



Strasbourg, 12 July 2023

CONFERENCE

E-voting and use of ICT in elections ***"Taking stock and moving forward"***

Strasbourg, 16 June 2023

Main takeaways:

The conference was organised by the Division of Democratic Governance and the Division on Elections and Participatory Democracy with the aim to prepare a review of the implementation of the [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2017\)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on standards for e-voting](#) and the [Committee of Ministers' Guidelines on the use of ICT in the electoral process](#). The conclusions will feed into the review meeting of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG), the intergovernmental committee tasked with reviewing the implementation of the Recommendation every two years.

Main takeaways included:

- Digital transformation is impacting all aspects of life, including elections. While some Council of Europe member States are adopting or updating legislation on e-voting, and a few member States even use e-voting, most are not considering e-voting solutions due to concerns about public trust, security, electoral integrity, cyber threats, costs, and lack of political consensus, as well as concerns over voter pressure, vote-buying, and manipulation.
- At the same time, member States are increasingly digitalising different aspects of the electoral process, such as voter and candidate registration, online submission of campaign expenses reports and complaints, political party registration, online training for election administration, application and accreditation of national and international observers, e-identification of voters, and e-counting. Many Election Management Bodies (EMBs) are also using their websites to publish regulations, decisions, instructions, political parties' financial reports and other documents. Some even live broadcast their sessions.

- There is a rising concern over an increased risk of cyber-attacks, foreign interference and manipulation particularly in national elections where the stakes are likely to be the highest. As the mere allegation of interference in elections might in itself undermine trust in democratic processes and its outcomes, states seem to be reluctant to consider or introduce internet voting solutions, especially as it is extremely difficult to ensure full security of online systems.
- To protect electoral integrity, trust in the process and its outcomes are vital. Trust and trustworthiness are different concepts. Trust relates to voters' perception of proper election management, while trustworthiness focuses on the adequacy and adherence to technological standards. Technology alone cannot guarantee trust, and trust is a precondition to the introduction of e-voting.
- In addition, EMBs, as the entities guaranteeing the integrity of the electoral process, should own and understand the technologies used, rather than relying on private companies.
- Personal data protection regulations may conflict with electoral principles, necessitating guidance on incorporating data protection provisions in elections. In addition, there is a difference between privacy and secret suffrage. While data protection aims to ensure privacy, the secrecy of the ballot is a separate matter.
- Guaranteeing the secrecy and freedom of the vote – two of the key principles of democratic elections – presents challenges in remote voting, such as postal voting or internet voting, particularly for vulnerable groups who may be at risk to face pressure. At the same time, remote voting can be beneficial for certain groups like expatriates and students, making it essential to offer various voting channels to increase or stabilize turnout.
- Citizens' limited knowledge of electronic public services and lack of trust in public institutions highlight the need for societal discussions on the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in elections and on e-voting. Gradual introduction of ICT, with pre-election testing under realistic conditions and with relevant stakeholders, coupled with awareness-raising and voter education, can help in building trust and pave the way for a meaningful evaluation of the process. This is an ongoing task.
- ICT solutions in the electoral process promise transparency, efficiency and accuracy, but may also pose dangers, such as the potential for pre-poll disinformation and manipulation through powerful AI and cyber tools. The introduction of ICT in elections is thus context dependent, with no one-size-fits-all solution.
- International observers should receive proper capacity building and access to effectively observe the use of e-voting and ICT in elections. ODIHR is currently revising its handbook in this field which should be published at the end of 2023.

- Regular review meetings of the implementation of the current Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)5 on the standards of e-voting along with the accompanying Guidelines as well as the CM guidelines for the use of ICT in electoral processes are necessary to adapt standards to evolving technologies. This is a continuous effort. Participants also agreed that such exchanges were important and inspirational, as countries needed to learn from each other and to replicate good practice.
- Furthermore, there is a need for more research and studies with regard the use of ICT in electoral process as well as e-voting, including to the growing phenomenon of use of artificial intelligence in election campaigning.