

Attitudes of Canadians toward Online Registration (2004–2011)

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The purpose of this research note is to summarize public opinion towards electronic voter registration services. It aims to determine the extent to which attitudes towards online registration among electors and candidates have evolved between 2004 and 2011, and to provide insights into future uptake of electronic registration among electors. The note draws from data from the Survey of Electors of 2004, 2006, 2008, the Survey of Candidates of 2008 and 2011, and the Canadian Election Study¹ (CES) of 2011.

In addition, the note examines the socio-demographic factors associated with likelihood to use online registration, specifically age, gender, education level, disability status and urban/rural location.

Background

The *Canada Elections Act* (section 18.1) provides the Chief Electoral Officer with the power to explore and test new technologies to make the electoral process more accessible. In its Strategic Plan for 2013–2018, Elections Canada has committed to increasing voter accessibility by implementing a registration process that allows electors to register in person, or by mail, telephone or Internet.²

Furthermore, the 2013–2016 Business Plan proposes to encourage all voters to use online registration to

ensure they are registered at the right address before voting.³

Previous research has supported the viability of online voter registration. For instance, a feasibility study completed in 2003 showed that online voter registration could offer benefits of convenience and accessibility for electors and improve Elections Canada's service delivery. The study also noted benefits of allowing Elections Canada to "position itself for the investigation of electronic voting, to establish a substantial Government On-Line presence, to develop mechanisms for real-time exchange of data with partners, and to enhance the quality of the National Register of Electors."⁴

It was moreover stated in the 2010 report *Responding to Changing Needs* that an increasing number of electors and political entities want to do business with Elections Canada electronically.⁵

Elections Canada launched its online elector registration service in April 2012. The first phase allowed electors to confirm their registration, update their addresses and, in limited cases, add themselves to the Register.⁶ The next phase, which would allow

¹The CES is a longitudinal, university-based study dealing with Canadian federal elections. Elections Canada has been involved with the CES since the 1997 general election.

² Elections Canada. *Strategic Plan*. 2013.

³ Elections Canada. *Elections Canada's Business Plan 2013–2016*. 2013.

⁴ CGI Information Systems and Management Consultants Inc. *On-line Voter Registration Feasibility Study*. 2003.

⁵ Elections Canada. *Responding to Changing Needs – Recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada Following the 40th General Election*. 2010.

⁶ For those who have provided consent on their income tax return and who can enter a driver's licence number for validation.

new electors to register online, will not be possible until an authentication mechanism is available.

Methodology

This research note draws from data from Elections Canada's surveys of electors and candidates (EC) as well as from the Canadian Election Study (CES).

Variables of interest include:

1. Electors' self-reported likelihood of using online registration services to register to vote or to update their information online. Questions to this effect were included in Elections Canada's surveys of electors in 2004, 2006 and 2008; as well as the CES of 2011. Responses were typically measured using a four-point scale ranging from very likely to very unlikely.
2. Electors' perception of the risk associated with online registration. One question to this effect was included in the 2008 and 2011 CES. In the 2008 survey, responses were ranked on a four-point scale, whereas in 2011, respondents were asked whether or not they agreed with the statement that online registration was too risky.
3. Candidates' opinions regarding whether or not electors should be able to register online, based on results from the 2008 and 2011 surveys of candidates, conducted by Elections Canada.

Statistical tests were applied in order to determine significant associations between likelihood to use electronic registration and perception of risk; and relevant socio-demographic variables, including age, gender, disability status, urban/rural location, and level of education.⁷

⁷In cases where the socio-demographic variable of interest was categorical, a chi-squared test was used (with level of significance 5%) to determine if the observed distribution to the categories could be due to chance alone. To measure the strength of the association between variables, a phi statistic was used for 2 x 2 tables and Cramer's V was used for larger tables.

