

League of Women Voters of Texas Education Fund *Voting Procedures to Increase Voting Participation*

Internet Voting: *Casting Your Vote by Mouse* *Facts and Issues*

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We live in a country in which voter turnout rates vary greatly among the states. According to an analysis of the 2004 Presidential Election by the Pew Center on the States, some states such as Minnesota (78.37%) and Wisconsin (74.8%) had considerably higher turnout than other states. Only Arkansas, South Carolina, and Hawaii had lower turnout rates than Texas (53.72%). While the introduction of any one particular alternative voting method will not change low voter turnout overnight, we cannot afford to disregard the possible voting methods that might increase voter interest and action. Particularly in states with young populations, such as Texas, Internet voting is one alternative voting method that should be examined further.

Traditional political parties and advocacy groups need assistance in reaching young voters. The Internet is certainly one way to reach them, whether it is used as a source of information or as a vehicle for voting. The Internet as an information and community-building tool is a seemingly natural fit for democracy and civic engagement. According to scholars at the Woodrow Wilson International Center (Simon, Corrales, and Wolfensberger, 2002), the Internet's democratic characteristics include:

- an ability to erode physical boundaries, allowing people to associate with those with similar views.
- a dramatic increase in a citizen's ability to receive and impart information.
- empowerment of individuals and smaller groups, allowing them to organize and advance their political views.

Appeal of the Internet to Young Voters

Russell Dalton's 2008 book, *The Good Citizen – How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, makes a strong case that, as citizenship norms change, traditional methods of encouraging voting and other civic endeavors will no longer work. Given the results of various surveys, Dalton's thesis appears valid as using the Internet for political information and mobilization ranks high among young voters. In a survey completed by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2008, the younger respondents were considerably more positive about the Internet's role in the 2008 election (Smith & Rainie, 2008). See Table 1.

TABLE 1. Younger Internet Users See the Good Side of the Internet

The percent of Internet users in each age group who agree with these statements...				
	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
The Internet helps me feel more personally connected to my candidate or campaign of choice	38%	29%	21%	18%
I would not be as involved in this campaign as much if it weren't for the Internet	32	22	16	14

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Spring 2008 Survey. N=1,553 Internet users.
Margin of error is ±3%.

Yet during the political Internet's early years, voter activity did not substantially improve. There were certainly achievements in online campaign fundraising, notably Jesse Ventura's successful gubernatorial bid in Minnesota and Howard Dean's unprecedented level of online contributions in 2004. But the Internet did not make a considerable difference in American voter turnout, even among young voters, until the 2008 Presidential Election. Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama was able to galvanize young voter interest through the Internet, whether it was through his campaign website or through social networking tools such as Facebook, My Space, and Twitter. With the positive intersection of the Internet and elections, the time is right to investigate Internet voting as a viable voting method.

Online Voting

Internet voting (or online voting) is an election system that uses encryption allowing voters to cast their ballot online. There are essentially two forms of Internet voting. First, consider *Poll Site Voting*. Poll Site Internet Voting allows voters to access the Internet in an environment controlled by onsite election officials, not dissimilar to the way Texas voters use electronic machines in specific polling locations today. Kiosk voting is a form of Poll Site Internet Voting made available in more people-friendly environments such as community centers, libraries, shopping malls, and grocery stores. The key to kiosk voting is easy accessibility in locations that people generally visit everyday.

The second form of online voting is *Remote Internet Voting*. Remote Internet Voting allows a voter to cast a ballot through any Internet connection. This is seen primarily as an advantage for overseas military and other less mobile citizens, including the elderly and those with disabilities. Busy people might also find it convenient. Proponents of this method also argue that it could increase voter participation among young people who are often "wired" 24/7. Regardless of the voter's age, remote Internet voting allows voters the luxury of voting in the comfort of their homes.

Regardless of the specific type of online voting, Internet voting has its ardent supporters and opponents. Proponents say it allows a convenient format for voting, and such convenience may lead to greater participation (Oostveen & Besselaar, 2004). Those who

may have multiple jobs and responsibilities can vote. Internet voting may also reduce election costs in the long run.

Finally, it is theorized that young voter turnout would increase with the option of Internet voting. As early as 1999, a California statewide survey found that younger voters are more likely to support Internet voting than older voters (California 2000). In 2005, a survey was given to 595 undergraduates at the University of Houston (the second most ethnically and racially diverse research university in the United States) to define young voters' sources of political information and to explore the relationship between young voters' use of the Internet and civic engagement (Cross 2005). The survey found that University of Houston students decidedly prefer Internet voting. Furthermore all ethnic/racial groups chose the Internet as their number one choice of voting method if available.

