3 Things Election Tech Officials Need Right Now

Ben Miller | May 17, 2017

SAN FRANCISCO — The U.S. is in the midst of a historic moment of civic participation. And while protesters march in the streets and politicians wrangle with each other over the aftermath of an election, the people who actually run elections are quietly working on making their systems better.

And those systems are, by all accounts, in need of updating. At the first-ever Global Election Technology Summit on May 17 in San Francisco, hosted by the Startup Policy Lab, a diverse group of people involved in elections and the technology used to run them gathered to talk about how they can improve the process for everyone involved.

Here are three things they said the government could use right now to make elections better.

Voting systems — hardware and software

The machines that people vote with, and the software they run, are old. How old? Well, according to California Secretary of State Alex Padilla, they are physically falling apart.

That's not an exaggeration. The parts for some of the systems are so old the original manufacturers often don't make them anymore. When election officials need new ones, they have to go on hunts for them.

"Would you use a cellphone that's 15 or 20 years old? You wouldn't accept that," Padilla said at the summit.

That's largely because of a big funding package the U.S. Congress passed in the aftermath of the contentious 2000 election, where the design of ballots in Florida was a major issue. Election officials across the country jumped at the chance to buy new systems — and those systems are still standing today.

However, voting systems are also among the hardest for government to buy. For one, the procurement process is even more heavily regulated than for other kinds of technology, involving special certifications that vary from state to state. There also just isn't much funding for them.

The systems are so old that they might someday soon be unworkable, but several people at the conference said they don't expect any new funding from the federal government. So any new voting system pushes would likely have to happen at the state and local level.

Data analytics and management

Matt Masterson, chair of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, spends his time working with local election officials. And he said that lately, they're starting to see themselves more as managers of complex IT systems.

There's a side effect: They're developing an appetite for data.

"They'll literally go through checklists and metrics, and data-driven analysis now in elections has become the expectation and the norm, not the exception," Masterson said. "That wasn't true when I first started in elections a decade ago; it was anecdotal. It was, 'Ah, we got a call from one voter at retirement home X that they're having problems, so we should go look at that.'"

One example is in Maryland, where state officials ran a project based on ballots. They took every ballot cast through a system so they could gather data on them.

"What they saw with the voter's interaction with the ballots helped improve their ballot design and poll worker training," Masterson said.

But while some are simply seeking data to help improve existing processes, others have more internal, business process-type data needs. That goes back to the age of the systems agencies use to run elections.

"The election technology, not just the voting systems — so you have voter [registration], e-polls — those systems don't share a data format," Masterson said. "They don't talk to each other well. And so election officials either have to figure out a way to share the data themselves, or work with a vendor to get the data into a format they can use."

That's a problem tech workers have been finding new ways to tackle lately, with data transformation and machine-learning algorithms that can quickly convert data into necessary formats.

Help understanding options

Finally, a lot of election officials are simply in need of ideas. Masterson said election officials tend to pay attention to what each other are doing, and that process could help new technologies spread.

"The work in Travis County, [Texas,] the work that Denver's done using [commercial-off-the-shelf technology] — that's all informing the customer base across the country about what's available, what can be done, what should be done," he said.

But given constrained budgets and the need for systems that last a long time, they might need hard proof they work. Amber McReynolds, director of elections for the city and county of Denver, said her state ran pilot tests of potential systems in five counties during an off-year election so that officials could compare them in real time.

"We could see it in a live environment, assess how it was doing and then obviously go from there," she said. "So I think that when looking at a new voting system or any technology, assessing what the process looks like and determining if you need to consider making a change on your voting model or that kind of thing, you want to [test] now before you invest in significant technology."

Monica Crane Childers, director of government services for the tech nonprofit Democracy Works, said one simple way for vendors to help government officials understand their options is to participate in requests for information before an agency moves to the RFP phase. That, she said, is the best way to expand the things those people consider when writing out what they're looking for.

She also has an idea for software to help election officials stay on top of the game.

"We don't have a good way in the election space right now to find what we call 'sister jurisdictions' — so other places whose rough demographics are similar to your ... county or city, and then overlaying that with what kind of voting options you provide. Are you vote by mail, do you do vote centers, is there early voting? We really don't have that for election administrators," Crane Childers said. "Academics would love it because it would make comparisons easier, but that is one of the things that could be used to say, ' OK, let me find my three sister jurisdictions across the country that look like me. What tech are they using? What solutions have they found? How do I talk to them on a regular basis so that if I'm [putting out a bid] for a new voting system, maybe we can all RFP together?"

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