In cases where both variables of interest were measured as ranks, a gamma statistic was used to measure the strength of association. Gamma is a proportionate reduction of error

Limitations

Some limitations of the methods used for this research note include:

- Variations in the wording of questions mean that comparisons between responses should be made with caution. For example, in 2004 (EC), the question was worded as: "How likely would you be to update your voter information or register online if it were available?" In 2011 (CES), the question was worded as: "If you could register to vote over the Internet, would you be very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely or not at all likely to do so?"
- In some cases, a neutral option was provided, in others it was not.
- Information about candidates is based on only two general election surveys (2008 and 2011).
- Similarly, information about electors' perception of risk associated with use of online registration is based on the 2008 and 2011 CES only.

Results

Likelihood to use online registration

This section focuses on electors' responses to the question of how likely they would be to use online registration services if the option were available. The question was first added to Elections Canada's Survey of Electors following the 2004 general election.

As illustrated in Figure 1, a majority of respondents from each election from 2004–2011 reported that

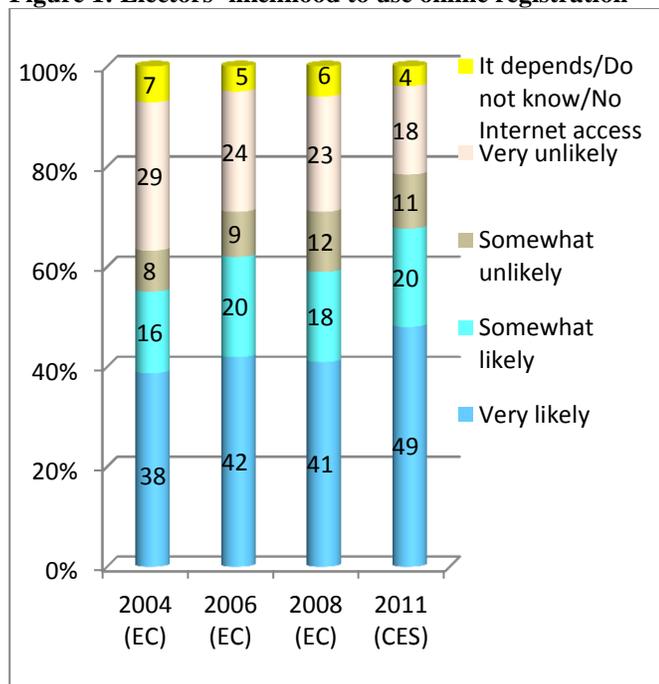
(PRE) measure, which quantifies the extent to which the error in predicting one variable is reduced when taking the other variable into account. Gamma values range from -1 (100% perfect negative association) to +1 (100% or perfect positive association). A value of zero indicates the absence of association.

they would be very likely or likely to use online registration.

Overall, there was a significant increase in the proportion the number of very likely or somewhat likely respondents in 2004–2011. Though the increase was not linear, the change from 2004 to 2011 was statistically significant.

Specifically, 54% of electors reported that they would be very likely or somewhat likely to use online registration in 2004; 62% in 2006; 59% in 2008 and 69% in 2011.

Figure 1: Electors' likelihood to use online registration



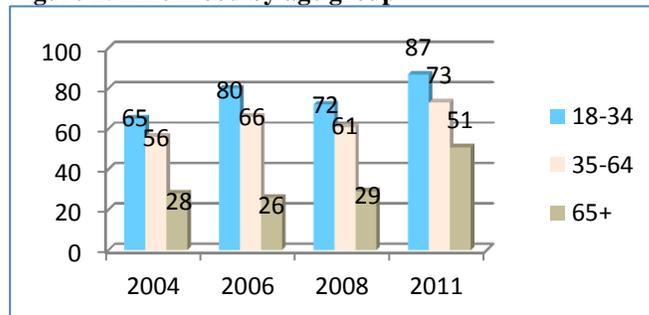
Certain socio-demographic characteristics were associated with likelihood of using online registration. These included age, gender, urban/rural location, disability status, and level of education.

