



CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY &
ADMINISTRATION

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
UTAH

260 S. CENTRAL CAMPUS DR.
ROOM 214
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
84112

PHONE: 801.581.6781
FAX: 801.587.7861

AMERICAN ATTITUDES ABOUT ELECTRONIC VOTING

RESULTS OF A NATIONAL SURVEY

*Thad E. Hall, Assistant Professor of Political Science,
University of Utah*

*R. Michael Alvarez, Professor,
California Institute of Technology*

*Center for Public Policy & Administration -
University of Utah*

This study was funded through the generous support of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, the Department of Political Science, and the Center for Public Policy and Administration at the University of Utah.

American Attitudes about Electronic Voting

Results of A National Survey

Thad E. Hall, University of Utah

R. Michael Alvarez, California Institute of Technology

September 9, 2004

Executive Summary

This study examines current attitudes of the American electorate toward electronic voting. This issue is critical to understand, given the highly argumentative debate going on among media and political elites on this topic, as well as the movement in many states and localities toward electronic voting systems. If American voters lack confidence in electronic voting systems—or for that matter all the various voting systems they may use in this fall’s presidential election—the basic integrity of our democratic system could be in jeopardy. The survey, conducted in the month of August, 2004, has several key findings:

1. American registered voters are largely comfortable with the two predominant voting technologies: electronic and optical scan machines. A plurality of 38 percent of voters said they are most comfortable with using electronic voting machines to cast their vote, and 30% are most comfortable using optical scanning voting devices.
2. The survey shows a sizeable generation gap in attitudes about electronic voting. Support for electronic voting is highest among Generation Y voters (18-27 year-olds), while older voters (those 59 and older) are the least likely to be comfortable using electronic voting systems.
3. African-Americans voters express a high level of comfort with the use of electronic voting systems (52% say they are comfortable using them), but African-American voters are also cautious about whether electronic voting systems increase the potential for unintentional glitches.
4. Roughly one-third of voters in our sample did not express opinions about the potential benefits or liabilities of electronic voting systems. This may represent uncertainty about electronic voting machines, a lack of familiarity with them, or ambivalence about their use.
5. The electorate views electronic voting as making voting easier for people with disabilities (61% agree with this position). But a plurality of registered voters in our sample (43%) also agreed with the statement that electronic voting equipment is prone to unintentional glitches, while 39% agreed (27% disagreed) that electronic voting systems are more accurate and 38% agreed (with 28% in disagreement) that electronic voting increases the potential for fraud.

Introduction

Since the 2000 presidential election, a debate has swirled regarding the methods Americans use to cast their ballots. As we move into the final stages of a new presidential election cycle, voters in 42 states (including the District of Columbia) may use new voting machines, with as many as 50 million registered voters potentially casting their ballots using electronic (“direct electronic recording” or “touchscreen”) voting devices.¹ There is concern about whether voters will trust these new voting systems, especially the new electronic voting machines. There is also concern that Americans lack confidence in the other voting systems they will use this fall, largely due to the problems with other voting systems that were debated following the 2000 presidential election.

The tenor of the debate over voting technology has become quite argumentative over the past two years, as critics and supporters of electronic voting have debated its merits. On the one hand, there have been many cases of anomalies in the implementation of electronic voting systems that have resulted in votes being lost or problems at polling places. At the same time, there have been cases of electronic voting enfranchising voters, giving certain voters—such as people with disabilities—the chance to cast a secret ballot for the first time, or lowering the number of uncounted ballots. Much of this debate has played out among media and political elites, and our goal in this study was to determine how the public views these issues at this point in time, in particular the tradeoffs between possible increases in accessibility and accuracy relative to potential increases in either glitches or outright election fraud.

To assess the attitudes of American voters about electronic voting systems before they go to the polling places in this fall’s presidential election, we developed a series of survey questions about voting system use, confidence in voting systems, and electronic voting. These survey questions were recently posed to registered voters, in a poll conducted with a nationwide sample of 829 male and female registered voters, fielded between August 25 and 29, 2004.² This poll was fielded by International Communications Research (ICR) using their EXCEL telephone omnibus survey of adults.³ The margin of error for the poll was plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.

