

2008 Online Voting Survey:

Online Voting Trends from the Association Community



A survey of 100 associations reveals that switching to online voting can save time and money and is likely to lead to increased voter turnout.



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▶ Executive Summary

Although online voting has been around for several years, its use by associations and non-profit organizations has grown rapidly in the last couple of years. Associations are increasingly steering away from paper ballots and telephone voting to run their board and leadership elections, bylaw approvals and other voting events online.

A survey of 100 associations and non-profit organizations that use online voting examined motivations for making use of this technology and the tangible impact of the technology on the organization and its members.

Key Survey Findings

- Organizations of all sizes, membership demographics, geographic locations and industries are using online voting
- The primary use of online voting is for board elections, but many organizations use it for bylaw approvals and to solicit member feedback
- A desire to modernize the election process was the most popular reason associations switched to online voting
- Almost half of the respondents saw voter turnout increase by at least 10%
- About 40% said switching to online voting saved their association money
- Nearly three-quarters said switching to online voting saved time

▶ 2008 Online Voting Survey: Online Voting Trends from the Association Community

94% of associations surveyed said they would not consider a return to paper ballots

Professional and trade associations as well as non-profit organizations have long relied on voting members to elect key leadership positions in their organizations, vote on changes to bylaws and regulations and give guidance to major association decisions. With the introduction of secure online voting, these organizations have been able to offer their voters the opportunity to cast ballots securely via the internet instead of relying on the cumbersome, time-consuming chore of mailing, counting and verifying paper ballots.

With the advancements in technology of the last few years, online ballots have moved far beyond online forms and surveys. Online voting involves secure transactions that prevent election fraud and ensure high levels of impartiality, confidentiality, accuracy and integrity.

In the fall of 2008, Votenet Solutions, Inc. and The Kushner Companies, a non-profit CEO and governing board advisory firm, surveyed 100 associations and non-profit organizations that used online ballots in their board of directors and leadership elections. The survey probed organizational attitudes towards online voting, the motivations for making use of this technology and the tangible impact of the technology on the organization and its members. This white paper presents the major findings from the survey as well as recommendations for ensuring a successful transition to online voting.

The survey results indicate that online voting is being embraced by organizations of all sizes, membership demographics, geographic locations and industries. In the survey, 94% of respondents said they would not consider a return to paper ballots. Larger associations are generally the first to lead the way with new technologies, but associations of all sizes have embraced online voting: there appears to be no correlation between adoption rates and the size of the organization.

► Types of Associations Using Online Voting

On the whole, organizations with any type of voting events have been able to use online voting, regardless of size, industry, geographic distribution, non-profit status or membership demographic. In the association community, several trends have emerged regarding the ease of adoption and benefits of online voting.

Who is Using Online Voting?

Less Than 5,000 Members	
National Cancer Registrars Association	Board of Directors Leadership Elections
Association of Nurses in AIDS Care	Leadership Elections Awards
Hunterdon/Somerset Association of REALTORS®	Board of Directors Bylaw Changes
5,000-10,000 Members	
International Association for the Study of Pain	Board of Directors Bylaw Changes Other Elections
American College of Prosthodontists	Board of Directors Leadership Elections Bylaw Changes
Tokyo American Club	Awards Committee Votes
American Society for Healthcare Engineering	Board of Directors Bylaw Changes
10,000-30,000 Members	
American Anthropological Association	Board of Directors Other Leadership Votes Bylaw Changes Committee Votes Other Elections
National Recreation and Park Association	Board of Directors Other Leadership Votes Awards
More Than 30,000 Members	
American Society of Heating, Refrigerating & Air-Conditioning Engineers	Board of Directors Bylaw Changes
North Carolina Association of REALTORS®	Leadership Elections

► Types of Associations Using Online Voting

Trends in Smaller Associations

Smaller associations are trending toward online voting because they are often able to implement change quickly. The fewer members an organization has, the easier it is to communicate and inform members of this new method of voting.

In addition, organizations with smaller staffs also benefit immediately from the time savings. Management sees tangible time savings and productivity gains when a small staff no longer has to take hours to print, mail and count paper ballots. These time savings translate to immediate cost savings as well.

Trends in Associations with Chapter and Affiliate Networks

Large organizations with smaller components, including chapters, SIGs and affiliates, are also rapidly adopting online voting. Because of their large memberships, these associations have complex elections that require significant staff time and coordination. They are also subject to ballooning election costs as postage and paper costs rise. Many are now moving away from traditional paper-based election processes and embracing Internet-based solutions to reduce operational costs and the administrative burden of managing an election while still advancing their level of service to members.

