

Elections Canada pushes online voting
Study shows change would increase voter turnout, but observers question security
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Gauntlet News
July 23, 2009

If everything goes according to Elections Canada's plans, voters will soon be able to cast their ballots online -- even from the comfort of their own beds.

With Parliament's approval, the federal body is aiming to test online voting before 2013 in a by election.

Elections Canada released a report last June pushing for legal changes to implement an online registration system.

In last October's federal election, only 58.8 per cent of voters cast their ballot, the lowest turnout in Canadian history. A survey conducted by the agency found that 57 per cent of non-voting respondents surveyed cited reasons such as being busy with work or on holiday, while 14 per cent were too apathetic to vote. The same survey mentioned that 64 per cent of non-voting youth electors said they would be likely to use the Internet to vote if the service was available.

Spokesperson John Enright said combating apathy is one reason why Elections Canada expressed interest in internet voting.

"This would likely take the form of a pilot project during a by-election to allow us to test the processes outside of a general election," said Enright. "Internet voting could provide an additional opportunity for electors to vote and would complement existing voting methods such as special ballot [voting by mail] and regular and advance polling days."

Enright warned it is too early to discuss what security measures the agency is considering, but stressed security is paramount and Elections Canada is working with experts to ensure the integrity of the ballot.

Kirk Schimdt, an independent federal candidate who ran in Calgary West last October, isn't keen on the idea.

Schimdt pointed to another Elections Canada survey of candidates, in which only 41 per cent supported online voting. He explained many are wary of the chaos and corruption an online voting system could create.

"The main problem with online voting is having a transparent, auditable system, from marking the ballot to ballots being counted," said Schimdt.

University of British Columbia computer privacy expert Richard Rosenberg agreed with Schimdt's concerns, echoing the difficulty of balancing privacy against convenience. He feared it might be possible to determine individual votes when the program saves them [for appeal

reasons], which could compromise an individual's right to a secret ballot.

"The system can be compromised by clever hackers, disgruntled government employees or even employees of the voting machine companies," said Rosenberg. "Hacking can be done without leaving a trace. So test runs must be done on a regular basis before the machines are to be used."

Canadian Alliance of Student Associations national director Arati Sharma said she believes moving towards online voting would bring more students to the ballot box.

In the last election, many students complained about voting problems such as having no polling stations on campus, confusion about voting station locations and lack of advice on applying for a special ballot.

"CASA has been aware of problems with the Elections Canada voting system, particularly for students, for some time now," said Sharma.

"The main concern is a lack of resources for Elections Canada. Our members have identified the lack of online voting as a chief inconvenience, and one that leads to low voter turnout."

Ilona Dougherty, executive director of Montreal-based Apathy is Boring, explained online voting can be useful in combating voter apathy, because it would remove barriers related to getting to a polling station, such as having no vehicle or living on campus.

However, she pointed out not all students have access to computers and, in the end, online voting would not replace physical polling stations.

"It is also important to recognize that democracy should evolve, and that means continuing to ensure that young people feel that their votes are making a difference," she said.