THE OBVIOUS ANSWER: ONLINE VOTING

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Poll inspectors squinting helplessly at hanging chads was the lasting image from the federal election of 2000. We were shocked and frustrated by the fragility and archaic infrastructure of our election system. If only we could replace those dastardly little squares of paper with something better, something modern, electronic and foolproof, then all would be well in America.

Two years later, an irony-free Republican Congress passed the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), a power grab by the federal government to standardize election processes in over three thousand municipalities across the country. HAVA provides funds to states to transition from paper ballot systems to electronic ones, but doesn't mandate which machines states must use. Six years and over three billion dollars later, a hodgepodge of delicate, complicated, expensive, and unreliable election machinery populates the countryside. Meanwhile,

not a single cent of HAVA money, or any other government funding, has gone into researching the electoral system of the future.

Seventy-six million Americans registered on the National Do Not Call Registry fueled almost entirely by friend-to-friend e-mails. Over seventy million blogs exist, according to the blog tracking site Technorati. Joe Lieberman and Dan Rather suffered the wrath of some of these bloggers—one survived, the other didn't, but political and media Goliaths have been put on red alert. YouTube videos were instrumental in sinking the incumbent senators Burns and Allen in the 2006 election and will surely be similarly influential in 2008. MoveOn.org boasted a membership of over three million in November 2006; at its height in the mid 1970s, Common Cause had one-tenth the number of members. As the ecosystem of political campaigns has changed radically, we have stubbornly, almost irrationally, refused to take advantage of the revolutionary power of the Internet when it comes to voting. Online voting is the obvious answer to our voting woes.

We replaced levers and punch cards with privately owned, proprietary electronic machines that are shut tight to the public like bank vaults. Some states, like Florida (why is it always Florida?), have thrown out their electronic voting machines in favor of optical scan machines. I spent Election Day last year in San Francisco, watching as poll workers repeatedly pulled the ballots of individual voters out of the scan machines, looked at their votes, and announced aloud to the room, "Well, the problem is that you voted for Gavin Newsom in column A, but didn't also vote for a candidate in columns B or C." (San Francisco has a ranked ballot system, which is a great idea but needs more educational outreach to be effective with voters.) Historians will undoubtedly consider our current era of voting machines the technological equivalent of the 8-track tape machine.

But the machinery is only a part of our voting problem. There is a quiet crisis in recruiting poll workers. The Election Assistance

Commission conducted a national survey in 2004 that revealed that on average poll workers were 72 years old, and presumably older still every day. Sixteen-hour days that ricochet between tense and tedious for paltry pay are not great recruiting enticements. In Maryland in 2006, almost a third of the poll workers didn't show up for work on Election Day.

We have come to the point where almost any body will do in some places to relieve our "Greatest Generation" poll anchors. California and other states are recruiting high school and college students as poll workers, for pay and course credit incentives. It is a telling sign of the vulnerability of our system, and our poor planning for the future, that the most visible aspect of our democracy totters on the reliability of teens to help open polling places at dawn.

So why do we continue to hold onto an 18th-century voting process in a 21st-century world?

According to Celent, LLC, a research firm specializing in banking, nearly forty percent of households did some banking online in 2006.[17] Bank of America alone has over 22 million online banking customers worldwide, and their services includes using mobile devices for banking.[18] According to Forrester Research, online retail sales in the United States are projected to grow by about fifty percent and exceed $300 billion annually.[19] If we can trust our personal and business finances to online systems, with nary a worry about security as a result of institutions having worked hard to secure their systems, surely we should be able to do the same with our votes.

Imagine how many more people would vote if they could do so

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17 Kim, Jane, J., "Call It Online Banking 2.0," *Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2006, pg. B.1

18 Robel, Adam, "Internet Leaders Think Strategically," *Global Finance*; Dec 2007; 21, 11; ABI/INFORM Global pg. 46

19 Jonathan Birchall, "US online sales growth 'to defy slowdown'," *Financial Times*. London (UK): Apr 8, 2008. pg. 20

from their desktops, laptops, the palm of their hand, or at a kiosk in the library or shopping mall. Also imagine how many more digital natives, young people born to, with, and of new media, will participate when the voting system is reflective of their online, mobile lives. Voting is the entry point for community life for millions of people; we are obliged to make it as simple and reliable as possible in the hope that it will lead to further civic participation.

The concerns about online voting are oft stated if misguided. The first, of course, is security. Even though study after study finds no significant amount of voter fraud today (see the voter fraud and integrity work at Demos.org that systematically dismantles the myth that voter fraud exists at any significant level), our outsized anxiety about elections being hijacked by nefarious vote stealers remains firmly intact. This anxiety begins to spiral out of control when discussing online voting—as if changing the voting system will create a huge, crowded field of election thieves. I will concede that this is a legitimate concern, but not an intractable problem. If online banks can be audited, so can online voting systems. The Defense Department and private corporations have sophisticated encryption systems that can be used for voting systems—and they will need to be updated and adjusted to stay ahead of the hackers, just as Bank of America does every day. We can't know all the answers today, but that doesn't make the task of transitioning to a new system impossible. If the criteria is that we must know all the answers before creating a new voting system, no such system will ever be created.

The second concern cited against online voting is a potential decrease in turnout and loss of civic capital generated by the gathering of citizens locally to vote. Oregon's voting-by-mail started in the mid-1990s lays this concern to rest. In 2001, researchers reported an increase in voting in Oregon after voting-by-mail was instituted,

with no deleterious affect on civic feelings.[20] And millions of dollars are saved every election since the cost of paying poll workers is gone. Continuing to hire poll workers to staff elections is the equivalent of rehiring bank tellers to replace ATM machines.

John Bonifaz argues in this book that voting systems must be open and transparent, and that they must be wrested from the clutches of for-profit companies more interested in quarterly profits than democratic participation. And online voting systems should be no different. Neutral parties, as opposed to political parties, would be charged with monitoring online voting systems for irregularities and auditing the results. The software code would be open-source. Translated from geek speak, this means that the engine behind online voting will a collaborative effort of a wide community of public-spirited individuals, yet still managed by municipalities. All we need to do to get started is put Meg Whitman of E-Bay and Eric Schmidt of Google in charge of a national task force for online voting—that will ensure that the system will be secure, easy-to-use and scalable.

Walk into a polling precinct anywhere in the country (except Oregon!) on Election Day and you will inevitably see a system riddled with human and technical mistakes and problems. The end result is that we citizens increasingly don't trust or believe the results of elections. Election systems have always been unreliable; what has changed is that now we can see all of the problems instantly, nationwide, on YouTube. The very same technology that is shining a spotlight on the problems of the system can be used to fix it.

It is human nature to think about all of the things that could go wrong with a new system. But at some point we have to decide that what we don't know yet, what details we haven't worked out today

20 Berinsky, Adam, Burns, Nancy, Traugott, Michael W., "Who Votes by Mail? A Dynamic Model of the Individual-Level Consequences of Voting-by-Mail System," Public Opinion Quarterly, 65:178-197 (2001)

but will tomorrow, are not sufficient reasons to sit and do nothing. An online voting system built openly, honestly, and with great care is surely preferable to watching faulty machines, long lines, and human error erode our election system.

About the Author

Allison H. Fine is a senior editor of the Personal Democracy Forum and a senior fellow at Demos: A Network of Ideas and Action. She is the author of *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age* (Wiley, 2006) and Social Citizens(beta), a discussion paper commissioned by The Case Foundation.