Larger associations are also adopting the technology to ensure consistency and integrity throughout their elections. The IEEE, the world's leading professional association for the advancement of technology, chose one online voting vendor to maintain a single, consistent voting platform that would standardize how online voting was conducted across all aspects of their organization. The switch helps larger organizations avoid election controversies because using one secure, high-integrity system can prevent fraud and malfeasance for all their components.

Associations with International Memberships

Organizations often turn to online voting when they are reaching out to international members. With online voting, organizations no longer have to face the challenges of international mail delivery.

Demographic Shifts in Associations

In addition, organizations seeking to embrace younger members without alienating older members are trending toward blended or hybrid voting, where members can request paper ballots or vote online.

► How Associations Are Using Online Voting

Why Associations Turn to Online Voting

- Modernize the election process
- Save time and money
- Increase voter turnout
- Offer convenience to members
- Simplify communication with international members
- Reduce their carbon footprint
- Standardize one voting technology platform across all aspects of the organization

Survey respondents indicate that the primary use for online voting so far is to elect new members to the board of directors. This voting event usually involves the largest number of potential voters and requires significant staff resources. Associations using online voting for board elections will generally place all the information members need to cast their votes online, including election instructions, candidate rosters, candidate bios and photos, online ballots and other information pertinent to the election.

Associations are also using online voting for bylaw revision referenda and other governance activities that require the entire membership to vote.

On a committee level, associations are using online voting to keep committee members connected, especially since travel budgets have decreased and committees are less likely to be meeting in the same room. The security of an online election administered by an independent 3rd party ensures accurate results of high integrity.

An emerging trend with member-centric organizations is to use voting as a way to engage members in the organization's decision-making and strategic planning processes. Associations are increasingly running advisory votes where members can provide feedback or vote to select conference locations, determine legislative priorities and construct the organization's mission and agenda.

For example, when the city of Seattle searched for a new name for its major league soccer team, the Seattle Sounders FC gave their 13,000 season ticket deposit holders a vote for every season ticket purchased. Ultimately, the collective wisdom of these members and fans from around the world selected the name of the team.

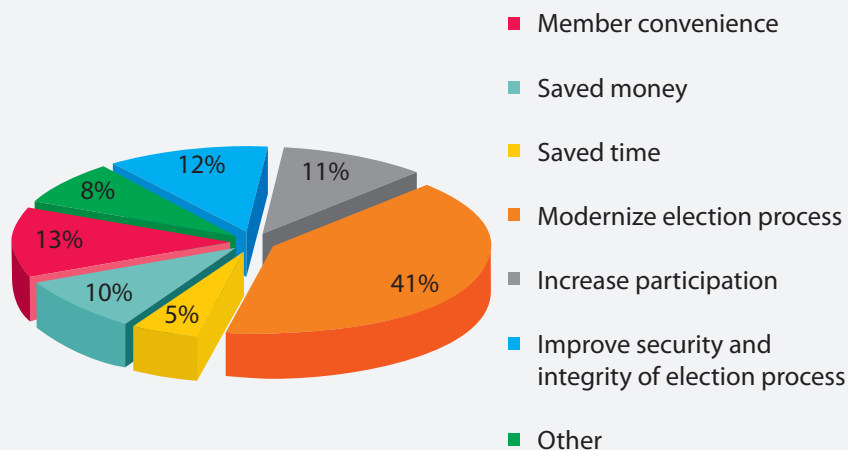
► Online Voting Survey Findings

Primary Motivation for Switching to Online Voting

About 40% of the respondents said they were motivated to make the move to online voting because they wanted to modernize the voting process for their members. "It makes it look more professional to our members," said Pamela Dean of the American School Health Association. "Switching to electronic voting seems like it's bringing ASHA into the 21st century."

Other groups wanted to make it easier for members to vote (13%) and to improve the security and integrity of the election process (12%).

What was your primary motivation for switching to electronic voting?

