Mr Michael Chevallier (State of Geneva, Switzerland):
"Internet voting, status, perspectives and issues"

The Geneva Internet voting project
Issues and perspectives

In Switzerland, citizens vote up to six times a year. This specificity has been the departure point of our reflection, back in the 1980s. In an ever more mobile society, where the weekends are spent migrating out of the cities and where shops and businesses open ever longer hours, we came to the conclusion that it wasn't possible anymore to open polling stations only a few hours on each ballot.

Starting in 1991, we gradually introduced postal voting in Geneva. It increased the average turnout by 20 percentage points and it is now used by 95 % of voter. The postal ballot is open for two or three weeks, depending on the ballot (local, regional or federal). As a result, election campaigns last longer and became "interactive": the confronting sides are watching each other more carefully and campaign in a more reactive way than in the past.

Outside Switzerland, postal voting raises the question of the so-called "family voting", that is the pressures that voter could undergo when casting a ballot at home. We do not ignore this aspect, but the systematic controls that we are conducting haven't brought to light a single problematic case in more than ten years!

A consolidation of postal voting

Then came the Web, Internet in ordinary language. Our first aim with Internet voting was the consolidation of postal voting success by offering Swiss expatriates and disabled citizens a voting system tailored to their needs. Today, we realize that online voting can also simplify the way we process ballots. This simplification is a beneficial by-product of this customer-centred approach.

Internet voting will not replace the current voting systems; it will be added to them. It is extremely important not to impose decisions, but to offer citizens the choice. Offering a choice is the condition for ballots' legitimacy. This legitimacy does not arise from technical or legal measures first, but from the public's acceptance of the proposed methods. This point is central.

A matter of sovereignty

We decided to address the challenges posed by Internet voting because we think it a matter of sovereignty. We protect it better by developing our own eVoting solution today, rather than to choose within a few years between several proprietary, turnkey solutions, which we shall not be allowed to inspect or audit.

We designed Internet voting as a transposition of postal voting in the digital world. We did not want an online voting solution that would be open only to a happy few. This is

why we did not opt for a solution based on a smart card, which would impose voter to purchase a card reader.

The young and the old like it

What experiences did we make during the two official ballots we organized to-date? First of all, the turnout on Internet exceeded our expectations. In Anières, in January, 2003, it reached 43,6%; in Cologny in November, 28,9%. The difference can be explained by two factors: more advertisements in Anières and the novelty effect.

These two ballots were referendums, "yes"/"no" questions. In both cases, the three voting system yielded the same majority. In other words, the online voters do not vote differently than those using the traditional methods.

The richest and most surprising lesson we learnt from these ballots was the quality of the participation. In absolute number, there were more 60+ voters online than 30- voters. From every 100 electronic votes, 16 were issued by these seniors while only 14 were cast by voters younger than 30.

How did young voter react to Internet voting? To answer this question, we have to leave absolute numbers and address it in percentage. While 24% of the voters above 60 used Internet, this percentage rises to 50 % for the voters under 30 and even to 55 % for the 30 to 39 age group!

Another observation completes this one: 25% of Internet voters are irregular voters or abstainers. One out of four internet voter is relatively foreign to public life.

Internet security will improve

A few words on the security. I believe that we have now reached a low point as far as Internet security is concerned. It is my conviction that Internet will become safer, for example by a personal identification feature similar to the phone number and by a new PC architecture that will take into account the reality of networks and machine interconnection.

We are only at the beginning of a process. It is only a matter of time. In this process, democracy will be gaining ground through the integration of expatriates and disabled persons in the voting process.

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