

# Public opinion about electronic voting in Europe as illustrated by YouTube<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article presents the results of the analysis of the political news about electronic voting published on YouTube. The purpose of the research is to reveal an attitude towards electronic voting that is formed in YouTube videos, because it is a powerful channel for forming public opinion. In the focus of attention there are four countries that have made the electronic voting a widely used practice (Belgium, Estonia, Switzerland and Russia). The author bases his research on the hypothesis that the decision of a voter to take part or not to take part in elections will be influenced by the information he or she has learnt about electronic voting from the news – especially attitudes towards the voting, expressed by other users of YouTube. The research results demonstrate that in Belgium the electronic voting is treated neutrally, while in Estonia and Switzerland it is positively regarded. As for Russia, the attitude is negative.

**Keywords:** Europe, electronic voting, YouTube, public opinion, political news, social media, elections, Belgium, Estonia, Switzerland, Russia

## Opinia publiczna o głosowaniu elektronicznym w Europie na przykładzie serwisu YouTube

### Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki analizy wiadomości politycznych na temat głosowania elektronicznego publikowanych w serwisie informacyjnym YouTube. Celem badania jest zidentyfikowanie stosunku do głosowania elektronicznego, który kształtuje się w audycjach wideo w serwisie YouTube, gdyż jest to wpływowy kanał kształtowania opinii publicznej. W centrum uwagi znajdują się 4 kraje europejskie, które wprowadziły głosowanie elektroniczne jako powszechnie stosowaną metodę głosowania (Belgia, Estonia, Szwajcaria i Rosja). Autor stawia hipotezę, że na decyzję wyborcy o wzięciu udziału lub braku udziału w wyborach będą miały wpływ informacje o wyborach elektronicznych, uzyskane w wiadomościach – w szczególności stosunek do głosowania wyrażany przez innych użytkowników serwisu YouTube. W wyniku badania ustalono, że głosowanie elektroniczne ocenia się przeważnie w kategoriach neutralnych w Belgii, pozytywnie – w Estonii i Szwajcarii, negatywnie zaś w Rosji.

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**Słowa kluczowe:** Europa, głosowanie elektroniczne, YouTube, opinia publiczna, wiadomości polityczne, serwisy informacyjne, wybory, Belgia, Estonia, Szwajcaria, Rosja

Political news in social media has a considerable influence on forming public opinion. Getting acquainted with electronic voting is one of the forms of political participation that directly affects the other form, namely elections. "A voting system is only as good as the public believes it to be." (Oostveen, Van Den Besselaar 2004: p. 74). The decision of a voter to take part or not to take part in elections will be influenced by the information he or she has learnt about electronic voting from the news. Along with the traditional mass media the other influential ways to spread the news are through Facebook, YouTube, Chinese Qzone, Wechat or Russian social network VK (*Vkontakte*). Social media and networks are considered by "online mass" as independent platforms and, consequently, they have a big potential for manipulations. Social media in the 21st century are an important instrument of soft power. Joseph Nye explained that with soft power, "the best propaganda is not propaganda."

The aim of the article is to determine the impact of e-voting estimates in political news on YouTube on a voter's decision to participate in elections. For this purpose the following research tasks are set out:

- to collect the database of videos about electronic voting;
- to define the tone of the coverage of electronic voting topic in each of the countries of research: Belgium, Estonia, Switzerland and Russia;
- to identify the tendencies towards using YouTube as a public outreach channel of communication.

These tasks can help to answer to the research question, i.e. what attitude to electronic voting has been formed on YouTube: neutral, positive or negative. It is important because we can hypothesise that the decision of a voter to take part or not to take part in elections will be influenced by the information he or she has learnt about electronic voting from the news – especially attitudes towards the voting, expressed by the users.

## Materials and Methods

There has been done a search for videos on demand "electronic voting (the name of the country)". The examples of the search queries: "electronic voting Belgium", "Internet voting Estonia" and so on. The search was done using the state language of the definite country, as well as other languages widely used all over it. The chronological framework: from the first publication of the video about electronic voting in the country being analysed till the 20th November 2020. The collected amount of videos was analysed for defining the content (whether it is suitable or not) and the attitude to the electronic voting being formed (neutral, positive or negative). As a result of such monitoring, the table was made to summarise qualitative (an attitude to electronic voting) and quantitative figures (the number of publications and views) of the videos for each country. The existing systems of monitoring social media are not perfect and they often make mistakes in defining the tone of a video. That's why all the found content was analysed by the author personally.

