

Not Voting in Your Pajamas

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Amid the media hype surrounding the Florida recount, Internet voting has emerged as a cure-all for the nation's electoral process. At this week's Comdex trade show in Las Vegas, techies were abuzz about the recount and wondered why voting has yet to go the way of e-commerce. The nation's editorial pages rage about the need for electronic voting to replace democracy's rusty machinery. The message: It's the Internet, stupid.

And it's true, Internet voting could serve as an antidote to Florida's recount woes. Tired of waiting for election results? Internet voting would capture ballots electronically and feed them to a database for inspection and real-time tabulation. Upset that you voted for the wrong guy? Internet voting would make it easy to review your selection before casting your ballot, so you could change it if you made a mistake. Concerned about missing ballots? Internet voting would present an audit trail for the public and for election officials. Votehere.net, for example, claims its system would verify *who* has voted without disclosing *how* they voted. Once polls close, election authorities and designated observers would use cryptographic keys to decrypt only the election tally while keeping individual ballots encrypted.

But what Internet voting won't do is bring more people to the polls. Until last week's once-in-a-century crisis, the primary goal of Internet voting was to increase America's embarrassingly low voter turnout. Just 50.7 percent of the American electorate turned out to vote this election. More than half a million registered voters in Miami-Dade and Broward counties alone failed to vote. If American voters are staying home on Election Day in droves (the 1996 election recorded the lowest percentage of voters casting ballots in a national election since 1924), why not make it simpler and easier in this wired world to vote where we all congregate—at home?

Unfortunately, it's not that simple. There's no silver bullet that will solve low voter turnout. In fact, many experts believe that short of compulsory voting or a cash incentive, the United States is just not going to produce more voters. University of Michigan political scientist Mike Traugott has studied voting reforms and their impact on voting habits, including Oregon's vote-by-mail initiative. He's heard it all before: Americans are busy and voting is too hard. The answer, surely, is to make it all more convenient. Yet reforms ranging from motor-voter and Election Day registration to absentee ballots, early voting, and voting by mail have led to only modest improvements in voter turnout. According to Traugott, despite the tremendous media attention paid to these novel reforms, "the effects on turnout were small, virtually none greater than single digit

increases. They also show that there were even smaller or nonexistent effects on changing the composition of the electorate." Ballot accessibility is important, but the jury's still out as to whether all the recent reforms have even a cumulative effect on turnout.

A Medill Journalism School survey conducted after the 1996 election may explain why. The 100 million or so age-eligible voters who avoided casting ballots four years ago are largely poor and young. They fit neatly into six descriptive categories—doers, unpluggeds, irritables, don't knows, alienateds, and can't votes. Crassly defined, doers prefer actual interaction with an elected official to voting: They intend to vote but feel a letter to the official is just as meaningful. Unpluggeds simply tune out, irritables are too upset to try, and don't knows couldn't find their polling place if you drove them to it. Alienateds don't want near the candidates, and they may not want near the can't votes, who include convicted felons and recent immigrants. Internet voting isn't going to drive any of these people to start casting ballots. Convenience is not the primary reason people avoid the polls.

Despite these facts, the Internet-voting movement has acquired a furious momentum. States and federal agencies are contemplating regulatory changes that would clear the way for voting online. A yearlong study of Internet voting ordered by the White House is expected this spring.

And in a way, Internet voting is already here. During the much-hyped Arizona Democratic primary, 48 percent of the votes were cast online. (Click [here](#) for a "Net Election" with a critical take on the Arizona primary.) Last week, the first binding Internet votes in a presidential election were cast when, in a sign of things to come, the Defense Department tested a small-scale Internet voting pilot in several states. Certain overseas military personnel and their families were allowed to vote over the Internet, and most of the 46 e-ballots cast in Florida were part of George W. Bush's narrow advantage. California tested nonbinding, poll-site Internet voting in several counties, and spokespeople at Internet voting companies say their phones are ringing in the aftermath of Tuesday's Florida fiasco.

In fact, Internet voting appears to be coming in spite of the fact that few experts, with the possible exception of those selling the software to enable it, believe cyberballots will have much long-term impact on voter turnout. And those selling the software—technology companies such as Election.com—will likely find the novelty wears away and the dot-com dollars for promotion wither. Online voting may be inevitable, but its effect on democracy isn't.