Building a Better Way to Vote

Los Angeles has transformed its entire election system from the ground up.

Like most places in the United States, Los Angeles County's election system had long been plagued by inefficiencies, malfunctioning equipment and antiquated technology. But when L.A. first began confronting these challenges more than 10 years ago, it came up with an audacious plan: It would build its own election system from scratch.

Now, L.A. County's new "Voting Solutions for All People" initiative has transformed the way Angelenos vote. VSAP includes much-needed modernizations of voting machines and infrastructure throughout the county, but the overhaul isn't just about upgraded technology. It's a top-to-bottom reimagining of the entire voting process.

"People here had been voting the same way for 50 years," says Aman Bhullar, CIO for the L.A. County Registrar-Recorder/Clerk's Office, which oversees elections in the county. "Our system was on life support. We had to come up with a better way of doing things."

With 5.2 million registered voters, Los Angeles County is by far the biggest voting district in the United States — larger than 42 states. Its multilingual population and its sheer size — 88 municipalities spread across more than 4,750 square miles — make it an especially challenging place to hold elections.[1]

But voting in L.A. had remained essentially unchanged since the 1960s. "It was antiquated; it lacked flexibility and adaptability," says Bhullar. "It was a hindrance for the people who were trying to vote."

Los Angeles may be an extreme case, but its struggles with outdated voting technology are part of a widespread national problem. Despite some election modernization assistance from Congress — including more than $4 billion in Help America Vote Act funds since 2002 — many jurisdictions still rely on decades-old voting technology. And many of the new machines that were implemented by states in the early 2000s are now themselves becoming obsolete. Indeed, as recently as 2019, 45 states were still using some voting equipment that is no longer manufactured,[2] forcing some election officials to root through used computer stores for compatible parts.

How Los Angeles Reimagined Voting

When Los Angeles officials started looking for a new solution, they quickly realized there was nothing in the marketplace that would fit the county's needs.

"There was no system available that could actually scale to the volume that we deal with," Bhullar says. And in an industry where a small handful of vendors control the vast majority of the market, "there was little room for innovation," he adds. "So we thought, 'Let's create one ourselves.'"

They refocused around a new voter-centered approach. It began by outlining key principles around transparency, accessibility, privacy and options for voting. The county engaged a global design firm to reimagine the voter experience. Community representatives were involved every step of the way, including advisory committees made up of community-based organizations and technology experts. The county designed its own open source elections software and then approached manufacturers about building it into new touchscreen voting machines.

The county was always focused on three areas, says Bhullar. "It's people, processes and technology. Those three have to go hand-in-hand."

After several years of design and planning, the county was ready to begin

operationalizing VSAP. That's when it brought in AT&T to help implement various aspects of the project.

"As a system, VSAP had a lot of operational nuances that needed to be straightened out," Bhullar says.

The county had long maintained a relationship with AT&T, but it increased that collaboration to help make VSAP a reality.

"Bringing in AT&T helped us in many capacities, including streamlining our cybersecurity and network operations, as well as process improvement."

One key decision, which the county implemented in April 2019, was to assemble a program team, led by AT&T's consulting group and select subject matter experts from AT&T's security organization. The team was co-located with the Registrar Recorder which facilitated communication and helped protect the elections.

"That was very unique," says Janet Ifekwunigwe, the AT&T strategic lead for the initiative. "We felt like we were part of the organization, and that gave everyone a very different sense of responsibility to one another. It was an environment that allowed us to really collaborate as teammates."

That relationship also allowed AT&T to focus not only on its traditional strengths of connectivity and security, but also on things like technical staffing, asset management, mobile applications, site logistics, training and poll worker management.

"For AT&T, it was really about looking at every step of the election process to see how we can help support the county," Ifekwunigwe says.

It also speaks to the evolving roles between public and private organizations, says Bhullar. "I'm not looking for a vendor who can simply sell me products and services. I'm looking for a partner who can be there and stick it out with us in this journey and for a long term."

From 'Teething Issues' to a National Model

The county officially debuted its new system for California's presidential primary in March 2020. The new

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touchscreen machines were easier to use, and voters received a printed copy of their ballot, allowing them to personally verify their vote had been properly recorded. The new devices were a major improvement in terms of accessibility: They offered ballots in 14 different languages, plus large-type and headphone options, and screens that could adjust for voters in wheelchairs.[3]

But L.A. didn't just change its voting technology; it changed voting itself. Utilizing new options available under state law, L.A. County expanded the voting period from 13 hours on a single day to 11 days over the course of a week and a half. It replaced its 4,800 precinct voting sites with nearly 1,000 voting centers — and voters could show up to cast their ballot wherever they wanted. Also for the first time, the county offered instant day-of registration for residents who wanted to vote.

All those changes resulted in some initial hiccups, including technical glitches and long lines at some polling places. But Bhullar likens those Super Tuesday problems to "teething issues," adding that, "in a huge rollout that touched the lives of millions of people, there were challenges that presented opportunities for us to learn from our mistakes."

The county immediately began assessing anything that had kept the election from running smoothly, and it implemented those lessons for subsequent elections, including eliminating some of its smallest election centers and redeploying those resources to other sites in higher-traffic

parts of the county. The important thing, says Bhullar, is embracing the fact that it's an iterative process.

"We continue to evolve and learn," he says.

Most other voting districts in the country don't have the resources to do what L.A. did. But thanks to L.A., they don't have to.

"VSAP was intended to be used by other jurisdictions for the greater good," says Bhullar.

The county is making its open source code — and its experience and expertise — available for jurisdictions throughout the country to pick and choose what they need.

"They may not need 100 percent of VSAP. Maybe they just need a tabulation system. If they do, they can pretty much take ours and start running with it," Bhullar says.

Ultimately, as more communities start using the new platform, they could even help improve the system.

At the end of the day, it's about creating a process based on transparency and making it easier for each person to cast a ballot, Bhullar says. "More transparency and better access are good for the community, and good for democracy."

Endnotes
1. https://www.fastcompany.com/3049203/voting-needs-a-serious-overhaul-and-la-might-have-the-solution
2. https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-machines-risk-where-we-stand-today
3. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/has-los-angeles-county-just-reinvented-voting-n1000761

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