DeVOTE Policy Brief
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Voters' Attitudes Toward i-Voting: It's About Trust, Especially in Technology

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Abstract

Amid declining voter turnout worldwide, internet voting (i-voting) offers a potential innovation to enhance democratic participation, but its success depends on public trust. This brief draws on evidence from a recent paper using Estonia as a case study to show that while trust in both government and i-voting technology promotes online voting, trust in technology is the stronger driver of whether citizens choose to vote online. Accordingly, the brief suggests that a dual policy approach may be worth considering: prioritizing technological trust through robust security, independent audits, and public education, while also working to strengthen trust in government via transparent rules and pilot programs that incorporate citizen feedback.

Keywords

internet voting; turnout; trust; voting modalities; government

Trust in Government or in Technology? What Really Drives Internet Voting

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DeVOTE
The meanings of 'voting' for citizens

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Executive Summary

Voter turnout is declining worldwide. In response, some governments have considered or piloted internet voting (i-voting) to ease participation (Turnbull-Dugarte and Devine 2023). Internet voting (i-voting) is a system that allows eligible citizens to cast their ballots remotely over the internet from any device, without the need to visit a polling station. But citizens won't use i-voting unless they trust both the government running it and the technology behind it. Our research in Estonia – one of the few countries with nationwide i-voting since 2005 – shows trust in i-voting technology matters more than trust in government for getting people to vote online.

Key findings:

- Citizens who trust i-voting technology are far more likely to use it, even if their trust in government is relatively low.
- Trust in government still plays a supporting role, especially for overall election confidence.

Our findings suggest that a "dual trust" strategy may be worth prioritizing for governments:

1. consider boosting technology trust through strong security measures, independent audits, and public education on how votes are kept safe;
2. working to strengthen government trust via transparent election rules and pilot programs that incorporate citizen input may also help, and
3. starting small with pilots and scaling up based on feedback could be a prudent path forward.

Why Internet Voting Matters

Low voter turnout threatens democracy, and participation has dropped steadily (Kostelka and Blais 2021). Traditional in-person voting can be inconvenient with long queues, burdensome travel, bad weather. Internet voting allows people to vote from home via online platforms, potentially cutting costs and barriers. Estonia has offered it in all national elections since 2005, with growing use (Serdült et al. 2015). Still, many countries hesitate to implement it due to concerns about hacking, fraud, or errors. From the citizens' perspective, our study indicates that two forms of trust are critical: confidence in government to run fair elections and confidence in the technology to work reliably. Attending to both dimensions can make a difference. In particular, our evidence from Estonia shows that building trust requires focusing on both government credibility and technology reliability.

What Our Research Shows

We surveyed 1,492 Estonians before the 2023 parliamentary election – a group nationally representative of the population by age, gender, education, and region. We also ran a survey experiment to test how the two dimensions of trust affect the willingness to vote. The results of the statistical analysis are extensively discussed in our paper: trust in i-voting technology

strongly predicts who votes online, a big jump in trust doubles the odds in some cases. Trust in government helps, but its effect is weaker and indirect. When both are high, i-voting adoption soars (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities of i-voting compared to in-person voting for increases in government trust and in online voting, respectively, as well as a histogram of the levels of trust as percentages. The mean predicted probability of preferring internet to in-person forms of voting is of 0.61 if one does not trust the government at all (trust in government = 0) and increases to 0.70 when government trust is high (trust in government = 10), averaging across the sample values of all the other control variables. While the effects of both types of trust are related to (some) increase in i-voting, the increase for trust in i-voting is stronger: the mean predicted probability of i-voting is 0.25 when the level of trust in i-voting is at its lowest (0) and increases to 0.89 when it is at its highest possible score (10). This is a much steeper increase compared to trust in government, as visualized in Figure 1.