In this initial report from this survey we focus on two sets of survey questions. All registered voters in the sample were asked:

¹ The estimate that voters in 42 states may use new voting systems this fall comes from a January 2004 report by electionline.org, “Election Reform: What’s Changed, What Hasn’t, and Why?” (<http://www.electionline.org>). The estimate of usage of electronic voting machines comes from a study by Election Data Services (<http://www.electiondataservices.com/home.htm>).

² The survey was fielded to a national sample of adults; here we focus our attention on only registered voters as they are the population that has used voting systems in the past and who will be the most likely to use voting systems in this fall’s presidential election.

³ ICR is a leading market and opinion research firm, located in Media, Pennsylvania. For more information on the omnibus survey methodology, see http://www.icrsurvey.com/omni_srv.html. The incidence rate for the survey of registered voters was 82%.

- “Regardless of whether or not you have voted in the past, which of the following ways to cast your vote are you most comfortable with? Electronically, like on new touchscreen machines, marking a paper ballot with a pen, by punchcards, or by some other method?”

Also, in order to assess different dimensions of attitudes about electronic voting, we asked the following questions to all registered voters:

- “You may have heard discussion about the use of electronic touchscreen or direct recording electronic voting machines in the presidential election this fall. I’m going to read you some statements about electronic voting, and want to know whether you agree or disagree with each statement, or if you have no opinion.
 - electronic voting systems increase the potential for fraud.
 - electronic voting systems are more accurate.
 - electronic voting systems make voting easier for people with disabilities.
 - electronic voting systems are prone to unintentional failures.

These four items track the major arguments made by both sides of the debate on electronic voting. The critics argue that electronic voting increases the potential for fraud and for unintentional errors. The supporters argue that the system is more accurate and more accessible, especially for people with disabilities. The order in which these four items were asked was rotated to ensure that the survey results were not biased. In the table attached to this report we provide the weighted results for each of these survey questions, as well as the cross-tabulations of these questions by age, race, and partisanship.

Analysis of Attitudes About Electronic Voting

First, we find that American registered voters are largely comfortable with the two predominant voting technologies: electronic and optical scan machines. Thirty-eight percent of registered voters in our sample said they were most comfortable with using electronic voting machines to cast their vote, followed by the almost 30% who said that they are comfortable using optical scanning voting devices. Eighteen percent expressed comfort with the use of punch cards, while 8% mentioned being comfortable with other voting systems. About 6% of the sample of registered voters had no opinion or did not provide an answer.

However, there were strong patterns in the relative degrees of comfort with various voting systems by the variables presented in the attached table. Regarding age, we see that a majority (56.1%) of Generation Y registered voters (those aged 18 to 27) expressed comfort with the use of electronic voting machines, while almost 32% of those 59 or older were comfortable with the newer electronic voting technology. The level of comfort with the use of optical scanned ballots also was highest among Generation Y registered voters (34% of them expressed comfort), dropping to 25% for those older than 59. We noticed that Generation Y voters are not comfortable using punch cards, as less than 2% of them stated they were comfortable with those voting systems. But 14% of Generation X (those aged 28 to 39) registered voters said they were comfortable with punch cards, as were 24% of Boomers and those 59 years of age or older.

We also noted a difference in comfort with electronic and optical scanned ballots for white and African-American registered voters. Thirty-seven percent of white registered voters said they were comfortable with electronic voting systems, while a majority (52%) of African-American registered voters stated having comfort with electronic voting systems. About a third (31%) of white registered voters said they were most comfortable with optical scanning voting machines, while only 13% of African-American registered voters were comfortable with that voting system.

As for partisanship, we noted that independents were more likely than Republicans or Democrats to be comfortable with electronic voting systems (44% of independents said they were comfortable with electronic voting systems, while about 37% of Republicans or Democrats expressed similar comfort). Almost 32% of independents said they were comfortable using optical scanned ballots, while 27% of Republicans and 26% of Democrats stated comfort with the same voting technologies. Independents were less likely than Democrats or Republicans to state being comfortable using of punch card voting machines.

