

## **I. In Focus This Week**

### **Common data format could streamline elections**

*Many stakeholders agree consensus is needed, disagree on how it will happen*

By [Matthew Morse](#)

Although at times it's difficult not to get lost in the alphabet soup of the detailed technical conversations about XML, ASCII, and CSS, elections and technology have become inseparable.

Now, nearly every major aspect of election administration is computerized on some level, including voter registration information, candidate filings, polling precinct data, voter choices, results data, audit trails, and certified results.

Often, however, this data is stored in different databases, frequently configured in proprietary formats that prevent interoperability or data consolidation. This creates problems at nearly every step of the voting process: voter registration files remain outdated and flawed, states and localities are locked into a single vendor, voters cannot access election day information on demand, and vendors must develop and service a multitude of systems to meet their clients' needs.

Experts hope that a common data format will remedy these problems and recently technology experts from across the election community gathered at the [National Institute of Standards and Technology](#) to discuss the topic of a common data format in elections.

#### **Expanding the public, securing the private**

Essentially all election data can be divided into two categories: 1) confidential data in the form of registration files, voter choices, and other personally identifiable information and 2) public-facing data to assist voters on election day, such as precinct locations or who is on the ballot.

Paul Stenbjorn, IT Manager for the [Virginia State Board of Elections](#), explained that from the perspective of a state official, it would be extremely helpful for Virginia to be able to implement a common data format. Public-facing data would facilitate election day results reporting and other tasks, while private data could be more accessible to administrators.

"Internal election data in a common format would be extremely helpful to fulfill various reporting requirements or answer questions about system failures that could potentially damage the integrity of the election process," said Stenbjorn.

John Borrás, a career expert in e-governance and member of the [Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards \(OASIS\)](#), is a major force behind [Election Markup Language \(EML\)](#), one of the leading standards to accommodate common data formats internationally.

EML is basically a language or set of rules for formatting election information. Because the format is freely available to the public, anyone could create a piece of software or hardware that uses EML. The eventual goal, as with any common data format, is that an ecosystem of interoperable election systems may be created.

Borrás explained that the ideal of EML, or any other standard, is to deliver a seamless experience across the entire process of voting, which includes the many steps before and after casting a ballot. Indeed, Borrás views EML as a vehicle that can adapt to whatever demands are made by state or local voting policies.

“Whatever the mechanism is for conducting an election, delivering votes, and auditing results, EML can handle that now or can easily be adjusted to do so.” Borrás said.

EML provides its own security gateway that allows its users to use their own security tokens and build in additional levels of encryption.

Some data, however, election officials want to disseminate as widely as possible.

Aaron Strauss, lead programmer on the [Voting Information Project \(VIP\)](#) (a collaboration with Pew Center on the States), discussed the increasing importance of information for voters. “By providing public-facing data in an open format, we can help create standardized applications that run data from any of the 50 states and are accessible around the world. An overseas voter could have instant access to all ballot information using a PC or smartphone, something that has not been possible in the past.”

And, as the technology has evolved, it has grown together. “Originally, VIP and EML data existed in two incompatible formats. Today, thanks to collaboration efforts, we could easily use a state’s EML data to create VIP information which would be accessible to millions,” said Strauss.

Those concerned about privacy and security also find benefits in an open data format. After all, closed systems with proprietary formats provide little transparency or verifiability. Even those who favor paper ballots find that a data format is an essential ally. [The Open Voting Consortium](#), an advocate for verifiable paper ballot elections, [uses EML](#) to construct a completely transparent process of paper ballots that are standardized, legible, and computer-readable.

### **The prospects for common data**

Although EML is just one of many potential formats, many stakeholders seem to agree that a consensus is needed, whether the answer lies in EML, a vendor-driven solution, or some other common data format.

Experts disagree on exactly how that will happen. Borrás, for example, feels that states should lead the charge by coming together and creating a market demand. Stenbjorn, on the other hand, believes that a federal mandate is needed to create a common data format.

“Additionally,” said Stenbjorn, “I want to stress that EML, or any other format, is the vehicle, not the destination.”

Even with universal acceptance of a common data format, proactive efforts from the election community would be needed to realize its benefits. “In order to capture the next generation of voters, more information needs to be available electronically and online, and to do that we need systems that are flexible and interoperable,” Strauss concluded.

