Electronic Voting and E-Petitions May Be Closer Than You Think

by Michael Iverson • September 18, 2013

What role should technology play in our modern democracy?

Senator Jim Dabakis (D – Salt Lake), addressing the Government Operations Interim Committee, posed the question of online voting in Utah as a way to increase voter participation.

Citing the prevalence of online banking and public trust in the security of these institutions, Dabakis asked if it would be feasible in the next five or 10 years for the state to offer online voting. Mark Thomas, with the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, said that he believed we could be in position "very shortly" to have the technology to make this proposal a reality.

The Lieutenant Governor's office, which oversees the elections throughout the state, has been working with the Federal Voting Assistance Program to develop a system that would allow military and overseas voters to vote online. In its current state, those eligible to use the system can generate a ballot online, print it, sign it, and send it. Thomas believes that by the next election they will be able to eliminate the paper aspect entirely, and make the entire process digital.

Among the potential challenges identified by his office, he noted the inability of a voter to double check that their vote had been cast in an online election. Unlike online banking where a person can log into their account to verify a check has been deposited, the secret nature of voting ballots does not provide for the same ease of use. Thomas said he believes the technology will be available and ready, but public confidence in the system may take time.

Also discussed by the committee was the use of electronic signatures on petitions for referendums and initiatives. In 2011, Senator Curt Bramble (R – Provo), introduced and passed SB 165, which outlaws the use of electronic signatures in these situations, and says they cannot be used to qualify a candidate for an election. Bramble, along with Representative Rebecca Chavez-Houck (D – Salt Lake), went on to introduce a successful bill to further study the issue and investigate a feasible model for online petitioning.

The Office of the Lieutenant Governor reported that, in the event of the Legislature approving electronic signatures and/or votes, they would be in a position to develop a secure system based on their model of online voter registration.

Thomas suggested the implementation of a PIN-based system to manage voter petitions, and perhaps to even allow a voter to withdraw their signature at a later date to increase trust and security in the system.

The committee will consider the findings of the Lt. Governor's office, and Mr. Thomas indicated they will continue to explore developments to the Utah elections system.