Arguments against Internet Voting

If the benefits of Internet voting are so obvious, why has it not been implemented? The United States has not pursued Internet voting for several reasons, with security concerns at the top of the list. According to the California Internet Voting Task Force, the technological threats to the security, integrity, and secrecy of Internet ballots are the most significant danger (2000). Security is at risk by sophisticated hackers, whether in the U.S. or in foreign countries. And while e-commerce endeavors, such as purchasing goods on line, have progressively become more secure, the tricky part about Internet voting is keeping it both secure *and* secret. Opponents of Internet voting also argue that the digital divide will make elections more elitist rather than more democratic, and it may actually be a threat to minority voting rights (Alvarez & Nagler 2001).

Some nations, including the United Kingdom, France and Switzerland, are using Internet voting for elections and referenda, yet the United States has been very cautious of its use. While testing by the U.S. Department of Defense began as early as 2000, Internet voting has been used only sparingly by a few states, with Arizona leading the way with its online Democratic Party primary. Other states are offering varying multi-mode processes; for example, an overseas soldier may access the ballot online but must submit it by fax or through mail. However, during the 2008 Presidential Election, an estimated 600 to 700 United States soldiers remotely cast their presidential vote electronically with the use of "hardened" laptops through the Okaloosa Distance Ballot Piloting (ODBP) test program (Sofge 2008). In order to reduce security risks, the laptops were without a hard drive, other features were either removed or turned off, and the computers were located in supervised kiosks in Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom. According to a media release by Election Trust (2008), a partner in the ODBP project:

"Registered county voters electronically accessed, voted and submitted their secure and anonymous ballots while verifying a simultaneously produced paper record of their vote. The manual count of the paper records was compared with the electronic tabulation report to validate

system performance. The paper records and the Secured-by-Scytl distance ballots matched perfectly.”

At the time of this writing, an independent performance analysis of the ODBP was not readily available.

In spite of the Internet’s popularity among American citizens and interest in online voting among young voters, the U.S. federal government is unlikely to endorse Internet voting anytime soon. The Internet Policy Institute (IPI) in cooperation with the University of Maryland conducted a study on Internet voting in 2001. Sponsored by the National Science Foundation, the report addresses the feasibility of online voting from technical and social science perspectives. The researchers found that Poll Site Internet Voting does indeed offer benefits and could be implemented in the not so distant future. However, they warn against remote Internet voting systems as they “pose significant risk to the integrity of the voting process, and should not be fielded for use in public elections until substantial technical and social science issues are addressed.” (Internet Policy Institute 2001). According to a Congressional Research Services report in 2003, “Public confidence about Internet security is increasing, but many feel that voting online requires a degree of security from fraud beyond the current standard for everyday Internet use.” (Coleman 2003). As late as 2008, an informal poll of *New York Times* readers found that the majority of respondents still did not trust the integrity of Internet voting, especially for a presidential election. (Seelye 2008). In short, the average citizen and academic experts appear to agree that the threats to security still outweigh the possible advantages in a widespread implementation of online voting.

Current Status

Internet voting is much more likely to be incorporated incrementally by individual states, which is not surprising given the vast differences among the states in terms of political culture, technology, and funding. A 2009 poll conducted in Washington revealed that an overwhelming majority of the state’s voters approve of Internet voting if it is deemed secure (Ammons 2009). The poll said 77 percent favor or strongly favor a measure to allow Internet voting by military and overseas voters, including Peace Corps members, missionaries, and business people temporarily assigned abroad. Legislation for Internet voting for military and overseas voters has recently passed in the Washington State Legislature and was in the appropriations stage at the time of this writing.

Legislation regarding the use of overseas military voting, as well as the need for further study on the feasibility of Internet voting, is currently being considered by several states, including Colorado, Missouri, Montana, and New Mexico. Texas State Representative Frank Corte filed House Bill (HB) 71 in November 2008, which was related “to the establishment of a program to provide a ballot by electronic mail to military personnel serving overseas.” HB 71’s companion bill in the Senate was SB 92, authored by Senator Leticia Van de Putte and co-authored by Senator Carlos Uresti. Had it passed, the act would have marked the second Texas venture into the world of remote online voting.

The state's first and only use of remote Internet voting--albeit in a very limited scope--was authorized by the Texas Legislature in 1997. Beginning in 1999, astronauts who are eligible to vote in Texas and unable to vote on election day or during the early voting period are able to vote from space. The law, found within Chapter 106 of the Texas Election Code, assigns the Texas Secretary of State the responsibility of prescribing procedures for voting from space on election day by a secure electronic method. The two astronauts who voted from the International Space Station in November 2008 were the fifth and sixth to do so. Depending on residency, either the Harris or Brazoria County Clerk prepares the ballot, which is sent to the International Space Station by NASA Mission Control at Johnson Space Center. The clerk's office e-mails the log-in information directly to the astronaut. The ballot is returned to Mission Control and sent to the county clerk's office to be tallied. Michael Fincke, who voted from the space station in November 2008, said there is one drawback to voting from space: the lack of a secret ballot (Malik 2008). Using the current method, a voting official must decrypt the secure form in order to count it so at least one person in addition to the astronaut is aware of the specific voting decision. Whether voting with one's feet on the ground or while in space, Internet voting still has challenges to overcome.

NOTES

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