

French election leaves thousands of expats unable to vote

Software problems plague voting in France's first 'online election' for MPs

By Naomi Scherbel-Ball | 15 June 2012



Offline: expat voters turned to the French consulate in London

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French expat voter

Computer hitches have prevented thousands of French people who live abroad from voting in the parliamentary elections.

Exaro has established that France's first attempt at online voting for the estimated 1.1 million French citizens registered to vote overseas has been a fiasco, with consular switchboards besieged with complaints.

Until now, French expats have been able to vote in presidential – but not parliamentary – elections. But French citizens based abroad will have 11 MPs to represent them from this year.

From Beijing to Iceland, French people overseas have been enfranchised, and will be represented in France's parliament. The UK is included in the "northern Europe" constituency.

But turnout for French expats in the first round of the parliamentary elections, which finished a fortnight ago, was just one in five.

With nearly 60 per cent of votes being cast over the internet, the low turnout has heightened concerns about the number of people unable to vote because of computer and administrative problems.

The size of some expat communities rivals many French towns. London, with a French community of around 400,000 people, is referred to as "France's sixth city".

Axelle Lemaire, the candidate for Northern Europe for president Francois Hollande's socialist party, told Exaro: "It is a real pity that there have been problems because I see internet voting as being very progressive. It really does bring something to democracy. But there were so many technical problems that prevented people from voting."

She added: "Security has to be improved, and the technicality of the voting system has to be improved."

Emmanuelle Savarit, the candidate for the Northern Europe constituency for the centre-right UMP party of the former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, said: "It is not easy to set up an internet vote. These are human errors that we cannot do anything about."

"We have no choice. We just have to trust it. I think that it is a small number of people who could not vote."

Some voters were unable to vote online because the electoral system failed to cope with updated Java software, which is used for a wide range of other programs.

The French ministry of foreign affairs advised them to use another computer equipped with an old version of Java.

Many of those unable to vote voiced their frustration on expat forums online. One French citizen living in Germany said that he had tried to vote on three different computers, and wasted two hours installing and reinstalling software.

Another expat in Thailand wrote: "This is a real scandal... At this rate, we shall receive the online codes we need to vote by Christmas. Long live democracy!"

Frustrated expats in the UK can go to a polling station next to the French consulate in London's South Kensington to vote in person on Sunday. The results are expected later that day or on Monday.

One voter who was visiting the consulate last week, who gave her name as Rabiya and has lived in London for 10 years, said that she queued there for hours to vote in the presidential elections, and had hoped that e-voting would prevent a repeat.

She said: "I thought that it would be simpler and quicker. But the process was so complicated that, in the end, I did not vote at all."

Anne-Marie Oostveen, a researcher at the Internet Institute at Oxford university, said that electoral fraud was another issue: "Electronic voting is not secure and it is not transparent. It is open to fraud on a large scale, and it is easy to alter the votes without anyone noticing – a truly terrifying thought."

Nicolas Dumortier, a London-based IT consultant who moved from France five years ago, said: "There is no control over who is voting, and what happens with the votes. I am worried about that, so I shall not be voting this time."

A spokesman for the French foreign ministry told Exaro: "Security and anonymity were real priorities for us when setting up the system."

"Some people may have had problems voting by internet. However, voting online was just one additional option offered to the citizens for this election. If they were unable to vote by internet they could still go to the polling station on Sunday."