Age was moderately-strongly associated with likelihood to use online registration in all general elections.⁸ Among all age groups, electors aged 18–34 had the highest proportion of those likely to use the service, with the proportions who said they were very likely or somewhat likely ranging from 65% in 2004 to

⁸ Gamma (γ) ranged from 0.234 (2004) to 0.431 (2006). By convention, this denotes a moderate-strong level of association.

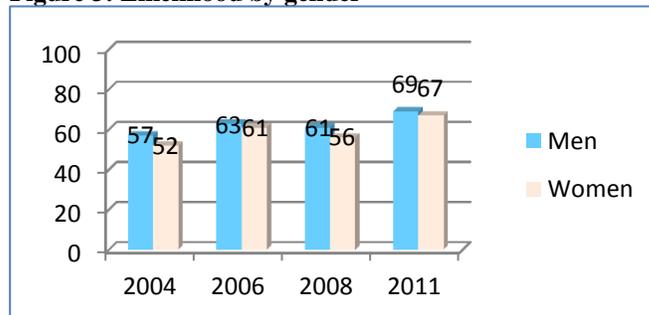
87% in 2011. By contrast, electors aged 65 or older were the least likely to report interest in online registration, with proportions ranging from 26% in 2006 to 51% in 2011.

Figure 2: Likelihood by age group



In general, men reported a higher likelihood of using online registration than women, with the difference between genders being statistically significant in 2004 (57% likely or very likely for men vs. 52% for women) and 2008 (61 vs. 56% for men and women respectively). The difference between genders was not significant in 2006 or 2011.

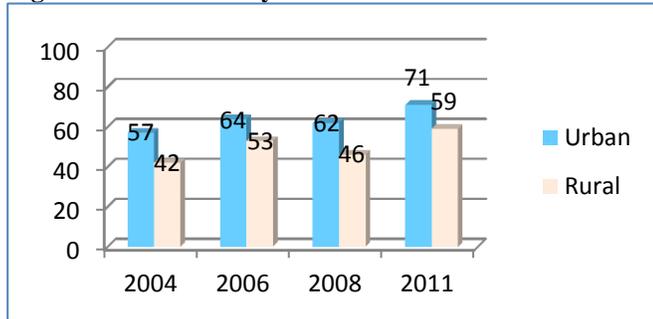
Figure 3: Likelihood by gender



Electors in urban areas were significantly more likely to use online registration than those in rural areas in all election years.

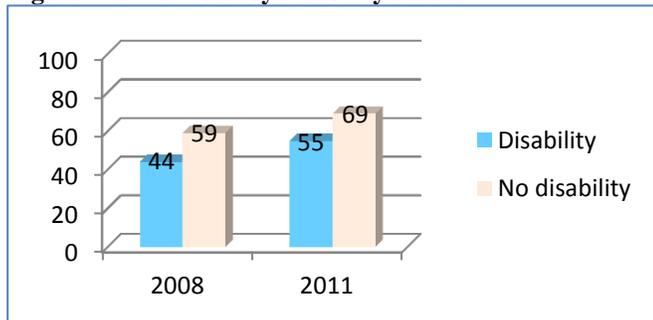
Percentages of urban electors saying they would be very or somewhat likely to use the service ranged from 57% in 2004 to 71% in 2011. By contrast, the percentages of rural respondents ranged from 42% (in 2004) to 59% (in 2011).

Figure 4: Likelihood by urban/rural location



Survey respondents were asked whether they had a disability in the 2008 Elections Canada Survey of Electors and the 2011 CES. In both, electors with disabilities were significantly less likely to be interested in using online registration than those without disabilities (44% vs. 59% in 2008 and 55% vs. 69% in 2011).

