Towards the Electronic Democracy
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08/11/2004

Against the most pessimistic predictions, and in spite of some momentary faults, the use of electronic voting systems in the recent North American presidential elections can be taken as being an overall success. However, this general electronic voting rehearsal, which was used in 27 states, is just the first step on what is seen as the long complex road towards electronic democracy.

Undoubtedly, the sorry experience of four years ago in Florida, which highlighted the limitations and deficiencies of the traditional systems, has favoured the acceptance of the electronic vote among most experts. All of this is, of course, within the North American electoral context, particularly complex because of its demographic density, geographic extension as well as its great diversity in the electoral tradition of the 50 states in the Union.

Proof of this success lies in the fact that the main criticisms were not levelled at the working of the electronic vote itself, but at two indirect points, although that does not make them less important. Firstly, the lack of an independent verification system to check the correct running of the system, such as a parallel vote on paper. Secondly, the reproach of those who claim that an electronic system is, by definition, vulnerable to attacks from hackers and that this weakness will only get greater the more generalized the system becomes.

Aside from these criticisms, perhaps the main doubt about the success of the electronic vote stems from a certain disparity between the final results and those obtained in the polls among voters outside the polling stations, which gave a slight advantage to the Democrat candidate, John Kerry. In any case, for the want of more conclusive proof, these comments are no more than mere speculation.

Highlights

1. In 2002, the United States House of Representatives passed the “Hava” law (Help America Vote Act). With a budget of 4,000 million dollars, they set out to promote the electronic vote in a system that, in the 2000 elections, gave rise to doubts as to the trustworthiness of thousands of votes.

2. Last year, a report from the John Hopkins University warned of the possibility of hackers designing intelligent cards to vote more than once or even altering the results.

3. Apart from the State of Nevada, the machines did not provide a hard copy of the vote, which prevented any independent hand count, which is usual in any electoral process. This circumstance has been the root of some very hard criticism from several media.

4. In Europe, the European Council of Ministers has acknowledged in a text that “the new technologies are more and more used in daily life”. This text recommended member states to organize and verify elections or a referendum through the Internet.
In the face of this reluctance, the initial success of the electronic vote does not necessarily imply that it is going to be implemented quickly or easily on a more generalized basis. One can see that, as time goes by, the novelty of the system will wear off and the memory of the incident in Florida during the elections between Gore and Bush in 2000 will fade, while the requirements for more security and reliability of the electronic system will increase. Moreover, a major task ahead is the standardization of the different systems and technologies used.

What is clear is that the recent elections mean an irreversible step towards electronic democracy. The fact that it was the United States that started it all and on such a large scale (50 million Americans are estimated to have used electronic systems) means that it is going to have an unquestionable demonstration effect of the Information Society on many countries. Who knows whether, in the long term, the electronic vote will forever change the concept and working of the representative democracy we know today.