Estonia Opts for Online Voting; How About the U.S.?

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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TALLINN, Estonia — In his victory speech, President Barack Obama acknowledged millions of voters' frustration when he said that it was time to fix the long lines at voting stations that have become an Election Day blight in America.

For inspiration, Obama may want to turn to Estonia, an Eastern European nation and staunch U.S. ally that allows its citizens to vote in the comfort of their homes — via the Internet.

Using an identity card and computer, Estonians can log on to an election website and cast a vote. Should they change their mind, no problem: They can log on again and re-submit their vote before a certain deadline. Only their last vote counts.

"It's a very normal and useful democracy service," said Liia Hanni, program director at Estonia's eGovernance Academy, a nonprofit organization that has advised some 20 governments around the world on technology.

In the U.S., many people faced grueling waits to get inside voting booths on Nov. 6.

In Hawaii, voters were turned away from nearly two dozen precincts where paper ballots had run out. In swing-state Virginia, people endured up to four hours of standing in the cold to exercise their constitutional right.

The reasons for the delays were manifold, ranging from new ID laws to faulty electronic voting machines, but the anger was heard loud and clear.

"By the way, we have to fix that," Obama said.

Voting in the U.S. is regulated at the state level, so if online voting were to be introduced, it wouldn't be a nationwide system as in Estonia, a country the size of Maryland with only 1.3 million people.

A key to the system's success in Estonia is citizens' wide acceptance of a digital identity and electronic chip-enabled ID card. Essentially a digital signature, the ID card is also used for checking out library books, paying bus fares, and even keeping track of medical data.

While voting via the Internet, the ID is inserted into a card reader that is plugged into a computer. Identification — but not the actual voting — can also be done through a mobile device via a special SIM card.

Hanni said the system has proven to be very popular, and countries such as Tunisia and Ukraine — and recently the Palestinian Authority — have expressed an interest in adopting Estonia's remote voting system as a model.

Jeffrey D. Levine, the U.S. ambassador to Estonia, said the European nation's approach could benefit many countries, but not necessarily the United States.

"For the United States, voting online is very problematic because [of] our lack of national ID cards, lack of some of the prerequisites that Estonia has implemented," Levine told The Associated Press.

In addition, there's the "fear of big government," Levine said. Americans, he said, "are afraid of the creation of a very large national database. We don't have that yet, and there's a lot of resistance to it."

When the District of Columbia experimented with an online voting system in 2010, hackers broke in and changed votes to fictional characters.

In 2005, Estonia became the first country to implement Internet voting in a nationwide election. Though it was slow to catch on, by 2011 approximately one-fourth of all votes in parliamentary elections were cast from homes or offices.

Other countries have tried online voting with mixed success.

Swiss voters have been able to vote over the Internet in some referendums since the federal government and some cantons (states) began experimenting with electronic ballots a decade ago, and this year 12 cantons were authorized to use online voting during federal elections

in June.

Britain most recently tested Internet voting at municipal elections in 2007, but found that offering the public to switch the polling booth for a computer proved problematic.

Some voters found an electoral website hard to navigate, while others forgot login details or passwords needed to cast their ballot. In the city of Sheffield, two–thirds of people who had registered for an electronic vote didn't end up using the service.

Britain's Electoral Commission, responsible for running elections, said there were major worries over hacker attacks and identity fraud.

Hanni said such worries "haven't come true" in Estonia. "But naturally they are there," she added. "Initiating Internet voting is a complex project. You need to build trust, solve constitutional issues and the secrecy of voting — it's not an easy task."

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