Jury still out on hi-tech polling
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INTENSE political jousting tips us off that elections are in the wind. If a fixation on the Howard-Latham tussle fails to satisfy your appetite for intellectual battle, you can flick channels or turn to the foreign pages to follow the US's "stupid white men" as they go toe-to-toe in the run-up to their poll on the first Tuesday of November.

Much has changed in technology since we last wandered into the assembly hall of our local school to choose our leaders.

Online scams and spam, viruses, wireless technology, broadband, polyphonic singing phones with colour screens, have all become part of our daily lives.

While technology continues to influence our behaviour in many ways, the pen-and-paper routine at the polling booth remains.

No form of e-voting will emerge in Australia until at least the end of the decade, says Australian Electoral Commission election systems and policy director Tim Evans.

A proposal to begin an e-voting project, offering online access to those who would otherwise vote by postal ballot, has been rejected by the parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

The reason: the politicians don't trust the technology.

They are not the only ones. The US government has withdrawn its electronic registration and voting system, which was installed for military personnel posted overseas to use in federal and state polls.

"My view is that we will not see any progress on e-voting until 2010," Evans says.

"It all depends on our politicians, because legislation must be changed to permit a new method of voting. It's not the AEC's decision."

The successful e-voting experience in the ACT's 2001 Legislative Assembly poll, the first of its kind in the world, has not eased concern.

Pioneering local officials in Canberra, determined to find a better way to decide a tight election than relying on hand-counted votes, even posted their software's source code on the internet to ensure complete transparency of the process.

The most recent local elections in Ontario, Canada, were conducted entirely online and went without a hitch, Evans says.

E-voting anxiety has also surfaced in Ireland in the run-up to next month's polls.

Its electoral commission is installing a Powervote/Nedap system of electronic booths, but a recent survey in an Irish Sunday newspaper finds 58 per cent of respondents want the system tested before it is used for their elections.

In India's recent state polls, marred by violence that has claimed at least 10 lives, electronic voting machines were used in booths in some poverty-stricken states.
Rebel elements, determined to disrupt the election, stole the machines, as they had done in the past with the old cardboard ballot boxes.

Even in the world's most technically advanced political division, California, officials are arguing over the reliability of a Diebold e-voting system scheduled for use in November's US presidential elections.

The Americans fear a tight election and a repeat of the bizarre hanging chad controversy of the previous presidential contest.

Misalignment of punch machines in Florida left it unclear how hundreds of people had voted, making US democracy a global laughing stock for weeks as the George W. Bush and Al Gore camps fought it out in the courts.

Evans says the failures of e-voting have had more impact than the successes, and Australian politicians should not expect e-voting systems to be more secure than existing systems.

"We have no requirement to show identification at the poll booth, and Australian citizens in the Antarctic are allowed to phone in their votes. We must apply the same standards of risk for the internet as for normal voting," he says.

A passionate advocate of every aspect of democracy, Evans says if he had $30 million to spend e-voting would be last on his list.

"There is no great advantage in using online voting machines at polling booths in Australia," he says.

"Votes are counted quickly and the result is often clear on election night, so e-voting would provide Australia with no major efficiency or benefit.

"Any political investment in the internet should focus on encouraging active participation in the political process. We need to break down the silos that hold and release information that affects our democracy. A real challenge is to encourage representatives and their electorates to engage with each other. Using the internet for this purpose is more powerful than e-voting."