## Research results

The analysis of the content on YouTube lets us come to the conclusion about the predominance of neutral and positive attitudes to electronic voting in the given countries in Europe. The videos about electronic voting have been watched 8 million times, the total number of videos is 280. The majority of the videos published are about the electronic voting in Russia (137). Neutral attitudes prevail in Belgium, positive ones are characteristic of Switzerland and Estonia. Only in Russia a negative attitude to electronic voting dominates. Russian videos are full of negative comments and assessments, that surely leads to the formation of distrust in this kind of voting on the part of voters. In a more detailed way this information is illustrated below (Table 1):

**Table 1: Attitude to electronic voting on YouTube.**

States	Distribution of assessments			Quantity	
	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Publications	Views
Belgium	<b>19</b>	7	4	30	163000
Estonia	22	<b>36</b>	10	68	3180000
Russia	24	36	<b>77</b>	137	4600000
Switzerland	17	<b>24</b>	8	49	60000
<b>Total</b>	82	103	99	<b>284</b>	8003000

Source: own elaboration based on the discourse analysis.

### Belgium

The chronological framework: from the 29 May 2007 till the 20th November 2020. The **phrases for browsing**: the Netherlands: "elektronische stemming België", French: "vote électronique Belgique", German: "elektronische abstimmung Belgien", English: "electronic voting Belgium". The number of videos in French is 16, in Dutch – 7, in English – 6, in German – 1.

For Belgium, neutral assessments of electronic voting are dominant. A considerable part of positive assessments characterises the company *Smartmatic* that is an equipment supplier for the elections in Belgium. Critical comments on electronic voting in this country are shared by some members of the national parliament, for example, the supporters of direct democracy and elections by sortation after Laurent Louis (see: YouTube 2014a), the position against the electronic voting is expressed by a civil activist Anne-Emmanuelle Bourgaux (see: YouTube 2014b).

Language differentiation among the people in Belgium influences the election system, including electronic voting that is more often used in the county of Flanders (five northern provinces where the Dutch language is mainly spoken), than in Wallonia (five southern French speaking provinces). The majority of critical assessments of electronic voting were in French. It can be explained by the fact that electronic voting was widely

used in the Netherlands neighbouring Flanders. There the manufacturer of the machines for voting was a local company *Nedap*. Due to this fact, voters speaking Dutch were better informed about electronic voting that has been developing in the Netherlands since 1970s. French-speaking Belgium people living in Wallonia, Brussels and its suburbs think that electronic voting infringes their voting rights.

The electronic voting was used during national parliamentary elections for the first time in 2003. Since then there have been five parliamentary elections. The average turnout from 2003 till 2019 was 89.93%. After the switch to electronic voting the turnout fell down by 2.61%. Moreover, the existing statistics unambiguously points out the decrease of the turnout for the local elections in Belgium from 1994 till 2012 at electoral districts where electronic voting was used (Kuzelewska 2018: p. 150). In Belgium the introduction of electronic voting was not dictated by the wish to stimulate electoral activity as high turnout is guaranteed by obligatory voting. The organisers of the elections were trying to decrease the number of invalid votes and limit the time for counting those votes.

### Estonia

The chronological framework: from the 6th March till the 20th November. **Phrases for browsing:** "electronic voting Estonia", "Internet voting Estonia", Estonian: "e-hääletamine Eesti", Russian: "электронное голосование Эстония". The number of videos in English is 37, in Russian – 17, in Estonian – 14.

For Estonia in general, positive and neutral assessments of remote electronic voting prevail. Such videos are popular and gain a lot of views. Neutral attitudes are characteristic for scientific seminars about electronic voting. Positive comments on electronic voting were generally provided by serving public officers and vendors of the voting system on the part of the company *Cybernetica*, as well as Estonian and foreign journalists. In negative reviews the stress is made on the threat of unauthorised access to the system of electronic voting and vote rigging. Videos with negative comments on electronic voting in Estonia gain few views. Among the critics of the Estonian system of electronic voting we can name a famous specialist in technical security from Michigan University Alex Halderman (see: YouTube 2014c), a Euro-MP Yana Toom YouTube (see: YouTube 2017a).