## **II. Election 2009 Follow-Up, Week Two**

Just a few more odds and ends for Election 2009 from across the country:

There are between 25 and 40 provisional ballots in Pitkin County, [Colorado's](#) mail-in election that have yet to be counted, and depending on how many of them are from Aspen residents, they could change the outcome of the Instant Runoff Voting advisory question. By a difference of only six votes, Aspen residents chose not to continue using the IRV method in electing the mayor and council members. According to *The Aspen Times*, the 805-799 margin hardly gives the Aspen City Council a mandate to change how municipal elections are done.

Officials will recount last week's election results for City Council races in Atlanta and Roswell, [Georgia](#), and will add some Atlanta residents to the city rolls who were denied the right to vote. Atlanta City Council President candidate Ceasar Mitchell said this week he'll ask county officials to review complaints from

residents in recently incorporated portions of south Fulton County that election workers told them they weren't on the voter rolls and couldn't cast their ballots on Nov. 3.

A close election, anxious candidates and telephones ringing off the hook with people giving numbers and taking numbers combined to create a well-intentioned, but botched effort by the Attleboro, [Massachusetts](#) election office to get information out quickly on election night. The attempt caused one candidate to think he won and another to think she lost. Election Commissioner Phil Daniels said the matter will be addressed in future elections. "It's not a pretty picture, but we'll continue to make improvements," he said.

Ballot counting by hand is going faster than expected in Minneapolis, [Minnesota](#), according to interim Election Director Patrick O'Connor. O'Connor told the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* that the hand-counting of ballots -- required by Minneapolis' new ranked-choice voting -- has been going relatively quickly. But the verification of results, which requires an exact match of the number of ballots counted for each contest in a precinct, has slowed the process. That step must be completed before the results are fed into computers for a ranking of candidates to determine who has hit the threshold for election on the basis of first-choice votes, and second or third choices if needed.

The head of Camden County, [New Jersey's](#) Board of Elections said it will take at least another week to sort out the reports of voters being tricked into casting a ballot by mail. A number of voters in Camden and other Camden County communities showed up at polling sites on Tuesday only to be told they already had voted by mail-in ballot, Robert Venuti, chairman of the Camden County Board of Elections told the *Courier Post*. Erik Solivan, a Rutgers-Camden law student who monitored the city polls through the university's Voters Rights Project, said nearly all of the roughly 100 provisional ballots the project tallied were cast by voters who supposedly had requested mail-in ballots.

[Utah's](#) new voter ID law seemed to have little impact on voters in Salt Lake County as the clerk's office reported that only 13 voters had to cast a provisional ballot due to insufficient ID (a total of 1,300 provisional ballots were cast countywide).

A week after polls closed, King County, [Washington](#) was just finishing counting the more than one million ballots received. The slow count caused some folks, including Gov. Christine Gregoire, to question how the state counts ballots.

A Jefferson County, [West Virginia](#) commissioner attempted to vote twice in the local zoning referendum and told a local newspaper that he did so to "see how the system worked." Commissioner Jim Surkamp said he was glad those who were working the polls were quick to spot the fact that he had already cast a ballot. "I was glad to see that they had seen me as having voted early. That's what I was hoping would happen. They were doing their stuff right. ... It's so silly to think that I would try to vote twice," he told the paper.

### III. Election Reform News This Week

- Local election officials throughout Florida are urging lawmakers to [delay implementation of a 2007 law requiring all counties to provide federally approved voting equipment for disabled voters by 2012](#). Citing the costs and existing debts, the Florida State Association of Supervisors of Elections wants lawmakers to hold off until new technology may become available and counties have a chance to get on firmer financial ground. "With the economic downturn in our state, right now is not the time to be asking our county commissions to invest \$35 million in a new voting system in a state that has gone through many conversions since the year 2000," Bill Cowles, Orange County Supervisor of Elections and FSASE president told the Florida News Service. [Bay County](#) Supervisor of Elections Mark Andersen told the *News-Herald* new voting machines will cost \$450,000 for Bay County and \$35 million statewide. The [Lafayette County](#) board of supervisors was scheduled to vote on a resolution this week asking that the switch be delayed until 2016. "The technology is not out there that we need," Lafayette County Supervisor of Elections Lana Morgan told the *Suwannee Democrat*.

