

An update for our dusty old democracy

TILL UEBELACKER

Student at the Cologne School of Journalism

The pandemic has hugely accelerated the digital revolution. Is Germany now ready for digital voting too?

Twenty-five million downloads! Nobody could have expected the German government's Covid-19 alert app would hit that figure. The idea was to use digital technology to combat the pandemic, too. It received an enthusiastic response from virologists, privacy experts, politicians and the general public. How effective the app actually is as a measure against the pandemic is an open question. Criticisms soon emerged of the cost, lack of updates and unclearly worded alerts.

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But although there may be a few people who use the app on multiple devices, the enormous number of users makes clear that a great many people are now fully at home in the digital world. Twenty-five million downloads is an astonishing, almost unbelievable figure, particularly given all the uncertainties about the app and the fact that much of Germany still remains trapped in the analogue age, with some areas still using 3G or even having no network coverage at all.

GREAT POTENTIAL FOR UPDATING OUR DEMOCRATIC VOTING PROCESS

Two things are especially remarkable about the figure of 25 million. Firstly, behind each download is a person who's willing to contribute to the common good by using their phone's Bluetooth or by uploading their Covid test result. Secondly, it's almost half the voting population of Germany. That offers great potential for updating our democratic voting process in a way that makes it more flexible, reduces costs and

increases turnout and inclusivity. Voting is another area where the government needs to embrace digital technology. Doing so could motivate more people to vote and reduce apathy. Because at a time of growing scepticism about democratic processes, when democracy as a whole is increasingly coming under fire (or at least being subjected to vocal criticism), every vote counts.

ONLINE VOTING AS A SENSIBLE ADDITION

That's why the government should introduce the option of online voting, which would be a sensible addition to the outdated selection of voting methods currently available. Of course, there are some barriers and risks that would need to be addressed first, such as vote rigging, cyberattacks, software problems and legal challenges, to name just a few. Some critics regard digital voting as tantamount to a dystopian surveillance state scenario. But we simply need to turn our gaze to Estonia, where i-voting is already working well. Voters register online with a security PIN and their ID card, and can use a QR code to verify whether their vote has been received. The count is subject to several checks and controls, with only external election observers able to access certain keycodes.

It's been a success. In 2019, 45% of Estonians voted online in national and European elections. It's a sensible alternative to the option (which is still available) of voting on paper at polling stations.

While it's true that Estonia is a small country with far fewer eligible voters, that argument dates from the time before coronavirus. During the pandemic, a lot more people have suddenly had to get to grips with new digital tools. Politicians and political parties should build on that and start offering better digital content. That would allow them to educate and inform people more effectively, to get voters enthusiastic about politics and to make themselves seem more approachable and 'with it'.

DIGITAL VOTING IS ALSO MORE INCLUSIVE

The option of digital voting could be a big help to many people in Germany. Turnout among younger people who are more digitally savvy could rise, and with it their democratic influence. Local councils would need fewer volunteers at polling stations, less paper would need to be printed and costs would fall. It would suddenly be possible to vote from anywhere. Voters would have greater flexibility and could vote before election day, just like with postal voting. Someone who already has plans for polling day or forgot to send off their postal ballot would still be able to cast their vote. And they could vote from anywhere with an Internet connection, not just at their local polling station. Digital voting is also more inclusive. Think, for instance, of disabled people who can't walk, or elderly people who would no longer need to travel to the polling station.

PANDEMIC GIVES DIGITALISATION A BOOST

Some political parties have (not entirely out of choice) already taken a step towards digital voting. The pandemic brought traditional party activities at branch level to a standstill. But they still needed to make decisions and nominate candidates. The Greens voted on their new manifesto digitally. And although he had to wait half a year, when the new CDU leader, Armin Laschet, was finally elected it was done using digital voting – hacking attempts notwithstanding.

The 2020s are set to be a decade of upheaval. And 2021 is a bumper election year, with decisions that will have a particular impact on young people. Experts believe that uptake of i-voting would be especially high in this age group. And the pandemic won't be over by September, either, which means packed polling stations and long queues aren't ideal. Calls for the greater use of digital technology in political processes won't go away, and it would offer many benefits to groups whose ability to participate or volunteer has been limited until now: workers, older people, immigrants, single parents. So the German government should pave the way for the introduction of digital voting. If not now, then when?



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Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft

Members of management: Dr. Anna Herrhausen and Daniela Kaiser

Unter den Linden 13-15

10117 Berlin

Tel. +49 (0)30 3407 5559

Fax. +49 (0)30 3407 4209

E-Mail: info.ahg@db.com

Commercial Register: Local Court of Charlottenburg, 116881B