10 Tips for Using a Task Force to Modernize Elections

BY AMANDA BUCHANAN

Voters directly interface with the electoral process by way of the elections technology they use to cast their votes. From Direct Recording Electronic machines to paper ballots read by scanners, how voters cast their ballots varies from state to state. At least half the states have or will soon be confronted with the complex and expensive challenge of procuring new elections technology.

Most of today’s voting systems were purchased beginning in 2003 using funds provided by the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 and are quickly reaching the end of their useful life. Some software is no longer supported, hardware is no longer manufactured, and more states are interested in shifting to a paper-based system. In some ways, this national dilemma is a ticking time bomb. In others, it’s the prime time to consider modernization efforts and other elections technology innovations: voting using smartphones, open-source software, user-friendly—or “voter-centric”—election systems, and beyond.

Today, federal funding is nowhere in sight and yet, voting equipment in many states needs to be effectively replaced. The procurement process for voting equipment is complex and varies state to state. There’s little uniformity in how states administer and fund elections (counties traditionally take the lead), but states are increasingly using legislative task forces to sort through these important questions and make informed decisions.
**State Action**

A legislative task force, study committee or special subcommittee is typically authorized in statute and operates in collaboration with or under the control of the state’s chief election official. While each task force has its own composition, scope and timeline, the primary goal is to analyze the state’s voting system—the machines used to cast and tabulate votes. Often the task force will investigate options and make recommendations to the legislature for further consideration. In the last three years, seven states—Colorado, Delaware, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Rhode Island and Utah—have explored procuring elections technology using a task force or special committee, whether established through legislation or by the chief election official’s office.

**TEN TIPS FOR ELECTIONS TECHNOLOGY TASK FORCES**

Although there is no one way to run a successful task force, across the board, 10 tasks should be on the agenda.

1. **Bring in local and national experts.** No state runs elections the same as the next. National experts like NCSL’s elections team can share best practices and present the national election landscape. Similarly, not all task forces formally include local election officials who will implement new technology and interact with voters directly. Invite election officials in for testimony or to informally provide their perspectives during task force meetings. Rhode Island included public interest groups on its task force, including representatives from the disability community and each political party.

2. **Consider the election model as a whole.** The lifespan of a voting system requires new technology to accommodate not only the election model of today, but also the desires of 10 years from now. Might your state be interested in **early voting, vote centers, all-mail elections, ranked choice voting, or smartphone voting in the future**, even if it isn’t interested now? Each of those election models comes with technology implications that warrant advanced planning.

3. **Determine the appropriate scope.** The voting system is just one part of the entire election system. Does the state voter registration system or election night reporting system need to be revamped too? Does the state still use paper poll books or are e-poll books on the table? How will a new voting system interact with other components of the entire election system?

4. **Hone in on cybersecurity.** With growing concerns about the cybersecurity of elections, from rigging to hacking, the security of any new election system should be both robust and easily explainable to a legislator, a poll worker and the public.

5. **Line up funding.** Choosing a system doesn’t do much good if it cannot be funded. Some states line up funding first (Michigan), some do it concurrently (Rhode Island), some do it after (Nebraska), and some intend for counties to foot the bill and therefore don’t provide funding (Colorado). The important part is to have a plan or the task force’s efforts may not bear fruit.

6. **Budget time and money for voter outreach with any new election system.** Money spent on voter outreach is money well spent. It can build voter confidence and expedite the voting process. Maryland set up demonstrations of new equipment any chance they got—at town hall meetings, county fairs and grocery stores.

7. **Bring in vendors for demonstrations.** Vendors are eager to show off their products and task force members can physically try out election systems while getting a rundown of the technology and getting questions answered.

8. **Outline business requirements and let a Request for Proposal (RFP).** It may help to separate “must-haves,” which may include constitutional requirements, from “would be nice” features. The best advice for the RFP process? Don’t start from scratch. Seek help from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, which shares nearly a hundred RFPs from other jurisdictions and also provides expert consultation to states and election officials. And don’t rush the process; consider a Request for Information (RFI) from potential vendors if your business requirements (or non-negotiables) are not yet fully developed.

9. **Leverage the state’s purchasing power.** Involving the state procurement office to get the best bid. Maryland entered into a statewide lease for counties to purchase equipment at a lower rate than would be possible on a single jurisdictional basis. Several counties in Kansas banded together for the same goal.

10. **Take inventory of state statutory requirements before falling in love with an election system.** State certification requirements—enacted in state statutes—dictate elections technology choices. State constitutions should be investigated too. For instance, Delaware’s laws require full-face ballots, which automatically preclude some election systems. Understand the road ahead to implement a new system, and plan for statutory changes if necessary.

---

**Additional Resources**

- NCSL webpage, Funding Elections Technology
- NCSL webpage, Elections Technology Toolkit
- NCSL LegisBrief, Funding the Next Generation of Elections Technology
- U.S. Election Assistance Commission webpage, procurement and implementation program

**NCSL Contact**

Amanda Buchanan  
(303) 856-1467