

Rise of Internet-based elections hampered by controversy

By ERIK PISOR, The Daily Transcript
Monday, July 25, 2005

As more registered voters and company shareholders turn to the Internet to vote online for candidates and issues, the new method of casting a ballot continues to generate controversy.

According to CEO Lori Steele of EveryoneCounts, an Australian company that runs Internet elections and is now based in San Diego County, there are 1.7 million private elections alone, which include shareholder, trade union, homeowner's association and collegiate voting. EveryoneCounts provides Internet voting for these groups as well as the department of defense in Australia and various U.K. government elections.

"It's quite controversial," Steele said. "There are people who are afraid of technology." Steele also noted that Internet voting, which she says is the result of the technological age in which we live, could increase the amount of registered U.S. voters.

"This is the way things should be in the future to make sure that democracy is irrefutable," Steele said. "When it comes to government elections, we don't anticipate stopping people going to the polls. What we anticipate is taking the place of absentee ballots by mail ... Paper is not a secure way and far too expensive."

But Yoshi Kohno, a computer security expert who testified in July 2004 before the U.S. House of Representative's Committee on House Administration regarding touch screen voting at polls, sees the problems surrounding Internet voting, regardless of what type of ballot it's replacing. "I'm really concerned that electronic voting machines aren't for use in re-elections (or elections), and Internet voting is even a little more scary because they can inherit the same problems, but are more vulnerable because they're hooked up to the Internet," Kohno said. "We don't even know how to completely block our own computers against spyware and viruses," so how could we ensure a tamper-free election?

Steele said the company currently uses a dual password system, which doesn't require proof of identification, when conducting online voting and hasn't had an "election hack."

"We ensure the vote got where it's going and make sure the vote wasn't changed," Steele said, adding they have staff members who concentrate on the security of the site and the votes.

Though EveryoneCounts has not experienced a hack, Kohno said voting done via the Internet could be subject to future assault.

"Sometimes when attackers get into the system it can be undetectable," Kohno said. "If truly an attack hasn't taken place, what's to say it won't in the future. It's like riding in a car without your seatbelt," Kohno said, adding that attackers from other countries could manipulate votes.

However, Kohno said Internet voting might be convenient in private sector elections.

"The risks aren't as great as if you're determining the next president, so Internet voting may have its place in some small voting events," he said. "But I would have concerns if it determined a president. Writing computer programs is already hard enough."

Steele said an Internet-based election, even if just for absentee ballots, could save California 50 percent of its election costs. However, Mikel Hass, registrar of voters for San Diego County, said the state isn't considering Internet voting.

"The only place where it's looked at is in the military," Hass said. "There hasn't been any talk of anyone using it in elections."

According to Hass, the focus of the state is to meet the requirements of the Help America Vote Act, which will provide funds to states to replace punch-card voting.

"These new voting systems don't include the Internet," Hass added. "The state is tending to pull away from that (technological voting systems), and they're looking for more fundamental systems."