

Keeping Up with the Times

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The average Canadian relies heavily on technology for tasks that were historically done in person. From online banking, to shopping, to buying movie tickets, Canadians and people across the world increasingly rely on computers, cell phones and tablets for everyday tasks. While innovation has been prominent in a variety of sectors within Canada's digital economy, one notable exception is the use of internet-based technologies for voting in elections across the country. Federal and provincial elections continue to use an antiquated system of paper ballots and human counting, despite the fact that viable internet-based substitutes exist.

Countries from across the world have recently begun experimenting with online voting technology on a massive scale. Switzerland, Australia, Estonia, Spain, France, and others have experimented with or adopted this technology to some degree. The United Kingdom's Digital Democracy Commission has set an ambitious goal to have secure online voting as an option for all voters by 2020. Estonia has adopted online voting technology at all levels of government and Swiss Cantons have also begun experimenting with it.

Canada is also among the small group of countries experimenting with online voting, but there is room to grow. In the last round of municipal elections in Ontario in 2014, around a quarter of the province's population had access to online voting as an option. It is predicted that by the next round of elections in 2018, that access will spread to over half the voting population.

Online voting has also been used in two of the three federal political parties' leadership conventions, with the Liberals and New Democrats employing private companies to increase their voter turnout. Several Canadian companies have entered the market in recent years, selling their products across the country and around the world.

Although online voting continues to grow within Canada at the municipal level, the young industry faces many challenges. One major hurdle is the lack of an industry-wide certification process. Canadian companies have spent millions in research and development to ensure their online voting platforms are accessible and secure. Without a proper system of certification and set of standards, less secure platforms could enter the market and compromise public policy interests in online voting. Maintaining a high standard is particularly important for an industry that relies heavily on the credibility of individual platforms.

The United States has already implemented a system that online voting companies rely on to protect their credibility. The United States Election Assistance Commission accreditation and certification program came into effect in 2007 and since then has certified eight voting systems from various companies, one of which is Canadian. This program helps protect companies from being undermined by less advanced systems and has allowed governments on all levels to easily find accredited services. With an infant industry that can easily lose traction with negative media stories, Canada would be well served by developing a similar accreditation and certification system.

With our world continuing to follow a path of digitalization in almost every aspect of society, Canada must keep pace. Instead of preventing Elections Canada from running a research project on online voting, as was done a few years back, the Government of Canada should embrace innovation in this area. Members of Parliament must move past the thinking that online voting could threaten their seats by expanding the electorate to include groups they may not have experience with. The risks and benefits need to be weighed with any new disruptive technology, but Canada stands to gain from encouraging online voting and ensuring the platforms are secure, efficient, and accessible.

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