

Q&A on ACM's Internet Voting

ACM has stated that in public elections “Voting systems should enable each voter to inspect a physical (e.g., paper) record to verify that his or her vote has been accurately cast and to serve as an independent check on the result produced and stored by the system. Making those records permanent (i.e., not based solely in computer memory) provides a means by which an accurate recount may be conducted.”¹ When ACM members vote for ACM officers over the internet, no physical record is produced. This Q&A summarizes ACM's reasons for using the Internet for its private elections.

1. How does ACM justify the use of the internet for ACM elections?

A. ACM's recommendations are for public elections, whereas ACM elections are private.

2. What is the difference between public and private elections?

A. A public election is conducted by a government and allows citizens to vote on legislation or for people running for public office. A private election is conducted by a private organization to elect officers, award winners, or to decide on policy. Some intermediate cases, such as elections for union leadership or homeowners associations, as well as (in some cases) political party primaries, don't fall neatly into either category.

3. What is the requirement for voter privacy for each kind of election?

A. Public elections have very strict confidentiality laws, with criminal penalties for willful violation. Proxy voting, coercion, and vote buying are strictly prohibited. Private elections typically have no such laws. While secrecy might be assumed, and is generally desirable, there are no penalties for confidentiality violations, and there usually is no formal mechanism for dealing with coercion or vote buying. Some private elections, such as corporate elections, have no confidentiality rules and may allow proxy voting.

4. What are the security risks?

A. In public elections there can be significant economic and ideological issues that could motivate election tampering. For most private elections the stakes are much lower, with a correspondingly reduced risk of election tampering.

5. Why doesn't ACM use just paper ballots, since they are safer and can be recounted?

A. ACM has determined that the risk of election rigging for an ACM election is relatively low and that the risk/convenience trade-off of online voting is reasonable for ACM elections. The threat of coercion and vote buying, and the need for strict vote secrecy, are deemed not to be as significant, and the number of people motivated to rig an ACM election is believed to be vanishingly small. Also, ACM members live in many different countries, and mailing paper ballots to and from those countries can be time-consuming and costly.

6. We know of private elections that were rigged.² What provisions does ACM have for dealing with an ACM elections when there are technical problems or suspicion or proof of election tampering?

A. In a private election technical problems can be dealt with directly either by extending the time for voting or by cancelling and rerunning the election, flexibility not available for public elections without court intervention. If ACM has evidence of election tampering, the election will be rerun or appropriate measures taken. If there is evidence suggesting possible wrongdoing but no clear proof, ACM will make a determination on a case-by-case basis.

1 <http://usacm.acm.org/evoting/category.cfm?cat=14&E-Voting>

2 For example, in 2013 the online election for the Board of Directors of USRowing was rigged. See http://www.usrowing.org/pressbox/press-releases/13-03-26/USRowing_Board_Announces_Review_of_2013_Election_Results.aspx.