STAFF REPORT
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DATE: September 16, 2019
SUBJECT: Electronic Voting – 2020 Municipal Election

ORIGIN

The next municipal elections will be held on Saturday, October 17th, 2020. In preparation, Staff is requesting a decision of Council in regard to the use of electronic voting in next year's election held within the Municipality of Barrington.

BACKGROUND

Today, citizens can use the Internet to conduct their banking, make purchases and donations, sign petitions, renew and apply for government licenses and pay their taxes. The power of the Internet to transform the nature of traditional service delivery, particularly to improve communication and access to information, has raised interest in its uses to enhance the accessibility of the electoral process as well.

Its ability to create new participative spaces as well as expand existing ones suggests it has the capacity to improve accessibility to voting for many electors. Furthermore, the Internet's influence on other aspects of elections and government, such as campaigning, fundraising, membership recruitment, protest, lobbying and access to information for media and citizens, signifies that it now has an increasingly important relationship with electoral politics and will likely continue to have a considerable impact on the character of democracy in nations worldwide.

The newly emergent concept of electronic democracy suggests it may be useful to further explore the potential of the Internet to improve the electoral process for parties, groups, election administration, and of course, citizens. At the same time however, there remain many concerns surrounding the notion of Internet voting, primarily related to public confidence and trust in the security of the voting process. The goal of this report is to assess the considerations involved in the potential introduction of electronic voting in the next municipal election.

DISCUSSION

The term electronic voting is a blanket term used to describe an array of voting methods that operate using electronic technology. The following section discusses the benefits and risks associated with Internet voting in general, primarily concentrating on remote Internet voting.

Benefits

Proponents of electronic voting make several arguments in favour of its implementation. These are related to technology, social issues and election administration. First, electronic voting has the potential to make the **voting process easier** and **more accessible** for electors. This is especially true for remote Internet voting and telephone voting given that ballots can be cast from any computer with an Internet connection or any working telephone. These latter methods substantially lower the cost of voting for many electors by creating many more access points from which they are able to vote. There is the potential to eliminate long line-ups at polling stations and better address accessibility issues for persons with disabilities, those suffering from illness, those serving in the military or living abroad, those away on personal travel, snowbirds and other groups of citizens such as single parents who may find it difficult to visit a traditional polling station. Additionally, remote methods of Internet voting afford electors the opportunity of being able to **vote at any time**, a feature that further enables electors' ability to cast a ballot.

With regard to special populations of electors, Internet and telephone voting may also be methods of engaging those voters who are considered the hardest to reach, particularly **young people** aged 18 to 30. These electors are most familiar with the technology, are the most frequent reported users and would likely benefit the most from the extension of remote types of electronic voting. Internet and telephone voting seem to be especially useful ways of engaging young people away at university and who are not registered to vote in that particular constituency.

Internet and telephone voting could allow **greater secrecy** for special populations of electors with disabilities (including visually or hearing impaired). By voting electronically and therefore unassisted, these electors are afforded a greater degree of anonymity when casting a ballot. Enabling secrecy for these groups enhances the equality of the vote.

Enhancing accessibility and creating more participatory opportunities for electors holds promise to positively impact **voter turnout**. Generally, the academic literature addressing electronic voting and turnout decline presents inconclusive results concerning whether the extension of on-line voting has a positive effect on electoral participation. Cases in which remote methods were implemented have produced mixed results. Though some areas in Canadian municipalities that have reported some instances of increased turnout. The length of time remote Internet voting options remain in place appears to be related to increases in both its use and in voter turnout.

Related to administration, Internet and telephone voting are claimed to produce **faster and more accurate election results**. Internet and telephone voting systems are said to deliver a faster official ballot tabulation process and are alleged to be more accurate than other types of counting which are sometimes criticized for error.

Over the long term all types of Internet voting have the potential to be **less expensive** to operate and execute than traditional paper ballots which require setting up and staffing polls. However, the start-up costs for machines or kiosks can be very high.

Finally, all types of Internet voting and telephone voting have the potential to improve the overall quality of ballots cast by reducing or eliminating ballot errors and by creating better informed electors. There can be **no ballot errors**, and, if the legal structure in a jurisdiction requires the option to **spoil a ballot** or allows for protest votes, a button can be added in some programs to give electors the option to cast a protest vote (or decline to vote). Furthermore, depending on the architecture of the Internet voting system, there is the possibility for additional information to be displayed regarding candidates and their policy positions in conjunction with the on-line vote. This would provide voters with basic information about the candidates and party platforms, and therefore better informing them to vote.