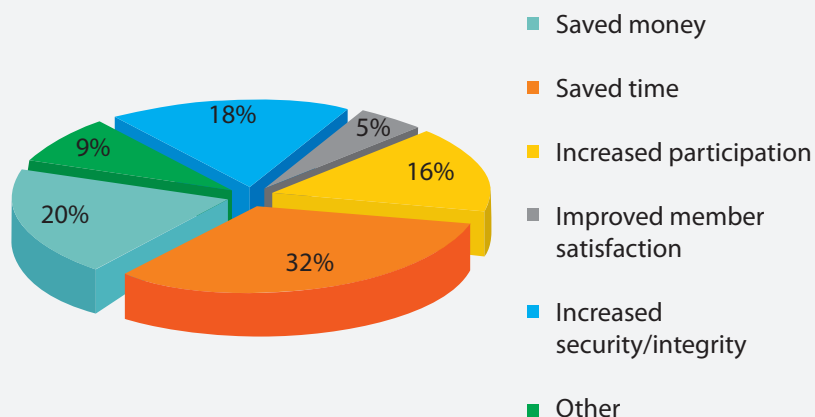


Primary Benefit from Switching to Online Voting

Although only 10% switched to online voting looking to save money, 1 in 5 said the cost savings ended up being their primary benefit. "We saved money, \$2-3,000 at least," said Suzanne Voelker, operations administrator for the Marine Technology Society. "It wasn't just the cost of staff time; we also saved printing expenses and postage."

When respondents compared costs after switching to online voting, more than 40% said they saved by switching, and another 30% said the costs were about the same.

What was your primary benefit from switching to online voting?



When associations first make the switch to online voting, they may incur one-time implementation costs to inform the membership of the change via direct mail, but after the membership adopts the new process (usually after one or two voting events), election costs will decrease even further.

► Online Voting Survey Findings

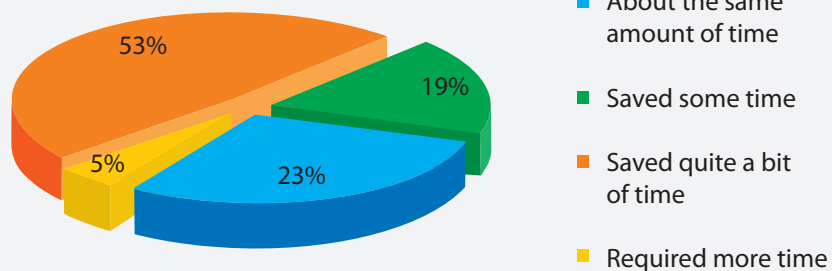
The results were similar with saving time: about 5% pursued online voting because they wanted to save staff and volunteer time, but almost a third indicated that the time savings were the best benefit from the switch. More than half of the respondents said they saved “quite a bit of time.”

The International City/County Managers Association with 9,000+ members used to tabulate paper ballots by hand, and the organization had to pull up to 15 staff members from their regular tasks for an entire business day as they counted ballots. After switching to online voting, “It’s down to an hour and a half and four people,” said Londa Jericho, Director of Customer Contact Center and Order Fulfillment.

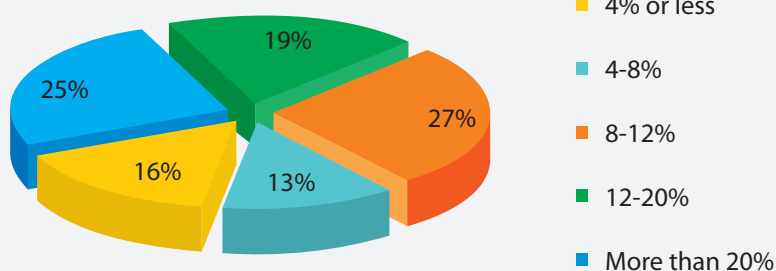
Effect on Voter Turnout

The vast majority of associations struggle with relatively low voter turnout, with the survey reporting that 75% of associations have turnouts of 20% or less. This means that despite an association’s democratic foundation, 80% of the membership is not engaged in important association decisions.

How much time does your association spend on voting events now in comparison to your previous method?



Average turnout before online elections

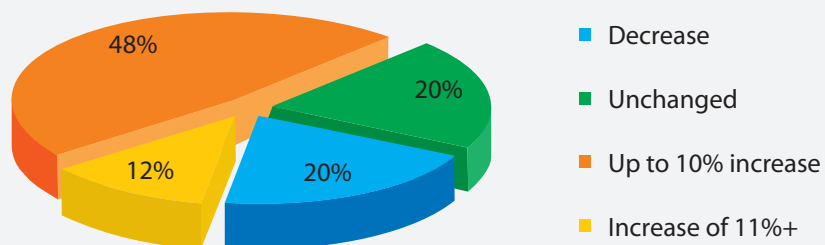


► Online Voting Survey Findings

Online voting, with adequate marketing efforts, was cited in another Votenet survey as being the single most important factor in increasing voter turnout. After switching to online voting, almost half of the respondents in this survey saw an increase in participation of up to 10%, with 11% seeing an increase greater than 15%. Twenty percent noted their turnout remained unchanged, and the same amount saw a decrease.

Associations may see an even greater increase in turnout after a couple of elections using online voting, since members will become more familiar with the process.