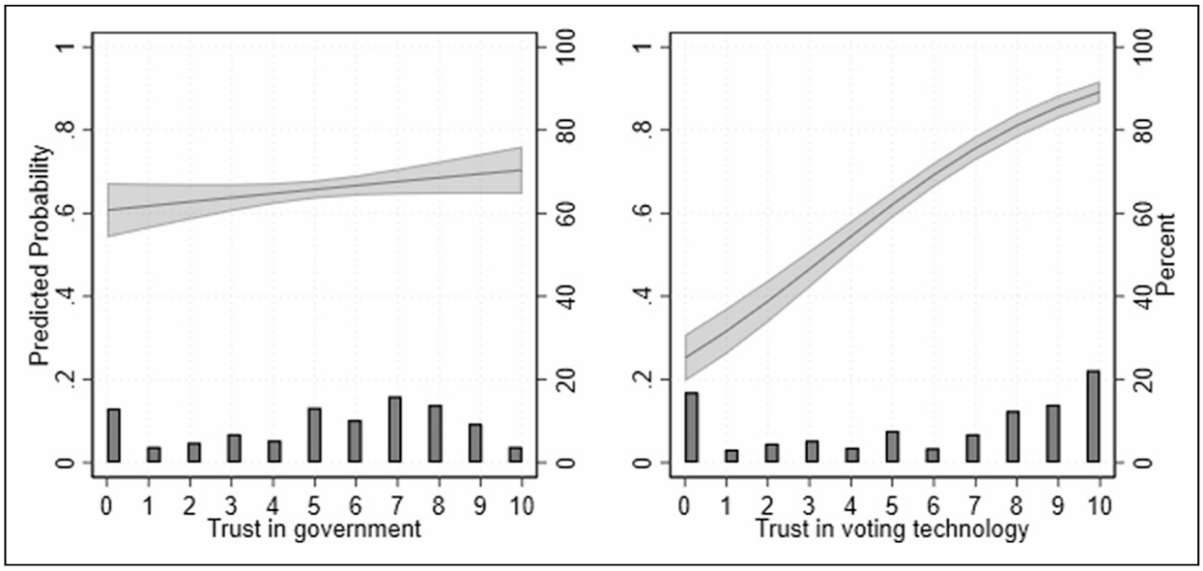

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities and 95 percent CI (confidence interval) of i-voting compared to in-person voting, over trust in the government and trust in internet voting technology, controlling for each other. Note: The right axis represents the histogram of the levels of trust as percentages (Abdala et al. 2025).

Key Recommendations: Policy Options Compared

Most countries have yet to introduce i-voting, and governments in this position face a genuine strategic choice. Doing nothing, that is, not introducing i-voting, carries no immediate cost but foregoes the potential turnout and accessibility benefits that digital voting can offer. A government trust-only path, built on transparency, electoral audits, and public dialogue, lays important groundwork but is unlikely on its own to make citizens comfortable enough to adopt a new voting technology. A technology trust-only approach, investing in secure systems, independent certification, and digital literacy campaigns, more directly addresses the barriers to adoption but risks backlash without broader institutional credibility behind it. The

recommended dual approach combines both: establishing government legitimacy while simultaneously building confidence in the technology itself, under independent oversight. For countries starting from scratch, this integrated strategy is not just optimal, it is arguably the minimum condition for i-voting to succeed.

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This draws from the DeVOTE project (ERC Grant 949247) at the University of Vienna.

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Carolina Plescia is Associate Professor in the Department of Government at the University of Vienna. She is the PI of the ERC starting grant project DeVOTE (2021-2026) which examine the meanings of voting for ordinary citizens, their causes and consequences. She is also co-leading (with Jan Maly) a project funded by the WWTF on citizen-centered democratic innovation, which aim to understand citizen preferences for participatory budgeting algorithms.

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Ming M. Boyer is a Research Associate in Communication Science at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His research focuses on the role of citizens' group identities in selecting, processing and creating political communication. He holds a NWO Veni grant on political communication by social groups. Previously, Ming was a postdoctoral researcher in the DeVOTE project.

Anna Lia Brunetti

Anna Lia Brunetti held a Prae-Doc position within the DeVOTE project. She completed her PhD at the University of Vienna in 2025. Previously, she worked as study assistant at the Department of Government at the University of Vienna where she got the chance to work on different research projects, mainly pertaining to public opinion research.