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Electoral Reform in the 21st Century: Embracing ICT?

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In most European countries more than 50 percent of the population has their own PC at home and most of them have access to internet at home or elsewhere. Never before did so many people have access to so much information. Although Internet is the most imaginative use of ICT other technological applications, such as mobile phones and voting machines had of course similar bearing. Given the huge impact of ICT on our society in general, the functioning of our democracy could not elude all these technological innovations and people had high expectations from the many potential benefits of ICT for democracy. One of these expectations of the use of voting machines and internet voting was to make voting even more accessible and increase turnout. But interestingly enough while information technology continues to permeate society, we witness an opposite process with regard to the use of ICT in the electoral process. For example in the Netherlands after a relatively long period of undisputed use of voting machines and internet voting in elections of 2004 (European Parliament) and 2006 (Parliamentary), the government decided in 2008 to ban voting machines as well as the use of internet voting for voters living abroad. The government in Ireland preceded the Dutch government when they decided already in 2004 not to use the - then- recently acquired voting machines. In countries such as Belgium, France and Germany similar debates are taking place and many predict the returning to the traditional methods of paper ballots and postal voting there as well. Advocates of a ban of ICT in the electoral process frequently refer to the increasing confidence gap between politics and citizens, although survey results show that the population at large thinks voting machines reliable and is in favour of internet voting. This paper reviews the current debates on electronic voting, identifying the main actors and analyzing the main arguments.