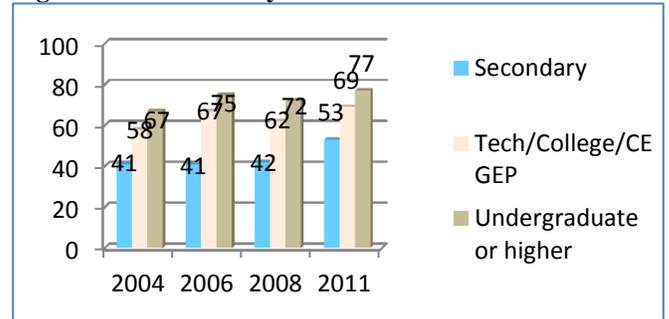
Figure 5: Likelihood by disability status



Electors with university level education (67%–77%) more often reported that they would be likely to use the service than those with college/technical school/CEGEP level education (58%–69%), who were in turn, more likely than those with a secondary school or lower level of education (41–42%). The strength of the association between likelihood and level of education was moderate.⁹

⁹ Gamma (γ) ranged from .275 (2004) to .328 (2008), which by convention denotes a moderate level of association.

Figure 6: Likelihood by education level



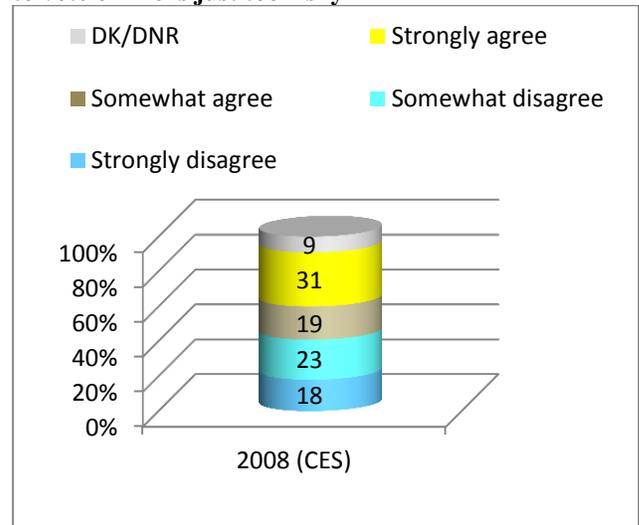
Perception of risk

The 2008 and 2011 CES included a question on electors’ concerns with the risk associated with online registration. This question aimed to measure electors’ perception of the potential for fraud or error associated with online registration.

In the 2008 survey, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement that registering online was just too risky. Responses were measured on a four-point scale.

Overall, 50% of electors strongly or somewhat agreed that registering online was too risky, while 41% disagreed.

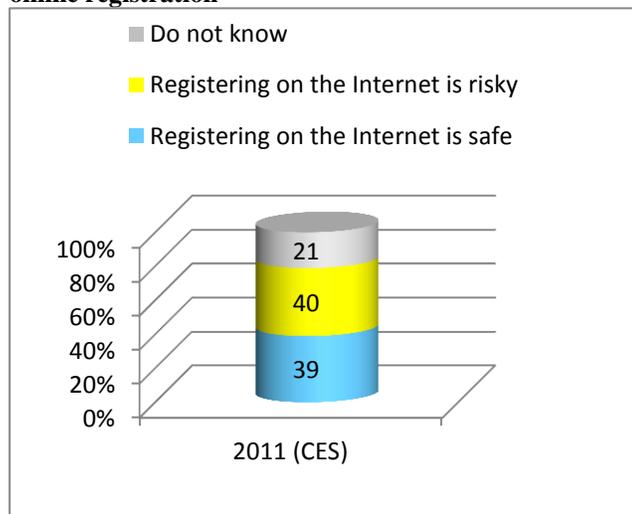
Figure 7: Agreement with the statement that “registering to vote online is just too risky”



In 2011, the question was altered somewhat, wherein electors were asked whether they felt that registering on the Internet was risky or safe. As illustrated below, 40% of electors felt that registering on the Internet

was risky, while 39% saw it as safe. Unsurprisingly, those who found the use of online registration to be risky were significantly less likely to be willing to use it.¹⁰

