Private Sanctity –
e-Practices Overriding Democratic Rigor in e-Voting

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Abstract. The discussion on electronic voting has so far mostly focused on technical issues, mainly concerning security and privacy. This paper reports an empirical study on how the symbolic values of democracy, as manifested in the act of voting, are considered by e-voters. The study found that the voters in a student election in actions as well as in stated views gave priority to convenience over security and privacy. They voted electronically from home despite uncertainty about the security of the technical system. We argue that this is an indication that the view of the principles of democratic practices will change, and that what might be called an “e-practices mode of thinking” will to some extent prevail over a “rigid democracy mode”.

1 Introduction

Electronic voting has been discussed for some time, most intensely so immediately after the US president election debacle in Fall 2000. The topic for the debate has mostly been technical issues relating to security, authentication, and privacy, but also turnout and, to some extent, economic considerations (CIVTF, 2000; Cranor, 2000; IPI, 2001; Rubin, 2001).

This paper reports a study that takes the issue a step further. Suppose we had perfectly secure systems for electronic voting – then what? What would they be used for? Voting is an act that is surrounded with a nimbus as it embodies the essence of democracy. The rules and procedures framing voting express the view of what a vote is, and hence what democracy is. Although different in details across countries and democratic variants (e.g. Barber, 1984; Åström, 2001), what is sometimes referred to as “the sanctity of the act of voting” (Statskontoret, 2001: 49) is usually described as coming from the following characteristics:

- The vote is an individual choice, and the result of individual deliberation. Although public debate is of course essential you should make up your mind yourself, at least without pressure from anyone else.
- The vote is at the same time an expression of a collective – you are part of a people who has decided to make decisions in public matters this way. Considering the alternatives, you should feel proud of the fact that you can indeed go to the polling booth. This means the way you view your voting is important – it is the expression of freedom of choice. The vote is a manifestation of the “sacred” mode of rule, democracy.
The content of the vote, or more precisely the link between the vote and you, is your private property. It is up to you whether or not you want to disclose your political preferences.

The voting procedures, hence, must be considered as reliable in all aspects by everyone – even those who do not vote. This includes surrounding events such as the preceding and ensuing public debates. (CIVTF, 2000; Johansson, 2001; Statskontoret, 2001).

Examining current voting procedures we find that precincts are physically set up so that people are not too hard pressed to individually honor the above principles. For instance, when you actually cast your vote, usually by dropping a piece of paper in a ballot box, there is a curtain or some other arrangement to prevent others from seeing what you do.

The briefest thought about conditions in the home reveals that this physical guarantee for privacy cannot be arranged without Orwellian measures. So, if we had secure electronic voting from the home, privacy would have to be guaranteed by the individual rather than government. In fact, not only the voter herself but also, often, by her family who would have to agree not to shouldersurf. Would we do that? Or would we change or minds about the principles?

To gain at least some preliminary empirical findings about people’s views of the act of voting in an e-voting context, we made an investigation of the first Swedish Internet election, arranged by a student union at Umeå University in May 2001.

2 The Election

Umeå Student Union, representing some 12 000 students in social sciences, humanities, and teacher education, is one of three unions at Umeå University, Sweden. Its Council is elected in annual public proportional elections. The procedures are quite similar to those in Swedish public elections. Voters vote for parties and are allowed to strike out candidates from the list provided by the party of their choice.

Turnout in student elections is generally very low across Sweden. In Umeå, the 2000 election attracted only 11.5% of the electorate. The low turnout was the main reason for choosing to use Internet in 2001. Eventually sponsoring from the Department of Justice required broader aims, as the government was interested in a pilot test for voter behavior. This led to the goals eventually being the following:

- Increase turnout by about 50% (from 11.5% to ca 17%).
- Investigate voters’ attitudes to Internet elections (concerning privacy as well as symbolic values).
- Investigate strengths and weaknesses generally with Internet elections.
- Improve the election process.
- Get more people active in the democratic process.
- Make democratic debate more available to people.

It was hoped that improved marketing in combination with the “improved election process” would achieve this. The improvement of the election process included not only electronic voting, also an electronic discussion forum was set up. The voting technology used was developed by the US company Safevote (www.safevote.com).