Second, when we examine the responses to the four questions on electronic voting machines, we found intriguing patterns. One important pattern in the data is that roughly a third of the registered voters in our sample stated not having any opinion about any of these dimensions of electronic voting systems. This might represent uncertainty about electronic voting machines, a lack of familiarity with them, or ambivalence about their use. Additional research is necessary to understand what is driving these high rates of no opinion about the pros and cons of electronic voting machines.

But turning to the percentages of registered voters who agree with each of the statements, we find that a sizeable majority of registered voters in our sample (61%) agree that electronic voting systems make voting easier for people with disabilities. But the second most agreed-with statement was the one on glitches; 43% of the registered voters in our sample agreed with the statement that electronic voting machines are prone to unintentional failures. The other two statements, on accuracy and fraud, had roughly identical degrees of agreement: 39% agreed with the statement that electronic voting systems are more accurate, while 38% agreed that they increase the potential for fraud.

A Critical Moment for Electronic Voting

Thus, this study provides a portrait of the opinions of American registered voters about electronic voting machines at this point in time. On one hand there is a considerable degree of uncertainty, unfamiliarity, or ambivalence about these voting devices; roughly a third of registered voters in our sample expressed no opinion on each pro and con dimension. On the other hand, American registered voters seem to be in some degree of agreement that electronic voting machines can make voting easier for people with disabilities, but that they are prone to unintentional failures. There is less agreement in the minds of American registered voters about the extent to which electronic voting machines are more accurate, or whether they increase the potential for fraud.

When we look at these four questions and age, race and partisanship, we see that that older voters (those 59 or older) are generally the most likely to express no opinion about the pros or cons of electronic voting, with the only exception being whether electronic voting systems make voting easier for people with disabilities. Older voters are also the least likely to express comfort with the use of electronic voting systems. On the other hand, Generation Y registered voters are the most likely to agree that electronic voting systems are more accurate, but also to agree that they are prone to unintentional failures and increase the potential for fraud. And Generation X registered voters are the most likely to say they are comfortable with the use of electronic voting systems. There is thus a significant generation gap in the attitudes of American registered voters about new voting technologies.

African-American registered voters appear highly uncertain (55% did not have an opinion) about whether electronic voting systems are more accurate. Almost 71% of African-American registered voters agreed that electronic voting systems make voting easier for people with disabilities (relative to 61% of white registered voters who agreed with the same statement), perhaps demonstrating that African-American voters are sensitive to concerns about the accessibility of the voting process.

We also see political divisions in opinions about the pros and cons of electronic voting systems. A majority of Democratic registered voters (55%) agree that electronic voting systems are prone to unintended failures, but 69% of Democrats also agree that electronic voting systems make voting easier for people with disabilities. Independents appear more convinced about the accuracy of electronic voting systems than are partisans; almost 45% of independents agreed with the statement that electronic voting systems are more accurate, while about 36% of Democrats or Republicans agreed with the same statement.

In conclusion, the attitudes of American registered voters about electronic voting systems—at this stage in the evolving use of those systems and in this particular election cycle—are complex. The survey data we have collected and analyzed here provide grist for both those who support and those who oppose the use of electronic voting systems in the 2004 presidential election.

We do find that there are many American registered voters who state that they are comfortable with the idea of casting their ballots using an electronic voting system, but who also see pros of electronic voting (that electronic voting systems are more accurate and more accessible for people with disabilities). However, we also find that there are American registered voters who see the cons of electronic voting systems, and who agree with statements that electronic voting systems are prone to unintentional failures and increase the risks of election fraud.

This is the first in what we plan will be a series of similar surveys gauging the attitudes of American voters about their voting systems. The situation we see now is one in considerable flux. Some of those who will vote this fall are comfortable with electronic voting technologies, and others who will vote this fall are comfortable with other voting technologies. It is likely that only with further experience with electronic voting technologies—and with their successful use in this fall's presidential election—that public opinion may coalesce around acceptance of their use in the future. If there are significant problems with electronic voting technologies in the

presidential election, it could be the case that the assessment of the American electorate about these voting technologies will be increasingly negative in the future. It appears that we are at a critical moment, where events in the near future—especially the performance of voting systems on November 2, 2004—will play a critical role in determining the assessment of American voters with electronic voting technologies for future elections.