Drawbacks and Risks

Those opposed to, or skeptical of, electronic voting point to several drawbacks and perceived risks that are associated with types of Internet voting and telephone voting methods. The most prominently cited risk relates to **security**. Threats of computer viruses or hacker-orchestrated 'denial of service' attacks are most commonly mentioned as problems that could compromise an election and public confidence in electronic voting. This concern is most prevalent with regard to the security of personal computers. In light of this, the maintenance of **ballot secrecy** is presented as an issue when using computers that are unprotected, located in public places, or which may be susceptible to virus attacks. Other potential technical problems or issues include power outages or malfunctions in Internet connectivity as well as the possibility of servers shutting down or crashing. The reliable recording and storage of votes is also an important consideration.

Problems with **access** are raised. The material on remote Internet voting discusses the potential for a "digital divide", which can occur in two ways. There is a digital divide between those who have home computers with Internet connections and those who do not. Second, there may be a digital divide between those who have faster access and those who have slower connections and hence lower quality access. People with higher incomes are more likely to be able to afford access. Furthermore, access is often less expensive and of higher quality in urban areas. Those with lower incomes and who live in rural areas are at a disadvantage. Therefore, the extension of Internet voting has the potential to create divides with respect to many socio-economic variables, namely income, education, gender, geography and race and ethnicity. These potential divides could be problematic for participation and representation.

It is said that remote Internet and telephone voting present greater opportunity for **fraud** and **coercion** or vote-buying. Fraud occurs when someone votes on another's behalf without their permission, whereas coercion or vote-buying takes place when a voter is pressured by others to vote in a way that he or she would not have otherwise. Both present problems for ballot integrity since it is important that every vote cast be tallied as the voter intended. There is additional opportunity for fraud in electronic voting systems if voter notification cards, which contain unique passwords required to cast a ballot, are intercepted. In the case of ballots not cast in person it is more challenging to verify a voter's identity. Remote voter authentication can be a problem since it may be difficult to confirm that the person voting is actually who

he or she claims to be. While digital signatures and passwords can help, they are not foolproof and could potentially be shared.

The issue of **voter education** is cited as a concern. A lot of time and money must be invested to ensure that the public is aware that electronic voting is an option and that voters are able to understand and use the on-line system to cast a ballot. Without correct marketing and advertising it will be difficult to engage electors.

Privatization is a concern when electoral administrators cede control to a hired firm. Contracting elections out to private companies to run the electronic operations has negative implications for some people, and hence has the potential to negatively impact public confidence and trust in government and elections.

Finally, perhaps the most significant social concern is the threat of **disintegration of social capital** or civic life. The proliferation of electronic election services has the power, some say, to alter the nature of electoral participation by causing more electors to vote alone instead of at a polling place with others. This threatens to erode civic life, local social networks and groups related to elections.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

N/A

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

N/A

PUBLIC CONSULTATION/COMMUNICATIONS

N/A

RECOMMENDATION

There is no doubt there are many benefits but still several drawbacks to the use of electronic voting. Those in favour of Internet and telephone voting argue that they provide such improved levels of accessibility that they can increase voter turnout and reach people who would not vote if required to attend a physical voting site. By the very nature of services being offered, improved access to voting for many electors is an acknowledged benefit. Even with the recent successes observed in the municipal elections in Nova Scotia in 2012 and 2016, where a significant percentage of electors voted by phone or on the web, some saw increased voter turnout, but this was not the experience for all municipalities.

While most would agree that online voting is consistent with our increasingly online society, questions of how to maintain the security, validity, and integrity of our elections are still outstanding. For this reason, it is still recommended to use caution and prudence when using electronic voting methods.

That being said, in 2016, 20 municipalities across the Province offered internet or telephone options to voters and it is becoming more popular as the technology advances and improves. There are also different

formats in which you can provide electronic voting to try and mitigate the drawbacks and risks. For example, some use it during advance polls only while others provide both paper and electronic voting methods.

SUGGESTED MOTION

Move to direct staff to study in greater detail the use of electronic voting as one of the methods in next year's election.

Move to use traditional paper voting as the method in next year's election.

ATTACHMENTS

https://electionsnovascotia.ca/sites/default/files/2013_AR_appendix_InternetVoting.pdf

https://www.municipalworld.com/feature-story/internet-voting/

https://www.elections.ca/res/rec/tech/ivote/comp/ivote_e.pdf