Electoral Reform and Online Voting

Nicole Goodman

As more of our lives move online, there has been increasing interest in online voting, as one possible reform being considered among the many before the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. While convenience and accessibility are obvious attractions of online voting, questions of integrity and security—particularly amid recent accusations of foreign hacking in the US electoral process—weigh heavily in the mix. Centre for e-Democracy Director Nicole Goodman takes us through the pros and cons, revealing some surprising statistics about youth participation and turnout.

Discussions about electoral reform in Canada have largely centered upon the possibility of introducing a more proportional voting system while other possible policy changes such as mandatory and online voting have received less attention. These "poor cousins" of the electoral reform debate haven't necessarily been left out by government, but the narrative of proportional voting has been much more attractive for many, including those who have provided testimony to the special parliamentary committee on electoral reform.

Partly, this is because altering Canada's electoral system is a much larger reform than changes to election rules such as compulsory or online voting. Another reason is that discussions of electoral system change are accompanied by a secondary debate regarding whether such reform should first be put to a referendum or some type of deliberative public consultation.

Finally, talk of proportional voting has been stirring for some time. There is a history of failed reform attempts in Canadian provinces. There have been many elections where the po-

litical outcomes have been far from a reflection of the will of the voting public; and stakeholders across the country are mobilizing to advocate for the reform. Though online voting attracts its fair share of attention, it has not reached the scale and scope of proportional voting debates.

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The irony is that Canadians seem to prefer online voting. A September 2016 survey of 1,000 Canadians conducted by AskingCanadians asked respondents which of the proposed voting reforms they prefer, or none at all. The largest group, 42 per cent, chose online voting, 25 per cent selected a new electoral system, 20 per cent said mandatory voting and 13 per cent none at all. If online voting is the preferred reform, and has received less attention, should we not be talking about it more? What are the implications of online voting for Canadian federal elections? Some considerations related to accessibility and inclusiveness, voter engagement, and electoral integrity are discussed here.

Voting accessibility is becoming increasingly important for Canadians. Turnout in federal and provincial elections has experienced a general trend of decline over the past 25 years (notwithstanding a few increases in recent votes which are associated with the particular circumstances of those elections). At the same time, voter turnout during the advanced voting period in the same elections has risen significantly.

Why is this?

While there have been some changes to the advance voting structure that have created additional opportunities to participate, such as extensions in the number of advance voting days, generally it appears to be part of a trend also mirrored in other advanced democracies such as Australia and the United States, whereby voters are opting to vote in advance of Election Day. Voters in these countries are also using other remote voting methods more, notably voting by mail. In the recent Australian federal election for example, overall voter turnout was the lowest it has been since compulsory voting was introduced in 1925

with more than 9 per cent of eligible voters not participating.

Yet advance participation at the polls was around 24 per cent, up from 16.9 per cent in 2013 and 8 per cent in 2010. Taking into account voting by mail, about 34 per cent of votes were cast in advance of Election Day. The fact that voters are so readily making use of the early voting period and other remote voting methods signals that the contemporary voter wants options, or rather choice and convenience, for voting.

There is also evidence that improvements in access can address some of the reasons for non-voting. In recent elections, the frequency of the explanation of 'everyday life issues' is the largest category provided by nonvoters in Elections Canada's Survey of Electors to explain why they did not participate. This includes rationales, such as being too busy, out of town, illness or disability, weather conditions, or transportation problems.

Online ballots can enable voting despite the vagaries of everyday life or health issues. They can also improve access for special groups of electors such as citizens abroad or military overseas, persons with disabilities, young people away at post-secondary school, the elderly, and members of Indigenous communities. Ten countries currently offer online voting and five of these initiated the reform to improve voting access for citizens or military overseas: Armenia, France, Mexico, Panama and the United States.

If Canada adopted mandatory voting, it would also be important to introduce reforms to improve voter access to the ballot box—such as additional advance voting days, vote centers, or remote online voting.

A recent study carried out on internet voting adoption in Ontario municipalities by myself and Leah Stokes, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara, finds that the voting reform increases turnout in Ontario municipalities by 3 per cent. These results are consistent with research findings on the effects of voting by mail and early voting.

The other voting reforms being considered, which are larger changes, may not have a much larger impact on turnout. Those providing testimony to the committee noted possible turnout effects from the adoption of a more proportional system would likely be in the 3-5 per cent range. While compulsory voting laws show a larger effect, often between 7-16 per cent, even in places where mandatory voting is already established, such as Australia, there is talk of further improving turnout. Voter participation is complex and no one institutional reform is the silver bullet.

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While not a panacea, there is evidence online voting can engage electors with less committed voting histories. Research in Canada, Estonia and Switzerland, shows that online voting brings some infrequent voters into the voting process. Particularly in Canada at the municipal level, there is evidence of non-voters participating when online voting is made available.

What about young people? Online voting typically appeals to voters of all ages though not disproportionately to young people, as is often thought. Research on Canada and findings from other countries, such as Norway, show that younger voters are more likely to choose paper over online ballots, perhaps out of symbolism for their first time participating. Emerging research from Switzerland finds that while older voters are likely to remain loyal to online voting once having tried it, young people are more likely to move back to paper ballots, or abstention, in the next election. This tells us that older voters will make use of online voting, but it is not the solution to engage young people.

Though security, authentication and verification must be managed carefully, our lives are increasingly moving online. The modernization of government institutions seems inevitable and whether online voting is adopted or not we can expect to see technology creep into other aspects of the election process such as voters' lists, voter registration, and ballot tabulation. Thus, we need to give due consideration to research in this area and how voting technologies might apply to the unique contextual circumstances in Canada.

The integrity of elections should be a foremost consideration in reform debates. While decisions to enact reform may raise questions about potential impacts, taking no action (a decision itself) could also affect citizen trust and faith in elections and parliament.

If online voting is implemented, its deployment should be carefully thought out, researched and trialed in a select area or with a particular group of electors prior to broader development.

Finally, process is very important. Electoral reform is not something that can be rushed. It is much better assessed as part of a careful and deliberate process. While a trial would be a practical step forward and change is inevitable, large-scale deployment needs to be well-considered, researched and planned. **P**

Nicole Goodman is Director at the Centre for e-Democracy, a charitable organization founded by Delvinia CEO Adam Froman, dedicated to generating, translating and disseminating scholarly knowledge about the ways digital technology is affecting politics and society. She holds a concurrent appointment with the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada financially supported this research. nicole.goodman@utoronto.ca