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Media Contact: Andrea Murta, Amurta@atlanticcouncil.org, 202-864-2822

New Atlantic Council Report:
2016 Elections Bring Voting Technology to Forefront of the Debate

WASHINGTON, DC—In the midst of a heated election cycle, a new report released today by the Atlantic Council sounds the alarm on the need to reassess the election systems in many countries – and especially in the United States. In a moment of profound partisan divide in the United States, “Democracy Rebooted: the Future of Technology in Elections” argues for the pressing need to update voting technology reflective of a 21st century electorate.

“Key stakeholders including government officials, technology experts, and civil society organizations must now come together to focus funding and strategic implementation on updating aging election machinery that lags behind much of the world,” said Peter Schechter, director of the Atlantic Council’s Latin America Center.

Though modern technology is used for voter registration, check-in at polling stations, and mapping jurisdictions, vote casting is largely left to paper ballots in much of the country. Memories of Florida’s “hanging chads” in 2000 haunt election administrators, but public perception around electronic voting remains wary due to misinformation and lack of trust.

While the US lags behind, other countries have migrated fully to electronic machinery with the support of government funding, robust voter-education campaigns, and involvement of third-party validators. “Many countries, including the large and diverse electorates in Brazil and India, entrust their democracies to electronic voting. But skepticism in the US has resulted in a number of states and localities reverting to paper ballots, most recently in the state of Maryland in 2016, despite more than a decade of success using electronic machines statewide,” said Conny McCormack, Atlantic Council author. “Are we going backwards?” she asks.

“Our report clearly concludes that electronic voting provides greater accuracy, speed of counting, and enhanced usability for all voters, including the disabled, and these benefits have motivated governments to seek this technology. That gives elections broader access and greater credibility,” said Rachel DeLevie-Orey, assistant director at the Atlantic Council.

Yet, lack of federal funds has left 43 out of 50 states with machinery over a decade old, according to research from NYU Law School’s Brennan Center for Justice. President Obama has recently spoken out on the need to make voting more accessible. In his State of the Union Address in January 2016 he stressed that voting needed to be made easier, and his recent remarks at South by Southwest implored the tech and entrepreneurial community to work with policymakers to develop technology to address this vital issue.

“It is much easier to order pizza or a trip than it is for you to exercise the single most important task in a democracy, and that is for you to select who is going to represent you in government,” said President Obama. “How do we create safe, secure, smart systems for people to be able to vote much easier […]?”

The Atlantic Council paper considers best practices from electoral commissions around the world for establishing independent, credible elections. It strongly urges electoral authorities to reach out to new stakeholders to help address questions of cost, transparency and credibility.
Ann Ravel, Commissioner of the Federal Election Commission, stresses the importance of this in a partisan climate. “As the United States enters a crucial election this year, it is important to remember the policies and tools which support our elections are critical to the strength of our democracies,” says Ravel. “It is vital that our elections are transparent and trustworthy. This paper provides a roadmap for how policymakers may look to advance stronger elections.”

Weighing advantages and obstacles of electoral technology, Democracy Rebooted: The Future of Technology in Elections recommends to governments and international organizations:

**What does electronic voting cost? Time to find out.** The debate about electronic technology in elections is adrift without a comprehensive financial analysis. Independent institutions such as IFES and International IDEA should conduct comprehensive research to determine the real cost of electronic voting.

**Getting on the same page: time to establish international guidelines.** For governments to make informed decisions, international guidelines for electronic voting machinery must be established. Organizations such as the National Democratic Institute and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have created these frameworks for election observation, and would be well-positioned to do so for electronic voting systems.

**Autonomous, apolitical, and well-funded election bodies make for transparent, credible elections.** Success follows independent electoral bodies and governments must prioritize and support autonomous, empowered institutions to run strong, legitimate elections.

The Atlantic Council report will be discussed in an expert roundtable held at the Atlantic Council on Tuesday, March 29, 2016, from 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. at the Atlantic Council headquarters at 1030 15th Street NW in Washington, DC. The discussion will be webcast live here.

**What others are saying about the Atlantic Council’s Paper**

**Yves Leterme**, Secretary-General, International IDEA

In order to cater to the demands of an ever-changing world, democracies must be dynamic and versatile. Diverse and increasingly tech-literate electorates will expect their electoral systems to reflect the world around them. The Atlantic Council paper aptly considers the challenges that need to be addressed by the strategic implementation of voting technology and how governments can seek to wisely implement these new tools.

**Lawrence Norden**, Deputy Director of the Brennan Center’s democracy program and lead author of the Brennan Center's recent report on elections technology in the United States says:

In this paper, Conny McCormack rightly argues that technology leaders have a critical role to play in improving voting throughout the world. This is especially true in the United States, where much of the country faces a crisis of aging voting equipment that has become increasingly difficult to maintain.

**Bill Sweeney**, President, IFES

Elections are a capital investment by society to address and hopefully choose a path forward in peace. This vital Atlantic Council contribution spotlights the kaleidoscope of challenges confronting all stakeholders in all elections. The definition and deployment of Twenty-First Century election technology lacks consensus due to a combination of demographic, political and technological dilemmas unique to each country. This is an important read.
Lord Mark Malloch-Brown, Former United Nations Deputy-Secretary General; Chairman, Smartmatic

Technology can play an important role in strengthening democracy around the world. When properly implemented, it makes it easier for people to vote, helps bring greater transparency and trust into the electoral process and reduces the cost of running an election. As all eyes turn to the upcoming US Presidential elections, this paper is an important call to action for technology leaders, governments, and civil society to work together to harness the full power of technology for the benefit of democracy both in the US and around the world.