



Did Electronic Poll Books Forget the Voter?

Electronic poll books (EPBs) have been developed by a number of companies. Several are old timers in the elections market and some are new comers just for the poll book market.

Electronic poll books are providing smart voter look-up along with the ability to direct a voter to their proper precinct and to communicate poll place status to the central office. This has proven quite attractive to administrators.

When newcomers saw a weakness in the old timers' offerings they made the poll books easier to deploy by using small, light tablets. All credit to those with fresh eyes for this management pleaser.

Yes, We Did Forget The Voter!

However, with the convenience these devices brought to management, the market lost sight of the end users, the voters. The tablets may serve the central office well but do little for the ultimate customer – the voter. Flipping a tablet does not keep the voter involved nor informed.

To date, the concept for all EPBs has been to replace paper with smart glass. The poll worker now has an attractive interface to voter information and to the elections office.

But, with limited time available to train on poll books, there is still fumbling and mumbling on the worker side of the check-in table. This is unavoidable when the conduit for informing the voter is a lightly trained human being.

If we treat the voter as a responsible agent for their own check-in – one who is helping the poll worker, rather than the other way around – all of a sudden, the check-in process can move smartly and swiftly to conclusion.

Somehow, up till now, we haven't parsed the obvious equation - computers in the poll place should offer the same satisfaction to the voter that computers offer everywhere a citizen transacts business. Not only should they bring the power of data management; they should and will bring the power to engage the voter.



Obvious once seen – people expect service

This is obvious everywhere outside the polling place. Customer facing screens are in pharmacies, in grocery stores, at airport counters, in train stations, in motor vehicle offices, in Dunkin Donuts. Each screen is there to make a transaction verifiable by the customer.

We see this every day on screens showing purchases being rung up. Even more relevant to our issues, we see customer-facing screens in airports and stores where the environment more closely resembles the poll place style of interaction. At these locations where customers get to see and touch their options, there are always employees nearby to offer help and to check ID.

Electronic poll books to date have left all the knowledge and control in the hands of the poll worker.

The rest of the world sees advantages in putting information and control in front of the customer.

Shouldn't we do as much?

Yes, We Should!

We should serve the voter. Our best way to manage this task is to catalog the ways that computer interaction makes the poll place more inviting. This should lead to making kiosks the standard, since a kiosk needn't cost much more than a poll book.

The cost of sizable retail kiosks is probably why their promise at the polls was being overlooked.

1. Inclusion – a political win as it should be

First, and in an iconic manner, the customer facing screen tells the voter they are included. It says their concerns have been considered. When money was spent, the politicians kept all the voters in mind.

Kiosks speak equal treatment. The screen verbiage is not going to change. It's written into the software. It's not being recited by a poll worker whose accuracy may be influenced by quality of training or how early they got up Election morning. Kiosk dialogs will be accurate from the time the polls open till the time they close.

A voter can read a lot of reassurance standing in front of a kiosk. The consumer marketplace has worked hard to get kiosks right. Poll place kiosks will start the voter's check-in experience with an aura of reliability and customer concern developed through retail exposure.

When vendors and elections managers meet retail expectations, we will have made the modern, busy poll place the friendliest it has ever been.

Additional evidence of consideration for the voter is the kiosk's ability to present the display at retail height. This provides optimal readability as well as a height where most voters can sign or initial without bending over.

2. Accessibility – proof of inclusion

No discussion of inclusion is complete without reference to including persons with disabilities. Although inclusion is not mandated by law it could be. A tablet computer acting as the voter screen can be accessible to persons with diminished eyesight. Fonts can be large. Controls can be large. Contrast can be maximized.

A kiosk certainly assists the deaf and hard of hearing since information is made available visually.

For voters in wheel chairs a removable voter screen will allow the screen to be placed close at hand.

For persons with limited muscle control, large response buttons and a removable screen are the answer.

In today's COTS world, no specialized hardware would be required for any of the above accessibility.

3. Fewer voter complaints – everyone wins

Next in attractiveness for all stakeholders is elimination of garbled communications due to hearing loss and noise. Verbal communication is required when no voter screen is present. The poll worker holds all the information and controls.

Topping complaints we have heard, unlikely as it seems, is that voters receive ballots for the wrong party.

4. Mandated language support – the law

High on the list of benefits for many jurisdictions will be accommodation of mandated languages during the check-in process. A voter kiosk can tell the voter all their poll place options in their language.

All information that is required to guide a voter at a polling place can be easy to read in their own language.

If a voter refuses to accept the elections office's statements as presented on screen, they can be directed to call the elections office. The elections office can have speakers of mandated languages available to field calls county wide.

Although interpreters at the polls are mandated, the voter kiosk alone will eliminate frustration that still arises for voters who need mandated language support. This will lessen the fallout should an interpreter fail to appear.

5. Poll book training simplified – staff win

At the top of the benefit list for election workers will be eliminating the need for poll workers to be trained in intricacies of voter eligibility.

For poll workers in training classes it means less glazing of the eyes while details of special circumstances voters are explained and explained. For the administrative staff it means a new and simpler process. They will only have to train the poll workers on how to recognize when a voter needs to contact the central office.

Poll workers can responsibly plead ignorance. They are seldom attorneys or comfortable playing attorneys. They shouldn't be subject to such expectations.

This will improve poll worker recruitment and retention.

Administration will be freed up ahead of the election to concentrate on equipment and ballots and outreach.

In Summary – We must design a voter experience to be as seamless and familiar as checking out when shopping.

Administrators, Poll Workers, and Voters will be less stressed. Lines will move faster.

Fully competent service will be delivered in this remote outpost of local government – only by fully utilizing modern technology.