Figure 8: Electors' perception of risk associated with online registration



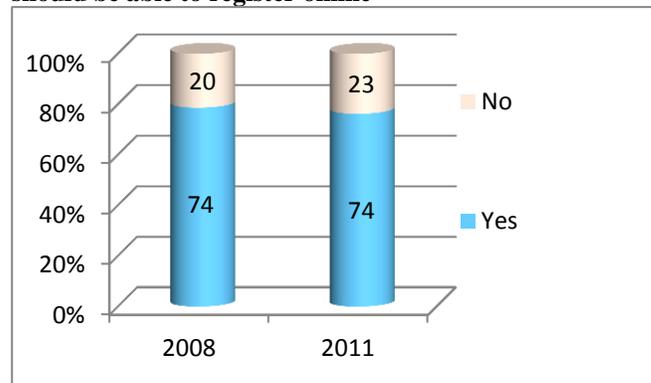
Regarding socio-demographic variations, older electors, rural electors, women (significant in 2008 only), electors with disabilities (significant in 2008 only) and those with lower levels of education were significantly more likely to perceive e-registration as risky.

Candidates

This section focuses on candidates' responses to the question of whether electors should be allowed to register online. This question was asked of candidates on the 40th and 41st general election surveys only.

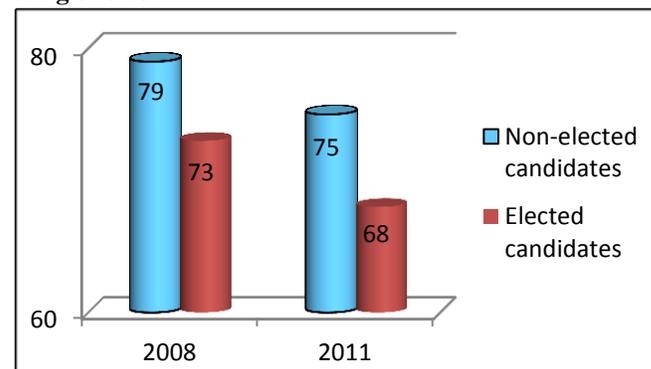
In both cases, approximately three fourths of candidates asserted that electors should be able to register to vote online.

Figure 9: Candidates' attitudes on whether electors should be able to register online



Non-elected candidates were more likely in both surveys to be in favour of e-registration; however, this difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 10: Elected vs. non-elected candidates in favour of e-registration



Conclusion

This study suggests a high and increasing level of support for online registration from 2004–2011 among all electors and suggests that it will prove to be a popular option in future elections. Based on results, uptake is likely to be highest among younger electors, those residing in urban areas, and those with higher levels of education. Most candidates are also in favour of allowing electors to register online.

The level of perceived risk associated with e-registration is significant however, and the 40 to 50% of electors who consider registering online to be risky or too risky are less willing to use it.

¹⁰ Gamma (γ) value of -0.330, which by convention denotes a moderate level of association. Based on data from the 2011 CES only.

Appendix: Survey Question Wording

E-REGISTRATION LIKELIHOOD	
YEAR	QUESTION
2004 EC (n = 2822)	Q32B: How likely would you be to update your voter information or register online if it were available?
2006 EC (n = 2011)	Q14: For future elections, if you could use the Internet to register or make corrections to your voter information with Elections Canada, would you be very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely or not at all likely to do so?
2008 EC (n=2493)	Q12: If you could go online to register or make corrections, would you be very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely or not at all likely to do so?
2011 CES (n = 1107)	QE28: If you could register to vote over the Internet, would you be very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely or not at all likely to do so?

E-REGISTRATION RISK: ELECTORS	
YEAR	QUESTION
2008 CES (n = 1807)	QEC18: Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: Registering online is just too risky.
2011 CES (n = 2972)	QEC14: What statement comes closest to your own view: Voting on the Internet is risky or Voting on the Internet is safe

E-REGISTRATION CANDIDATES' ATTITUDES	
YEAR	QUESTION
2008 EC (n = 887)	QEC36: Do you think that electors should be able to register online?
2011 EC (n = 1007)	QEC36: Do you think that electors should be able to register using the Internet?