

BUSINESS

A revolution in voting

Portsmouth firm works toward online balloting

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PORTSMOUTH – Eric Roberts sees some historical context when he talks about the transition from paper ballots to Internet-based voting – the horse and buggy versus the horseless carriage.

Some fully embraced the horseless carriage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, while others held steadfast to their horse and buggy. Still others, unsure which way to go, clung to the past and future by actually hitching up horses to their horseless carriages.

Roberts and his sister, Sylvia Hampton, are the driving force behind Web-Impac (<http://webimpac.com/>), a new software company that operates out of 1 New Hampshire Ave. at Pease International Tradeport. Their newest product is an Internet-based voting system they say can replace not only older paper ballots, but more updated electronic voting systems.

“We have an electronic system that is still based on the old way of doing things,” said Roberts, co-founder and chief strategy officer for Web-Impac. “This pulls the system forward to the point that we’re no longer attached to the horse.”

They are introducing their product at a volatile time as the country prepares on Tuesday to choose a president in a divisive campaign that has included allegations of election rigging, tampering by Russian hackers, and a widespread distrust, ultimately, about the fairness of the vote.

According to Roberts and Bates, Web-Impac is secure, opens the way for a larger voter turnout, and can be implemented on a national basis.

Their software product grew out of a public relations effort by Bates to get companies more engaged with their customers. She is president and chief executive officer of Hampton Bates

Public Relations, which she founded in July 2004 with offices in Portsmouth, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Boston.

In June 2016, she and Roberts announced the creation of a new software division – Web-Impac – to, as the company said at the time, “focus on developing and marketing software and applications that businesses can use to improve the look, feel and functionality of their company websites.”

They introduced what they called the “Star-Points Voter Button” that prompts a website visitor to vote on various aspects that make a website appealing and easy to navigate. The button can also be used to rate services and products offered on the website. The data is then processed through their “Star Points Voter Rating System” and sent to a private dashboard. From there, businesses can evaluate the information and use it to improve their pages, products or services.

“There had been a gap in business communications. That’s why we developed these software products,” Hampton said.

But they also realized their software had a larger application, much larger.

“It occurred to us that the election voting system is archaic,” Roberts said. “The technology exists – why not use it?”

With their vice president, Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate Glenn Graham, they upgraded and improved the software to create Web-Impac Quic-Vote, an online system where voting – for anyone from a selectmen to president of the United States – can be done with a desktop computer, laptop, smartphone or tablet.

The major elements of the system include authentication that the voter is registered: That would be managed by states through their Department of Motor Vehicles and voter database. The software knows where you live and would give you access to the correct ballot for your particular precinct or ward or town.

Once a vote is cast, it is recorded in three places – with the state (both electronically and with an automatically printed paper ballot), with a central federal voter monitor center, and an undisclosed back-up server. A final count is verified when the three locations agree on the tally.

“Having that system, if one part is compromised, the other two legs would stand,” Roberts said.

The notion of a hacked system, especially the electronic systems in place throughout the country, has been a source of anxiety during this election, fueled by repeated comments by Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump that the election is rigged against him. “This system here would dispel any notion that this is rigged,” Roberts said.

Roberts said the Quic-Vote system’s security and encryption would forestall a hack, but the redundancy would ultimately protect the tally.

“Hackers are opportunists,” Roberts said. “If you have sufficient encryption and back-ups, the hackers won’t have the incentive to be there.”

They see all kinds of advantages to a system that ultimately relies on an electronic count and less on a paper count.

“No more hanging chads,” said Roberts, referring to the Florida recount that decided the 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush.

It eliminates the need for absentee ballots, since people, as long as they are registered and authenticated by the database, can vote from anywhere. It would increase voter participation since an online election – held over a two-week period – would likely capture more participation.

“Our current voting systems do not recognize we are a busy and a mobile society, and the narrow one-day window to vote is outdated,” Roberts said.

They know they face an uphill battle – made steeper by entrenched societal and political biases for the current system of voting. And there are logistical issues to work out – such as providing access to those who don’t have online access through a connected device.

But they’re optimistic Quic-Vote could catch on and said they’ve have received inquiries from other countries.

“Nothing happens without people really having the knowledge,” Hampton said. “I think we need to educate the people.”

Added Roberts: “Someone has got to say: ‘Yes, there are risks, but let’s move forward.’”

