Bitcoin Foundation Candidates Voice Concerns Over Low Voter Registration

By Jon Southurst

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Candidates in the ongoing Bitcoin Foundation election to fill two vacant board of director positions have expressed concern at a low voter turnout.

Candidate Jim Harper of the Cato Institute, and former global policy counsel for the foundation, has pointed out that only 364 of the organisation's roughly 2,728 members have registered to vote – about 13% (this figure has been revised–please see below). This is in part due to the Bitcoin Foundation's requirement that members must confirm their intention to vote before becoming eligible, he contends.

The 364 figure means the minimum threshold for voters will be met if 183 of those ballots are actually cast, according to the Bitcoin Foundation's election committee chair Brian Goss. The previous election in 2013 saw 359 out of 713 registered voters cast ballots.

All who became members before 7th February are eligible to vote. The confirmation requirement, according to the foundation, is to ensure this minimum, or quorum, can be met from members who are actively engaged.

Previous elections required volunteer staff to spend hours communicating with individual members to encourage voting. Notably, this is not the first time bitcoin's chief organisation has struggled to meet this minimum number of voters.

Communication channels

Candidates such as Harper, who was let go by the foundation in a recent organisational pivot, has argued the foundation could have done more to inform voters of the election.

Harper said:

"If you look at the foundation's blog, there's been hardly a peep about the elections. Nothing since mid-December. I don't have every copy of the 'Bits & Bytes' membership email, but what I recall seeing is election information relegated to below the fold."

Fellow candidate Bruce Fenton also voiced his concerns at low turnout with a post on Reddit, voicing similar concerns by writing:

"The requirement to activate accounts was not announced on the Bitcoin Foundation home page (nor was the election itself!) or on Reddit or on Bitcoin Talk, two of the most popular industry news sources."

Fenton went on to note that announcements were only made on the Bitcoin Foundation message board and in an email campaign, both of which he suggested did little to increase visibility.

These conditions meant that even some standing candidates were not eligible to vote, he added. Both Fenton and Harper said they have received multiple complaints from other Bitcoin Foundation members about the elections and eligibility process.

The problem was not so much the election procedure itself, Fenton said, but the way it was communicated to members.

Efforts made

Speaking to CoinDesk, Bitcoin Foundation director of communications and business development Jinyoung Lee Englund spoke out against the organisation's critics, asserting that every effort has been made to keep members informed.

The foundation has issued an official statement on the debate, stating:

"We make every effort to communicate directly to our membership while trying not to spam our members. We believe a weekly email leading up to the election in addition to one specific email about confirming membership, in addition to the forum and blog post was sufficient notice."

At the end of the day, the statement concluded, the foundation can provide information and instructions, but it is up to individual members to decide if they wish to engage in the process.

Several comments in Fenton's Reddit thread supported this view, saying that while communications may not have been perfect, it was up to members to stay engaged.

Much of the election's technical process has been managed by Goss, a radiologist who works for the foundation in a voluntary capacity. His task was to design a system that accommodates members' varying degrees of engagement while ensuring the result is legitimate.

Some members have also claimed they were aware of the new process, but were unable to confirm or vote due to problems with either confirming or voting. The foundation has expressed concern at this, and posted a thread on its own forum for voters to register their issues.

Emails sent to members

There are 13 candidates running in the elections, which will conclude on 19th February. It has also maintained an 'Elections Update' blog, with the most recent message posted on 19th December.

CoinDesk can confirm that four separate emails titled 'Confirm Your Membership to Vote in Elections' were sent to current Bitcoin Foundation members in the first week of February explaining the activation process, as well as forum and blog posts on the foundation site.

In addition, the edition of the organization's Bits & Bytes newsletter carried the same voting instructions – though as Harper indicated, the notice was the fourth item in that message.

The Bitcoin Foundation's email to members

Confirming 'active' membership meant visiting the foundation's members' page and following instructions for the election.

Increasing participation

The foundation was created on a democratic model where elections would guide its direction, Harper said. His platform includes a plan for greater member engagement and participation.

Harper said:

"I like the model, though I recognize its challenges. If I am elected, I think that the foundation absolutely must find its membership roots again. My plan to repeat my risks-to-bitcoin study, polling the membership on threats to bitcoin's success, is just one part of that."

While he disagrees with fellow candidate Cody Wilson's plan to disband the foundation altogether, Harper said he felt "more than before" that radical change is necessary to build engagement and confidence. He endorses a "reboot" and return to the Bitcoin Foundation's

greater role in policy and outreach, which was put aside in favor of Bitcoin Core development after the departure of former executive director Jon Matonis.

Goss also expressed a desire for more effective systems going forward. While no amount of internet posts and emails is guaranteed to reach 100% of the audience, he said, the foundation was working to communicate with individuals both inside and outside 'internet culture' and their various channels.

He also urged people to remember the open-source culture that has driven bitcoin since 2009, and volunteer their efforts if necessary. That culture encourages people to raise issues through appropriate channels, and also work together to fix them.

UPDATE (16th Feb, 20:20 GMT): The Bitcoin Foundation has confirmed that its total membership count is 1,523 – which includes 886 annually-renewing members and 637 Lifetime members, meaning 23.9% have confirmed membership to vote. Jim Harper's figure of 2,728 was based on an estimate, and included members who have not kept up annual dues and are thus ineligible to vote.