were asked questions to verify their identity, e.g., birth date or social security number. Out of almost 90,000 votes, about 40,000 voters (4% of the registered Democrats) cast their ballots over the Internet, and 4,000 of the Web ballots were cast at polling places. Only about 18,000 people voted at polling places, while almost 33,000 mail ballots were received.

The Arizona experiment proved a mixed success. On the plus side, party officials were pleased with the turnout, which was more than twice the previous primary record. They also gained valuable experience with Internet voting. More negative was the fact that the system was down for about an hour on the first day of Internet voting. Help lines were so overloaded that on the first day some callers never got through. Some Macintosh users and some voters with old Web browsers were not able to use the site at all. The results of the primary have been

challenged on two grounds. Internet voters were given five days to vote while the polls were only open one day. Opponents also claim that since white, non-Hispanic voters have significantly more access to computers than poor and minority voters, the use of the Internet dilutes the voting power of minorities.

CALIFORNIA REPORT

An internet voting task force, established by the California Secretary of State, which issued its final report in January 2000, concluded:

At this time, it would not be legally, practically or fiscally feasible to develop a comprehensive remote Internet voting system that would completely replace the current paper process used for voter registration, voting, and the collection of initiative, referendum and recall petition signatures.

The report cited “technological threats to the security, integrity and secrecy of Internet ballots” as significant problems in the use of Internet voting. It noted that security concerns must not make the process of voting over the Internet so difficult that it actually reduces participation, rather than increasing it.

The California report suggests that Internet voting initially be modeled on absentee balloting procedures. An individual would make a request in writing for an Internet ballot. After comparing the signature on the request to the registration on file, the election official would send a digital signature to the voter at the specified address. The voter would use the digital signature to return the vote. The report also recommended that Internet voting be phased in gradually starting with use at traditional voting places, with computers available as an alternative to other types of voting machines. Use in traditional settings would alleviate most security concerns. After this period, voting computers would be placed in public places, like shopping malls. This would greatly increase access, but would still limit security concerns because the machines would be controlled by election officials. The final step would be to allow voting from home or office computers. The report concluded that “An appropriate balance between security, accessibility and ease of use must be achieved before Internet voting systems should be deployed.”