Anxieties over internet voting reflect wider social concerns

The EU-funded ELECTRUST project found that trust issues are key to voters’ attitudes around online ballots, and could help inform standards for the successful implementation of digital democracy.

The internet has transformed many aspects of our daily lives, from how we watch television to how we find romantic partners. However, it has yet to radically transform how people access and interact with government services.

Despite being technologically feasible for a couple of decades, i-voting – where voters submit their ballot via the internet, in an unsupervised environment – has not been embraced by many governments.

“Trust issues lie at the heart of many of the explanations for this reluctance,” explains David Duenas-Cid, principal investigator of ELECTRUST. Hosted at Gdańsk University of Technology, the project was undertaken with the support of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme.

ELECTRUST explores how discourse around i-voting both constructs and leverages
Beyond technology

Estonia is the only country where i-voting is used in all elections. Some countries, such as Canada, have implemented it in local elections, while France and Panama have deployed it for expatriated voters.

ELECTRUST conducted an extensive case study of New South Wales, Australia, where i-voting was abandoned after early experiments. Cryptography experts had raised security concerns about the integrity of the system, while an unexpectedly high number of voters had experienced technical problems with the identification process.

“This is symptomatic of one of the key problems with i-voting: a clash between trust and distrust. The decision makers discontinued it out of fear,” adds Duenas-Cid.

Duenas-Cid interviewed various stakeholders including technology providers, electoral administrators, journalists, politicians and activists.

Preliminary analysis highlights how i-voting discourse flexibly adopts trust- and distrust-related arguments, often unconnected to the technology, but rather touching on wider sociopolitical contexts and individual beliefs.

A guide for future elections

Exploratory case studies have also been undertaken into the various forms of i-voting adopted by Estonia, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland.

One side study that compared Estonia and the Spanish province of Catalonia outlined how i-voting is top-down in Estonia, as a branch of the country’s e-governance system seeking easier democratic participation. By contrast, in Catalonia, the online participation system ‘Decidim’ evolved as a bottom-up development to encourage wider citizen engagement.

“Our approach was informed by theories of ideal democratic methods – how decisions are made, and by whom,” says Duenas-Cid. “We’ve found that i-voting offers a more direct democracy, which can reach the marginalised and transform public administration through wide-ranging citizen engagement.”

Interesting paradoxes were also found between communities seemingly at odds, despite the common goal of improved democratic systems. For example, while some experts cite cybersecurity concerns, voters with disabilities argue that i-voting
enables equal participation in elections.

The project’s findings will be outlined in a white book, including recommendations for policymakers. Duenas-Cid says ELECTRUST offers a valuable contribution to debates about the expansion of i-voting: “We’re not necessarily arguing for widespread i-voting implementation, but our results could help explain some of the likely reactions to its adoption”.

**Keywords**

ELECTRUST, i-vote, elections, discourse, trust, cybersecurity, democratic, citizen engagement

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