



Story

Can e-voting increase electoral participation?

Considering the falling participation rate in EP elections, efforts to increase it and get Europeans involved in European policy are crucial. One way forward may be e-voting, especially among young voters who can do it between watching YouTube videos and checking Facebook. The Parliament's Science and Technology Options Assessment board (STOA) held a hearing on the pros and cons of e-voting on 17 March.

As Parliament's Silvana Koch-Mehrin Vice President put it: "How we can involve citizens is important from a European point of view"

Bernd Beckert from the Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research presented the pros and cons to MEPs, saying "we already have e-commerce, e-education, e-administration - why shouldn't we also elect our parliaments over internet?"

He said by offering e-voting, young people could be motivated to take part in elections they would otherwise ignore.

He said that E-voting is the final step in the process of an IT-based modernisation of the entire administrative process and could reduce costs.

However, he also said that e-voting is not the same as e-commerce - it's an essential part of democracy and if there's anything that potentially threatens the core values of it, like flawed elections, it must be avoided.

He also raised concerns about transparency as voters cannot be sure that the vote is being transmitted, voters cannot verify if their vote is correctly stored and counted. He also warned that there are many potential security flaws.

Estonia - the most prominent example

In Estonia e-voting was introduced in 2005 and has been used for national as well as EP elections. It works using a digital signature card and two PIN numbers.

The percentage of e-votes cast has increased from 2% of all votes cast in 2005 to 5.4% in 2007, 15% in 2009 and reached 24.3% in 2011.

Participants agreed that the effect of e-voting on voter participation remains unclear. "With e-voting you can vote where ever you are, whenever you want - we don't have evidence but this must increase participation," said Prof. **Rüdiger Grimm** (University of Koblenz, IT risk management).

Prof. **Barbara Simons** (IT security expert, formerly IBM Research, US) was sceptical: "It is not the time yet and in my opinion it would be a mistake." She referred to security issues like hacking and stealing the elections: "How can we be sure that the voter PC is not being controlled? Vote rigging in voters' computers is easier than money theft in online banking - the virus will be voting, not the voter."

A participant noted that postal voting can also be risky. Mr Grimm added: "I disagree with Barbara that the whole procedure cannot be safe - it can."

The STOA project on e-voting is part of a larger project on e-democracy