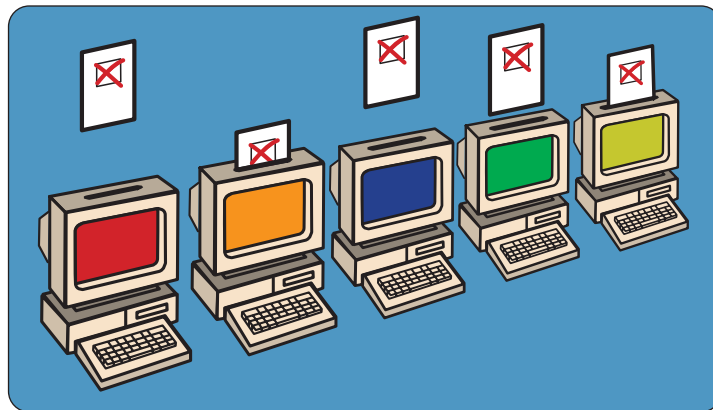# vote with one's PC

With the recent outrage in France over Le Pen's shock advancement in the presidential elections, it's time for the government to push for online voting. If the UK is to improve its election turnout it could be the only way

In France voters have sent the ugly spectre of a far-right presidential candidate packing. And at home the local elections had a turnout of 34 percent. That might have been lower but for the first real *en masse* use of postal voting, which boosted turnout to over 60 percent in one borough.

One of my colleagues said to me: "I actually voted in a local election for the first time since I was a student. Because it was postal, it was just so easy."

That Le Pen made it as far as he did was blamed solely on voter apathy. Politics has got to the point where only people who care about politics bother to vote, and extremists care passionately.

Once the reasonable but apathetic majority of the French populace realised what was happening, they took to the streets. Pity they didn't take to making their voice heard in a more conventional manner a few days before. The thought that a paranoid ex-paratrooper with a penchant for repatriation could hijack your country is enough to drive anyone into the polling booths.

Modern communities aren't really communities at all for the working part of the population. You sleep there; you do the gardening at the weekend; you might even have a few friends who live locally. But unless you regularly take the children to school, you are not going to know where the Portakabin in St John's Primary School area 'C' that the council has decided to use as a polling station this year actually is.

Finding the polling station in the rain before you get the train to work, or on the way home is not a no-brainer, whereas any method of remote voting fits in with modern society a lot better than turning up at a church hall, clutching a piece of photocopied paper so you can stand in a hastily erected MDF cupboard and mark

bad idea because hackers would corrupt the vote. Indeed, there are security issues to be tackled before online voting can become *de riguer* in Britain, specifically issues of authentication – is the person who is voting really who they say they are?

But even elections that rely on polling booths can be corrupted, as shown in recent elections in Zimbabwe, Pakistan and even the last presidential election in the US. Given the advance of digital signature and encryption technology, the challenge of securing online voting are by no means insurmountable.

For example, Southampton City Council began a smartcard-based e-government scheme in April so that people can apply for council housing and track their requests online. With sufficient public access points, it wouldn't be difficult to imagine such a system being routinely used for online voting. The instant inexpensive automated feedback that the web affords – PCAdvisor.co.uk's polls are an example – suits the modern democracy far better than the monolithic referenda of the pre-internet age.

Voting needs to be made easier or we are going to see the Le Pen factor repeated in modern democracies where a large part of the populace feels cut off from the political process

Get your voice heard

The fact is that voting needs to be made easier for the electorate. Otherwise we are going to see the Le Pen factor repeated over and over again in modern democracies, where such a large proportion of the populace feels cut off from the political process. And by making voting easier, what I really mean is making it a no-brainer.

another piece of photocopied paper with a blunt 4B stub of pencil on a string.

Digital democracy

When we asked PCAdvisor.co.uk visitors about online polling in January this year, nearly 70 percent were in favour of it, the majority of those specifically saying it was necessary to combat voter apathy. Nearly a quarter of respondents thought it was a

All go for online

Of course, it would be good to see government really get behind online voting, rolling out public access points and funding secure systems. It would have a very beneficial spin-off in e-commerce, too. But that isn't going to happen. We live in a world where a patchwork of local and corporate initiatives eventually turn into a society-wide trend that, after the event, government claims the credit for creating.

But politicians need votes like humans need air, and online democracy can deliver those votes. So you'll get online polling whether you vote for it or not. ■

Andrew Charlesworth