



Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference
PARLIAMENTARY LIAISON OFFICE



SUBMISSION

to the

**Electoral Commission of
South Africa**

on the

***Electronic Voting Policy
Discussion Document***

30 September 2025

1. The Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office (CPLO) is an office of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference. It is tasked with liaising between the Church and Parliament/Government, commenting on issues of public policy, and making submissions on legislation.

2. This submission is made in response to the *Electronic Voting Policy Discussion Document* published by the Electoral Commission of South Africa. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important national conversation on our electoral system, which is a key aspect of our constitutional democracy.

3. We commend the Electoral Commission for its work in developing this discussion document. It is important that all possibilities for an enhanced, accessible and secure voting system are explored and evaluated, and that everything reasonable be done to facilitate maximum voter participation.

4. The desirability of introducing electronic voting must be judged against the background of South Africa's experience of elections from 1994 to the most recent NPE in 2024. On the positive side, the Electoral Commission has built an enviable reputation for running free, fair and credible elections. There have been remarkably few irregularities over the years, and those that have occurred have not materially affected the outcome of any election.

5. On the other hand, rates of participation by eligible voters, and rates of registration by new voters, especially among younger age-groups, show a continual decline.

6. These two aspects highlight, in our view, the tension inherent in the introduction of electronic voting. While it might attract higher rates of participation, particularly of youth,

and make it easier for some people to cast their vote, it might also harm the credibility of our electoral process due to fears about hacking, technological breakdown and other real or perceived weakpoints.

7. We note that the Discussion Document refers to the need to have safeguards to make electronic voting as secure as possible. It *“underscores the need for robust cyber security measures to prevent unauthorised access, protecting the secrecy of the vote, vote buying/selling, manipulation of results, and denial of service attacks that could disrupt elections.”* (page 23)

8. It is also instructive that some countries that at one point adopted electronic voting have now abandoned it. As the Discussion Document indicates, these include such well-resourced and technologically advanced countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Norway (page 14). Furthermore, in Estonia, the only country that has adopted online voting, and which *“employs extensive encryption and secure identity verification measures, voter concerns about privacy and the integrity of the vote persist.”* (page 23)

9. In other words, there are both real and perceived risks. Real risks include hacking, the use of malware, various forms of malicious interference by entities outside the system, and possible errors, failures or breakdowns within the system. The Discussion Document rightly acknowledges these possibilities.

10. But the perceived risks are perhaps even more important. Sometimes people’s suspicions are aroused by the most innocent technological failures, as happened in the 2024 NPE when the monitors at the counting centre failed for a period of time – some political parties were quick to allege that this was part of an attempt to rig the results and, however absurd that claim was, it cannot be denied that it gained a certain amount of traction among the followers

of those parties. Likewise, the failure of some scanning devices at polling stations also led to uninformed speculation about manipulation of the vote.

11. It is important to note that the question of trust is not limited to trust in the actual voting process, whether it be manual, electronic or online. We have a much wider issue of trust in our public institutions as a whole, as is canvassed in para 7.5.1 of the Discussion Document (pages 82-83). It is partly this general lack of trust, we submit, that lies behind our low voter turn-out and registration figures, and we should be careful not to risk worsening this situation in our pursuit of technological innovations of unproven utility.

12. It is encouraging to read that large percentages of survey respondents, especially young respondents, said that they would be more inclined to vote if electronic voting were introduced (para 7.4.2, page 75). Evidence that electronic voting would significantly improve participation rates must be taken seriously and it certainly constitutes a powerful reason to pursue the idea. However, we would caution that the mere fact that some voters might respond positively to the convenience factor associated with electronic voting does not necessarily mean that they would trust it more than manual voting; or that they would have confidence in results that they were not expecting simply because of the manner in which they voted.

13. Regarding the two main forms of electronic voting, internet or online voting on the one hand, and poll-site voting on the other, it would seem preferable to begin with the latter (if it is ultimately decided to pursue any form of electronic voting). It is instructive that only Estonia and some jurisdictions within the United States allow online voting. The obvious reason is that this form of voting is (or is perceived to be) more open to manipulation and fraud; whereas poll-site voting, in which voters cast their vote using electronic means at a polling station, offers a greater sense of security.

14. In conclusion, we once again commend the Electoral Commission for taking the initiative to explore the question of electronic voting, and for making available a very comprehensive and informative Discussion Document. We look forward to the publication of the findings of the current consultations and to the release of the envisaged Green Paper.

For further information please contact:

Adv Mike Pothier
Programme Manager
Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office
mike@cplo.org.za
083 309 3512