In Estonia the remote electronic voting was firstly used in 2005 during municipal elections. Then 1.9% of electorate voted online. In 2007 during national parliamentary elections the percentage of internet-voters increased by 5.5%, and during the elections in 2019 it reached 43.75%. The number of voters in Estonia during national elections was 887 thousand people, while during local government elections – 1.1 million. In Estonia before the introduction of electronic voting for national parliamentary elections in 1995, 1999 and 2003 the average turnout was 61.57%. After the introduction of the electronic voting for the elections in 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 the average turnout had increased up to 63.10%. Thereby the increase was 1.53%. The researchers of electronic voting M. Solvak and K. Vassil underline that the voters' habit to vote with the help of the Internet gets acquired much faster than the habit to vote at the electoral district with the help of a paper form (Solvak, Vassil 2018). The more the number of electronic voters is, the more stable the turnout will be.

## Switzerland

The chronological framework: from the 9th November 2010 till the 20th November 2020. **Phrases for browsing:** "electronic voting Switzerland", "Internet voting Switzerland", French: "vote électronique Suisse", German: "elektronische Abstimmung Schweiz". In English there are 29 videos, in French there are 12 and in German there are 8 ones.

For Switzerland it is not characteristic to politicise the matter of Internet voting. Neutral assessments of Internet voting are given by mass media and experts. Those who support Internet voting are voters living abroad (see: YouTube 2019), the Swiss authorities (see: YouTube 2018a), and the vendor of the platform for internet voting *Swiss Post* (see: YouTube 2018b). The Swiss electronic voting is criticised by one of the leaders of Swiss People's Party (SVP), a Member of the National Council of Switzerland since 2015, Franz Grüter (see: YouTube 2018c).

In Switzerland the development of the Internet voting started in 2000 but experiments with it were done only in 15 cantons out of 26. The Swiss electorate has 5.46 million voters. From 2000 till 2019, 300 internet elections were registered. Elections in Switzerland presuppose a multiway voting: by post, at an electoral district or with the help of an internet service. Switzerland is a confederation. That's why the way of voting is the right of each canton.

774 000 (9%) Swiss citizens live abroad. For them the exercise of the voting right is a problem. Before they mostly used post voting, but since 2010 an Internet voting has become widely used. Before the shift to electronic voting from 1975 till 2007 the turnout at nine parliamentary elections in Switzerland was 46.76%. After switching to electronic voting the average turnout at parliamentary elections 2011 and 2015 was 49%. As a result, the increase of the turnout was 2.24%. After the abolition of Internet voting in 2019 the turnout at parliamentary elections was 45.12%, thus, having decreased by 3.39%.

Nowadays the state company *Swiss Post* is working on a new Internet voting system with higher requirements towards security and checking. By the Swiss governmental decision, in February 2019 specially invited so-called "white hackers" during the auditing services for the voting, managed to delete completely the Swiss electors' votes and falsify the results of the elections. Inserting remote electronic voting was stopped by the governmental decision. Due to the identified vulnerability of the system, the federal parliamentary elections in October 2019 were held without an online service. Despite this fact, the development of a new safe way of Internet voting is still going on.

## Russia

The chronological framework: from the 4th December 2011 till the 20th November 2020. **Phrases for browsing:** "электронное голосование Россия". In total 137 videos were found.

Electronic voting in Russia is represented on YouTube mostly negatively. Videos with negative comments on the electronic voting gain a lot of views. However, videos with positive assessments of electronic voting are less popular. Creators of the video content have made the Russian viewers form some mistrust in electronic voting. Electronic voting has been introduced in Russia without a long and widespread public discussion. The discussions

on this topic started in March 2019, when the civil forum was held in Moscow. At the forum representatives of the Central Election Commission of Russia and civil society activists offered to test remote electronic voting during the elections of the members of Moscow City Council.

