

behind the news

The government is keen to push forward electronic voting in order to counter the ever-growing problem of voter apathy, but is the country really ready to use an online ballot box? Wendy Brewer finds out

The government's long-awaited consultation document about e-democracy has received praise from many political groups who branded it a 'step towards the future' of voting. But it would be fair to say that pilot schemes that ran throughout the country during May's local elections did nothing to improve turnout figures. In fact in some instances it complicated the process. So why is the government continuing to push this idea?

Turnout for the books

The 2002 local elections marked England's worst electoral turnout in history, with just 58 percent of eligible voters bothering to turn up. The government believes this voter apathy is partly due to the restrictive voting regulations, which can be improved by alternative voting processes.

"Our strategy for e-democracy offers new ways for participating and seeks to complement rather than replace existing structures," said Robin Cook, leader of the House of Commons.

But the government faces an uphill struggle in reaching its goal of getting voting facilities online by 2006. Pilot schemes were hampered by technical glitches and many people had difficulty using the systems. In some areas "people were actually deterred by the systems", according to David Allen, a spokesman for the St Albans Labour party.

The problem seems to be that the UK isn't ready for the technology – from MPs down to the average voter there is an air of technological-incompetence. And the government is going to have to bridge this gap before e-democracy can ever take off.

In Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder has taken his political campaign online. His website was launched just two months before the elections in a bid to win back flagging ratings. It features an 'a day in the life of' web page along with his political intentions and manifesto. Many MPs in the UK already have their own websites, but few use them as a medium for political campaigning.

Move with the times

MPs in the UK are being given free handheld computers and email filtering software in order to encourage them to become part of the IT generation. But a recent government report, *Digital technology: working for parliament and the public* found that even among those politicians who do make their email addresses public, only around 10 percent of their correspondence is received electronically, proving that most MPs are still favouring traditional methods.

However, this is not the only problem. It seems clear that unless the whole political process is brought online, from members of the public being able to email their local MP to viewing campaign messages and casting our votes online, then the e-democracy system simply isn't going to work.

"We need to aggregate local services online," said Douglas Alexander, cabinet minister at the Office of the e-Envoy.

"Each local constituency needs to focus on getting their services online and creating a real resource for voters to view political information."

Post your vote

The government seems to understand that an e-voting system alone is not going to be enough. The introduction of postal voting proved most successful in this year's local elections, increasing turnout by as much as 28 percent.

"Offering people more choice about how they vote is perhaps as important as the method by which the government does this," said a spokesman at the Electoral Commission. "It will take time for people to get used to electronic voting; any change takes time to adopt. As long as the systems are easy to use and as convenient as traditional paper voting then people will want to use them."

Safe as houses

But the next issue the government will have to tackle is security. It is essential that people's votes remain anonymous and voters need reassurance that e-votes stay confidential. "We are addressing how best to deal with security and obviously this is one of our main priorities," said Alexander. To have your say click on to www.edemocracy.gov.uk. ■