Changes in turnout after switching to online voting



The vast majority of associations struggle with relatively low voter turnout, with the survey reporting that 75% of associations have turnouts of 20% or less in leadership and board elections.

This survey focused on immediate and tangible benefits of switching to online voting, but associations realize many other benefits in the long run. The following benefits work to create a stronger relationship between an association and its members, thereby strengthening the position of the association as an industry leader.

Increases Transparency and Trust

Using a secure online voting system that is built and maintained by an election management company adds a layer of transparency to the voting process. When members trust that their votes are counted and fraud is minimized, they will have more faith in their leaders and the association's democratic process. When the ballots are tabulated by the association or the voting process is complicated, members may doubt the integrity of the leadership. Using outside-validated, third-party sources eliminates the possibility of fraud and malfeasance.

Promotes Environmental Awareness

Increasingly associations are implementing green initiatives, and their members are requesting reduced paper waste and mailings. An election with paper ballots creates volumes of paper and has a larger carbon footprint than online voting. Online voting is mutually beneficial for associations with "green" initiatives and environmentally minded members.

Deepens and Strengthens Relationships with Members

When members vote and participate in the governance process, they are engaging with their association and therefore become active participants who can help to determine the future of the organization. Getting more members involved in signature events, like a board election, can deepen the bond with a member and increase the likelihood that they will remain a member in the future. Online voting coupled with strong communication can turn indifferent and passive members into more active members.

▶ Three Key Insights from the Online Voting Survey

Best Ways to Ensure Online Voting Success

- 20% of respondents recommended sending more notifications about the election
- 35% said targeted, succinct, timely emails work the best to encourage voter participation
- 11% advised a simple process with ample support for voters
- 11% said voter education was key to overcoming apathy and resistance to adoption of the new process

Online voting is rapidly becoming the norm for association elections, but experts compare the use today as perhaps the same as email was a decade ago: beyond the stage of the “early adopter” but not yet universal.

In the 2008 survey, associations shared insights that can help other associations make the decisions about when to switch to online voting.

Voter Turnout Is Likely To Increase after the Switch, but Associations Need to Communicate to Maximize Results

Many associations assume that their voter turnout will go up as soon as they switch to online voting. While online voting generally makes it easier for voters to cast their ballots, it does not necessarily guarantee a dramatic increase in voter turnout. The associations that participated in the survey overwhelmingly cited marketing and increased communication and reminders as the best ways to increase voter turnout in online elections.

Associations Are Likely to Save Time and Money after the Switch, but the First Year Is a Transition

To effectively transition to online voting, associations may need to use more time and incur additional expense to inform members of the upcoming changes of the format of the election. However, after this initial transition and after members become accustomed to the new voting process, associations are likely to see significant time and cost savings.

Voters Will Embrace the Technology if the Process is Intuitive

Associations are sometimes resistant to switching to online elections because they fear their members will not accept or understand the new technology. Those associations may spend extra time and money duplicating efforts by mailing paper ballots to voters and offering online voting. A better way to handle the transition is to focus on implementing a simple, intuitive process that makes online voting less intimidating. A simple governance program with an easy-to-use voting application that is explained to voters well in advance of the election will encourage participation.

▶ Additional Resources

- Ten Questions to Ask About Security
- Election Security Overview
- Votenet Case Studies
- 23 Practical Ideas to Increase Voter Turnout
- The Ten Most Common Bylaw Pitfalls
- Amending Your Bylaws for Electronic Voting

About Votenet Solutions, Inc.

Votenet Solutions, Inc., is the leading provider of secure on-demand voting and nominations software and election consulting for private organizations including membership associations, trade associations, award shows, REALTOR® organizations, universities, K-12 schools, law firms, homeowner associations, corporations, financial institutions, unions, pension boards, credit unions and other types of organizations.

Since 2001, Votenet's software has delivered more than 15,000 online voting events and served over 10,000,000 voters worldwide. With its market-leading online voting solution, eBallot, its suite of online governance solutions and 800+ clients in the United States, Canada, Asia and Europe, Votenet is the emerging global leader in e-governance technology.

Votenet is based in Washington, D.C., with offices throughout North America. For more information please visit www.votenet.com.

About The Kushner Companies, LLC

The mission of The Kushner Companies is to serve as trusted, high-level and confidential advisors to CEOs, senior management and governing boards of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. President David Kushner has over 35 years of experience in operational management, planning, membership recruitment and retention, education, philanthropy and meetings management, including more than 20 years as a CEO, leading national and international trade, professional, and medical associations. The Kushner Companies is based in Chevy Chase, Maryland. For more information please visit www.TheKushnerCompanies.com.