For Russia it is very characteristic to politicise the matter of the use of electronic voting. For example, the critics are the members of Communist Party and independent candidates, while the supporters of the practice of electronic voting are the representatives of the party United Russia. The sources of neutral assessments of electronic voting were mostly expert discussions and the programme "Full stop" on the radio "Echo of Moscow". The sources of positive videos were official YouTube accounts of the TV channels: "Moscow 24", "News 24", "News on the First channel". Among people the main contribution to the idea of electronic voting was made by the chief editor of the radio "Echo of Moscow" Alexey Venediktov. The main communication channels of negative assessments of electronic voting were: a co-chairman of the Civil movement Golos Grigory Melkonyants, a blogger Vladislav Zhukovsky, a candidate that has lost elections for Moscow City Council Roman Yuneman, State Duma deputy Political group of Communist Party Valery Rashkin, journalist of the TV channel "Rain" Pavel Lobkov (see: YouTube 2020).

In Russia the first experimental electronic voting at electoral districts in the federative units that didn't have a legally compulsory importance, happened in 1996 during the elections of the president of Russia. At 15 electoral districts in Moscow 45 optical scan voting machines were used. The machines were made in Russia. The elections for the president of Russia held in 2018 were the most considerable ones in terms of the use of electronic voting at districts. During those elections 13,6 thousand optical scan voting machines and 806 touch screen voting machines were used. However, great discussions about this new way of voting in Russia started only in 2019. The first trial of Internet voting in legally binding elections happened in the 2019 Moscow City Duma elections (Krivonosova 2020: p. 10). Due to a little experience of the use of electronic voting during elections in Russia it is impossible to make an empirical conclusion about the influence on the turnout. For example, in 2019 during the elections of the members on the Moscow City Council the turnout rose to 0.60% considering a limited use of remote electronic voting. Nowadays during the elections in Russia two ways (channels) of electronic voting are possible: electronic voting is used at polling stations and remote electronic voting. Since 2020 Remote electronic voting has been used during the elections of a nation-wide level.

## **Prospects for electronic voting in other European countries**

A German philosopher Friedrich Engels said that people, who boasted about the revolution, had changed their mind the next day and said that they hadn't known what they were doing, that the happened revolution didn't seem the one they had planned. This citation demonstrates that the future is very difficult to predict and that seemingly logical scenarios stay unfulfilled due to unpredictable circumstances. What will be the consequences of the shift to the electronic voting and the refusal of traditional paper voting? Information and communication technologies make the societies come closer to

the democracy (Steblyna 2018) and lessen the importance of parliaments. "People in mature postindustrial democracies have become skeptical of state authority and institutions and are now more willing to assert their own views. People in developing societies have also become more connected to politics because of the forces of social modernization and global communication." (Dalton, Welzel 2014: p. 305).

Among European countries where the discussions about electronic voting happen and there are good perspectives for the development of this new form of the political participation we can name the Åland Islands (Swedish speaking autonomous region of Finland), Poland and Ukraine. In all these cases we deal with Internet voting, but not about electronic voting in poll stations.

In 2019 on the Åland Islands it was planned to hold the first Internet voting during the elections for the parliament in Finland. This opportunity they wanted to provide for expatriate, overseas voters. The main reason for modernisation of the voting process was an intention of organisers of the elections to make them more comfortable for foreign voters and increase the electoral activity. The organizers of the elections took the first poll on the opportunity of the remote learning in 2015 among the voters that used the early voting by post. The majority of respondents treated the idea of the internet elections positively as it had begun a more modern form of remote voting. During 2015–2019 local organisers of the elections arranged a lot of awareness-raising activities with the electors that created the base for holding electronic elections with a high level of trust. But due to the problems with time management and coordination of the interaction between the vendors of the internet elections and the organisers the Åland project tripped at the fishing line (Duenas-Cid et. al. 2020: p. 77). Nevertheless, the internet voting on the Åland Islands have the best perspectives because there has already been done a great preliminary work.

In Poland there isn't any experience in electronic voting yet. They lack a necessary legal base. In 2000 during the elections of the President the Internet was used to send information about the way the electors voted. Then the information services were used to make a list of electors, to keep the information about the results of the elections and the checking of the results by the electors. In 2010 during the primary election *Plaforma Obywatelska* (PO) the electors could vote for the candidate that had been propelled into the presidential elections. In Poland Electronic voting is a topic that has been present in the public discourse for over 10 years. The majority of Polish people declare that Poland must introduce Internet voting as an additional form of participation in elections and they are ready to use i-voting. The Polish people think that electronic voting can be introduced as an additional form of participation in the elections and it will contribute to the increase of the turnout. In Poland political preferences are a statistically important predictor of the electors' attitude to the use of Internet voting. (Musiat-Karg, Kapsa 2020: p. 158). If a voter supports the political party that is in favour of Internet voting, he or she is most likely to be tolerant to this new form of political participation.