- Town and city officials in Massachusetts are [expressing concerns over the thousands of dollars — money they do not have — they will need to pay to conduct a special election](#) to replace the late Sen. Edward Kennedy. The primary election is scheduled for December 8 with the general election set for January 19, 2010. Brian McNiff, spokesman for Secretary of State William Galvin, told *The News Herald*, the state will purchase the ballots and pay for the three extra hours city and town offices must remain open to comply with the 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. state election hours. McNiff said the state will spend more than \$5.4 million on the elections. “It’s all we can see at this moment,” said McNiff of the state’s contributions. With little help predicted, many municipalities are dipping into 2010 election budgets to cover the special vote. “We’ve got to come up with the money somehow, but it will deplete our elections budget and we will have to go back to the finance board to get more money,” Swansea Town Clerk Susan Taveira told the paper. She estimated the town spends about \$7,200 per election. Somerset Town Clerk Patricia Hart said her town will need to hold a Special Town Meeting before the 2010 elections in order to replenish money used in the senate election.
- Beginning Monday, November 16, the Election Law Society at the William & Mary Law School will produce a three-time per week election-law blog focusing on the development of state election laws. [StateofElections.com](#) will feature interviews with election law decision-makers, student-developed content, and guest bloggers discussing developments in state and local election laws. New posts will be added Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. According to a press release, “the mission of StateofElections.com is to discuss laws and practices that govern our democracy. We aim to write about voting in all corners of America - the fifty states and the territories – and to shed light on the patchwork of law that organizes the expression of the opinion of our citizens.”
- The Nez Perce County, Idaho clerk is urging commissioners to take a look at the county [election day liquor policy](#). According to county code, it is illegal to sell or give away liquor on the day of a general or primary election until after the polls are closed, however liquor sales are allowed during city elections and Clerk Patty Weeks said the discrepancy needs attention before the 2010 primary. Commissioner Chair Doug Zenner told a local television station that the commission will take it under advisement.

## IV. Research and Report Summaries

*electionline provides brief summaries of recent research and reports in the field of election administration. Please e-mail links to research to [sgreene@pewtrusts.org](mailto:sgreene@pewtrusts.org).*

[2008 Election Administration and Voting Survey](#) – The U.S. Election Assistance Commission, November 2009: This [survey](#) and [summary report](#) cover data related to the National Voter Registration Act, the [Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act](#) and other election administration issues such as the casting and counting of provisional ballots, voting technology and poll workers. Additionally, there is a [statutory overview](#) which provides state-by-state information on election administration laws, definitions and procedures. [Datasets](#) in several formats are available as well.

[Modernizing Ohio’s System for Registering Voters: Automatic and Online Registration](#) – The Brennan Center for Justice, Preliminary Report, Nov. 5, 2009: The Brennan Center reports that the current voter registration system in Ohio is inefficient, costly and needs improvement. Two proposed solutions are shifting the state to automatic as well as online voter registration, which the authors state would both improve the quality and accuracy of the voter registration system and provide long-term cost savings.

## V. Opinion

National: [Voting-machine sale](#); [Overseas voting, II](#)

California: [Vote count](#)

Florida: [New voting machines](#)

Iowa: [Bilingual ballots](#)  
Kansas: [Election hurdles](#)  
Minnesota: [Instant-runoff voting](#)  
New York: [New voting system, II, III](#); [Voter privacy](#)  
Ohio: [Cuyahoga County](#)  
Tennessee: [Paper ballots](#)  
Texas: [Voter registration, II](#); [Harris County](#); [Election glitch](#)  
Utah: [Vote counting](#)  
Washington: [Voter registration](#); [King County](#); [Vote count, II, III](#); [Vote-by-mail](#)

*\*\*some sites require registration*

## **VI. Job Opportunities**

*All job listings must be received by 12 p.m. Eastern on Wednesday for publication in our Thursday newsletter. Job listings are free but may be edited for length. Whenever possible, include Internet information. Please email job postings to [mmoretti@electionline.org](mailto:mmoretti@electionline.org)*

**Executive Director/Election Commission, City of Cambridge, MA** — seeking experienced manager to oversee day-to-day dept administration of Election Commission. Reports to City Manager and Board of Election Commissioners, responsible for all aspects of federal, state, and municipal elections, voter registration & city census. Experience in project management, staff supervision, & budgeting required. Familiarity with election laws and the City of Cambridge desirable. \$61,266-\$73,265 + excellent benefits. Detailed job description available on [www.cambridgema.gov](http://www.cambridgema.gov) (click on JOBS). Please email your resume and cover letter by 5pm on 11/24/09 to [employment@cambridgema.gov](mailto:employment@cambridgema.gov). We are an AA/EEO Employer.