About This Study

This study is a part of a larger collaborative effort between the two authors. Thad Hall and Michael Alvarez will be publishing a book on electronic voting—*Electronic Elections: The Perils and Promises of Digital Democracy*—in which we will further analyze these survey data. This book will build on their previous work, *Point, Click, and Vote: The Future of Internet Voting* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004). Both authors also study election administration more broadly, with Alvarez serving as the co-director of the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, and Hall participating as a collaborator.

We thank the University of Utah—especially Dr. Steven Ott, Dean of the School of Social and Behavioral Science, Dr. Ronald Hrebenar, Chair of the Department of Political Science, and Dr. David Patton, Director of the Center for Public Policy and Administration—for providing financial support for the survey we conducted. We also thank the team at ICR for helping us develop our survey questionnaire, and for their professional efforts to help us implement this survey in a very timely manner. Colleagues involved in the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, in particular Stephen Ansolabehere, assisted in the development of this survey project and we thank them for their input. The Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation provided financial support to the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, and we thank both for their continued support of that research effort.

Thad Hall is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Utah and a collaborator with the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project. He is the author of several works on election administration, which have been published on both academic and popular outlets.

R. Michael Alvarez is Professor of Political Science at the California Institute of Technology and co-director of the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project. He is a nationally recognized expert and author of numerous articles and books on public opinion and elections.

SELECTED SURVEY RESULTS: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD ELECTRONIC VOTING

Questions	Overall	18-27 Generation Y	28-39 Generation X	40-58 Boomers	59+	White	Black	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Which of the following ways to cast your vote are you most comfortable with?										
Electronic	38.3	56.1	42.6	33.1	31.7	37.2	52.2	36.9	37.7	44.2
Optical Scan	29.5	34.4	31.3	29.7	25.2	30.7	13.0	27.0	26.4	31.9
Punch Cards	18.4	1.8	13.6	24.0	23.9	19.0	19.9	21.4	20.6	16.5
Other (Levers; Absentee)	8.0	5.9	5.8	7.7	11.6	8.3	7.8	9.6	9.6	4.4
No Opinion/Don't Know	5.9	1.8	6.7	5.5	7.6	4.7	7.2	5.2	5.6	3.0
Electronic voting systems are more accurate.										
Agree	39.4	54.5	45.0	34.1	34.2	41.4	29.3	37.3	36.5	44.9
Disagree	27.0	23.4	21.8	34.1	23.4	27.0	15.1	22.5	29.1	28.2
No Opinion/Don't Know	33.6	22.1	33.3	31.9	42.5	31.5	55.6	40.3	34.4	26.9
Electronic voting systems make voting easier for people with disabilities.										
Agree	61.4	61.0	69.6	60.5	55.9	60.6	70.9	60.1	69.1	62.3
Disagree	10.4	5.4	5.4	14.6	11.1	11.2	7.5	11.9	9.0	9.0
No Opinion/Don't Know	28.2	33.6	25.0	24.9	33.0	28.2	21.7	28.0	21.9	28.7
Electronic voting systems increase the potential for fraud.										
Agree	38.2	49.5	35.8	39.6	31.9	37.0	34.1	34.2	40.3	40.0
Disagree	27.5	18.9	34.3	29.1	23.1	28.5	23.1	32.0	23.4	31.1
No Opinion/Don't Know	34.3	31.6	30.0	31.4	44.9	34.6	42.8	33.8	36.3	28.9
Electronic voting systems are prone to unintentional failures.										
Agree	43.3	47.0	43.0	46.2	37.9	41.8	49.3	37.5	55.2	41.7
Disagree	22.2	30.1	19.1	21.3	21.1	23.5	16.4	28.1	16.0	25.5
No Opinion/Don't Know	33.4	22.9	37.9	32.6	40.9	34.7	34.3	34.5	28.8	32.8