E-voting in Ukraine is based on blockchain. During 2016–2018 in Ukraine there were three systems of internet voting tested on the base of the technology *Blockchain*. The vendors of these systems offered to use them during the elections among the members

of local units, for the elections inside the civil society organisations and during compulsory nation-wide elections. The big problem of these initiatives is that their vendors didn't publish the source code for the independent expertise (Khutkyy 2020: p. 241). It is possible that the Ukrainian authorities will concentrate on the development of internet voting for Ukrainian citizens, who live and work in the EU. Inside the country the electors will vote with the help of paper form.

## Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of videos on YouTube devoted to electronic voting in the four European countries lets us come to the conclusion about the dominance of neutral and positive attitudes to the electronic voting (Belgium – neutral assessments, Switzerland and Estonia – positive). Only in Russia, videos with negative assessments prevail, thus, making the Russian speaking audience treat this new form of political participation with mistrust.

Political news about electronic voting on YouTube is an important channel of forming public opinion. The electors' trust in the electronic voting can be gained through its active promotion on social media including YouTube. Elections' organisers and vendors of electronic platforms must look for new forms of communication with the Internet audience aimed at forming public opinion about the electronic voting as an effective mechanism of political participation.

According to Hegel, development is to some extent violence against yourself. The pandemic COVID-19 has made possible for the mankind to go through the way of digitalisation in a few months in 2020. Otherwise, it would have taken decades. For 1,5 billion people of the Earth that have stayed locked at home for three months it will be no surprise to be offered a remote electronic voting by their authorities. However, the electors will not trust the electronic voting tomorrow if today they learn that electronic voting is a "Pandora's box".

People are afraid of the unknown things. For example, electronic voting. To overcome the distrust of electronic voting, more information about it should be given people. Voters need to be informed about the benefits and risks of electronic voting. If experts and election organisers do not tell the truth, then opponents of electronic voting will tell the not truth. The importance of positive information coverage of electronic voting in social media is underestimated by its promotion agents. The election organisers continue to use traditional media (such as television and newspapers) to promote electronic voting. However, not enough attention is paid to promotion of the electronic voting in social media, especially YouTube. For example, videos in Russian in YouTube are dominated by negative estimates of electronic voting, and distrust of this method of voting is widespread in society. In Estonia and Switzerland, where a positive attitude towards electronic voting has been formed on the YouTube, thus society trusts it more.

People are witnessing a change in the pattern of information perception. Today, one of the most relevant phenomena is so-called "clip culture" (Toffler 1980) characteristic of most active Internet users. People do not want to read large texts in traditional



media and switch to the most simplified visualised formats of submitting information, for example, YouTube videos or Instagram photos. Such forms of communication with the audience need to be used both by the state and society while creating electronic voting content.

Researchers of electronic democracy have developed two main approaches to the impact of digitalisation on democratic development – digital optimists and digital alarmists. These approaches can be illustrated by the examples of two of their bright representatives. The digital optimist is the famous Spanish sociologist, author of *communication theory of power* M. Castells, who believes that information and communication technologies will provide new opportunities for the development of democracy and strengthen the role of civil society (Castells 2011). The representative of digital alarmism is, for example, American researcher S. Zuboff, who puts forward the concept of "surveillance capitalism", where corporations and the state manage society using information and communication technologies (Zuboff 2019). Whose approach better corresponds to the real picture of the world? Only time will answer.

The author of this article believes that electronic voting can develop participatory democracy and can be a "vaccine" against digital totalitarianism. But there's little trust in the effectiveness of this political "vaccination". To trust e-voting, civil society must, firstly, discuss this topic on the Internet, including the YouTube, and on international scientific and civil forums in the real world. A successful example of scientific cooperation is the *International Joint Conference on Electronic Voting: E-Vote-ID*. Such international civil forums are not held. Secondly, civil society needs to demand more actively that the state fulfills the conditions for transparency of electronic voting, ensures the possibility of an independent audit of the electronic voting platform and fulfills the mandatory condition for individual verification by the voter of the correctness of the recording of his vote. At present, the influence of the civil society on the state to fight for political rights is insufficient worldwide.

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