Pre-voted Ballots—Scan, Don't Re-enter Your Candidates

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The potential to reduce lines at the polling place through the use of pre-voting is currently gaining attention. The concept is to allow voters to vote using their own unofficial pre-voted ballots. The current debate is whether those unofficial pre-voted ballots should be allowed into the elections arena to be digitally scanned from paper or downloaded from a personal device.

Voters could pre-mark their ballots at home (e.g., on a computer or smartphone) in advance and print their selections. Upon arrival at the polling place, voters could scan their unofficial pre-printed choices into a scanner at the voting station. One option would allow voters to make changes to their previous selections and then print the proper, official ballot to be cast.

Pre-voting could also be done on a smartphone. After voters make their initial selections on a smartphone app for voting, they could download the information at their voting booth. Their choices would be stored on the device's hard drive in digital representation and their official ballot printed.

Pre-voted ballots may be a tool that can help reduce lines of voters at the polls. However, there are other factors to consider as part of implementation. Currently, no voting system is prepared to handle pre-voting and would need to go through federal and/or state certification. The voting system would need to accept the voter's initial choices in paper or digital form at the voting booth in order to accommodate secrecy of the ballot. The voting system would then generate a fresh printout of the voter's official selections, a real ballot, to be deposited into the ballot box when the voter has finished voting.

For security purposes, it is preferable to keep smartphones away from voting terminals. We specifically prefer paper which can be brought into the polling place and scanned at the voting booth. Allowing smartphones in the polling location introduces chances for surreptitious monitoring. Such monitoring could mean coercion of a voter. We really don't want to allow any electronic links, Q codes, wireless, or other pathways to interact with devices in the polling place for security and privacy reasons.

Please note that this concept of pre-voting is different from Internet voting. In pre-voting a voter shows up in person at the polling location with an unofficial copy of their selections and ultimately verifies an official paper ballot generated by the voting system. This official paper ballot contains unique markers, such as a bar code representing a special sequence of numbers and letters, and is voter verified before being placed in the ballot box. The pre-voted ballot goes in the trash/recycle (like other candidate literature often found in a polling place) or becomes a take home souvenir while the official ballot goes into the ballot box.

Adding cryptography to the security features of hybrid electronic tally/voter-verified, paper-ballot systems would greatly enhance their defense against attack. The paper ballots then fit into a post-election audit scenario that compares the electronic records to the paper ballot selections.

There are also usability concerns to consider. We must recognize that voters with disabilities may have limited independence in the use of pre-voted ballots. Also, the technology tends to reinforce the socioeconomic digital divide. It will be difficult to control the look and style of the paper that a voter brings into the polling place. Sufficient to say, that a voter would be better served with a pre-voted ballot whose design is recognizably different from the official ballot.

Summary

Scanning the voter's selections into a storage medium at the voting booth may speed voting for some voters. Certification is not complete yet on current voting systems to allow pre-voting. For security reasons, it is preferable for the voter to use paper at the polling location to scan their pre-voted ballot rather than download the data from a personal electronic device. While it is not immediately ready for implementation, and certification is the lengthiest hurdle, this concept is workable. Implementation seems more a matter of voter education and hardware configuration rather than being cost burdensome.