Responses to NCSL Policy & Elections Technology Conference Vendor Questions

Do you see the “election business” changing from a product to a service model? What does that mean for your company and clients?

We see the election market migrating from a proprietary, closed, single-purchase solution focus to a SaaS (software as a service) model that integrates with COTS hardware. For this to happen with voting systems and other certified applications, Federal Certifications standards would need to be updated. Current certification processes are old and outdated. They are based on a model of static software installed on a closed machine. A new, open environment must allow certification to take place on modules within systems and provide guidance on hardware standards on which to install new software.

This SaaS model will allow elections officials to not be as tied to one system. The use of a SaaS model allows election officials to be more flexible in choosing products the best meet their ever-changing needs. Additionally, the SaaS model allows governments to minimize their need to build and maintain infrastructure. Agencies can then rely on their vendors to provide the on-demand scalability and painless upgrades.

What is the future of the industry in an environment where federal funding is gone and state/local funding is so challenging?

The days of a large federal appropriation like HAVA are gone. It is likely that this appropriation was a once in a generation allocation. In lieu of federal funding like HAVA, state and local government entities would need to raise capital to purchase new voting systems and other tools for election modernization. Modern voting systems are much more complex and expensive and require a lot more effort to implement (training, planning, etc), so there is a large deterrent to change. However, some counties who have purchased new voting equipment in the past few years have done so with money that was put away for numerous years, which may be the best practice. De-certification and other political factors may disrupt that planning process and more funding options would be needed. From the vendor perspective, offering a purchasing model to spread out the cost over time would be a good option to help jurisdictions deal with the burden of finding large sums of money to make a change, which may be a feasible option.

Historically, big-box voting company vendors would use the threat of certification and the expense of new machines to “wall-off” clients from exploring other solutions. The advent of COTS (commercial-off-the-shelf) hardware in the election industry can provide a better opportunity for the state and local
governments to tap into new technologies and election modernization tools. More and more, it can be expected that the industry will continue to fragment with new technology and software companies utilize a SaaS model and/or COTS hardware to provide the better solutions at a more economical price, thereby allowing state and local agencies to more easily fund election improvements.

**How can the private sector work with policymakers and election officials to support innovation and otherwise support election administration?**

Policymakers should know that this industry requires a lot of planning and preparation when it comes to making changes and innovations. Discussions for modernization should be done years in advance, not when it becomes a problem. Election Administrators across the board should, as a best practice, always be willing to learn about new technology and study it so when an opportunity arises to invest in technology, there has been a large amount of research already done, avoiding uninformed choices. Policymakers, outside of election officials, must be willing to work with the private sector to find and fund creative solutions to administer elections. Policy-makers must also be willing to step outside the comfort zone and challenge election officials to be willing to use leading-edge, proven technology to address some long standing problems.

**What developments in the field are you the most optimistic about? Which ones worry you the most?**

Optimism abounds in the field of online voting. The adoption of remote voting means that the elections industry is ready to keep pace with modern web capabilities. There’s a generation of kids (and adults) that can’t put their smart phones down and are beginning to demand to vote online. Some believe that fundamental security issues will preclude us from voting online yet; there have already been successful elections in other parts of the world in countries who vote just like the United States. As an example, New South Wales (NSW) just conducted the largest online, binding public election with more than 280,000 votes cast. This is not the first time NSW has conducted online elections, but this election saw a 500% jump in in the adoption rate of online voting. France continues to conduct online elections with more than 240,000 votes cast in a recent elections and Canada recently used online voting in municipal elections. All of these elections have been incredibly well received. As more and more countries adopt online voting, the pressure will only increase in the U.S. so the time to prepare has arrived.

The most worrisome issue is small online voting vendors with little experience in binding elections heavily promoting suspect security. Mistakes by these vendors can potentially set back online voting adoption in the U.S. for years such as in the case of the Washington, DC online voting pilot. If DC had used an experienced vendor, it would not be held up as the great failure and a reason not to commence online voting in the US.

**Anything else you think the election community – and especially state legislators and staff – should know?**
When legislating the rules and guidelines for the future of elections and election administration, always keep in mind that it takes a few election cycles for change to truly be adopted and start to work so always plan changes for the long term, not the short-term. With regards to online voting in public elections in the US, now is the time to start pilot projects. Prepare for the future of online voting by giving voters the chance to continue to become comfortable with the process.

Additionally, many vendors are subject-matter experts and can provide a significant amount of expertise when discussing policy changes. Be willing to engage organizations that have a proven track record of experience in the industry.