

# Electronic Voting in Belgium

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## INTRODUCTION

Does representative democracy imply that there is ... representation? What does one mean by *representation*? Looked at very generally, it means that the legislative (parliament and government) and executive (government) bodies represent the opinions of those who are represented.

The primary method for expressing opinions in democracies is by voting: the parliaments are made up of representatives that reflect the different trends of the opinion expressed by the vote (Avril, 1990). Universal suffrage is neither a historical fact nor a clear-cut contemporary feature. There have been, and there still are, individuals who are excluded from voting and universal suffrage (Rémond, 1999). For a long time, several European countries had representational parliamentary systems that were not democracies. We then experienced a *notabilization* of political relations (Deloye, 1997, p. 96). As Max Weber put it, one is not then living from politics but for politics (Weber, 1963). Several restrictions existed and still exist with universal suffrage. For many years, governments either slowed down or restrained access to voting.

Nowadays, the problems arise in new and really reverse terms. The question is more about knowing how to bring citizens back to the ballot boxes and in this manner to perpetuate the legitimacy of the democratic system. Indeed, voter turnout rates have been falling for the past 20 years (Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998; Delwit, 2002). In many European countries, abstention has risen in a straight line since the end of the 1970s right up to the present day. In view of this trend and considering the growing number of election choices for a priori nongovernment parties (Ignazi, 2003), several analysts and political leaders have been wondering about ways to curb this development.

In part, thoughts relating to *electronic voting* (e-voting) lie within this context (Birch & Watt, 2004). A certain number of academics and political leaders have

been examining institutionalised restraints likely to improve the current state of affairs (Bowler, Brockington, & Donovan, 2001). Naturally in this framework, electronic vote is only one element amongst others. In this regard, Arend Lijphart has undoubtedly pursued this the furthest, since in 1997 he suggested (re)introducing compulsory voting in democratic states in order to respond to the sagging voter turnout (Lijphart, 1997, p. 11).

The will to reduce voter abstention was not the only issue at the origin of studies on the possibility of introducing or extending e-voting. The mobilization of new communication methods and technology for voting was also at issue. Particularly as the unfortunate vote counting experience in the state of Florida during the 2000 presidential election highlighted concerns about traditional methods of voting and vote counting (Jarvis, 2001).

This article will briefly discuss the issue of e-voting by looking at the response to the introduction of e-voting by Belgian citizens who used it. We will show the results of a major exit poll survey conducted on the occasion of the May 18, 2003, federal elections on Belgian's opinions with regard to e-voting. Two major issues were examined. To what extent was e-voting as it was used in Belgium considered as easy or difficult to use? Was e-voting commonly accepted or rejected by the voters who used it?

## BACKGROUND: THE BELGIANS AND ELECTRONIC VOTING

In 1994, the following provision was inserted in the Belgian Electoral Law, "The King can, by decree deliberated by the Cabinet, decide that, for electoral constituencies, electoral cantons or communes that he designates, an automated voting system should be used."<sup>1</sup> From that moment on, computer voting was introduced in more and more Belgian municipalities. In 2003, 44% of all Belgian voters cast their vote on a computer.

To a certain extent, the use of e-voting in Belgium may look surprising. In Belgium, voting is compulsory. Voters not attending at the polls may be sued. The first time, they risk to pay from 25€ to 50€, the second from 50€ to 125€. Even if sanctions are scarcely applied (0.0015% in 1985), most Belgians respect the rule and vote. In the last federal elections (2003), the turnout was 91.9% (decreasing of 3.25 percentage points in the last 15 years). In that context, one can hardly conclude that Belgian legislators introduce e-voting to curb a growing abstention. Actually, two reasons justified this choice. First, e-voting was going to avoid a large number of invalid votes. Second, legislators wanted to reduce the length of counting procedures.

Ten years after its introduction, time had come for a first evaluation of e-voting in Belgium. On May 18, 2003, a team of 27 pollsters supervised by seven researchers and professors from the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) went to 13 polling stations in the country<sup>2</sup>. In addition, two teams of pollsters went to two municipalities where the so-called “ticketing” method was being tried out, in order to improve confidence and, eventually, recount in case of contest (Kohn, Tubblefield, Rubin, & Wallach, 2003; Maynihan, 2004, pp. 523-524).

The questionnaire submitted at the polling station exit on May 18, 2003, was in three parts<sup>3</sup>. The first had a series of questions that enabled defining the socio-demographic profile of the individuals interviewed. This information has a twofold use. On the one hand, it enabled assessment of the value of the sampling in terms of representativeness. On the other hand, this data also permitted us to determine whether certain socioeconomic groups or certain age categories showed any specific association with e-voting problems.

The second part of the questionnaire contributed a second round of objective data on the profile of the persons polled. Its purpose was to provide the resources

needed to assess whether familiarity with computers and the information received beforehand about this new voting system tended to influence the way voters felt about e-voting.

Finally, the last part of the exit-poll questionnaire contained questions asking Belgian voters if they were satisfied with e-voting. Four questions served as indicators of this global satisfaction. First, those polled were asked to evaluate how easy they found e-voting. Second, they were asked to express the social acceptance of the new voting procedure. The third item concerned trust in e-voting. Finally, their overall feeling regarding e-voting was asked.

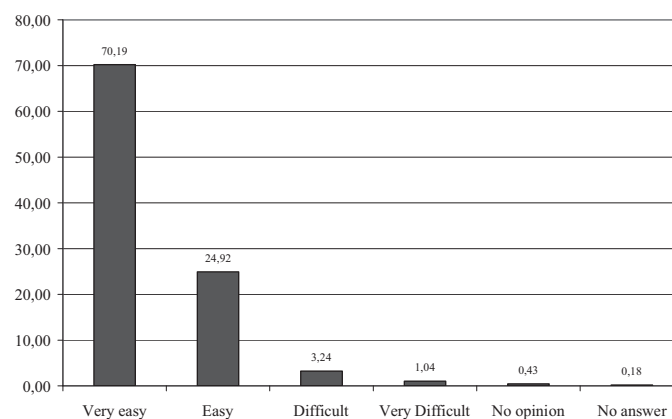
### MAIN THRUST OF ARTICLE: ACCEPTANCE OF E-VOTING IN BELGIUM

#### The User Friendliness of Electronic Voting

First of all, those polled were asked the user friendliness of e-voting. Before going into the answers, one should briefly state how Belgian voters have to proceed to cast their vote electronically.<sup>4</sup> In the poll station, each voter receives a magnetic card. The voter enters the polling booth, inserts his or her magnetic card, and starts the process. Using an electronic pencil, the voter chooses a party first, and then a candidate. Afterward, the voter has to confirm his or her vote. At the end, the voter gives back his or her magnetic card and his or her vote is recorded.

Knowing the details of e-voting in Belgium, we can move on to the analysis of the user friendliness of e-voting. Those polled were asked to evaluate the ease/

Figure 1. Ease/difficulty in using electronic voting



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