

Combat Post Election Uncertainty – Prepare Your Audience with Transparency

The 2020 Presidential General election was used to see if results collected and tabulated by widely accepted means would stand up to theories as to how they could have been fraudulently manipulated. They did, but not without taking hits from which they have not convincingly recovered.

Whether the theories originated from conviction that fraud was perpetrated or the theories are simply people trolling the system without conviction, the theories do stress the American voting system as a whole and, when personal threats abound, at a local level.

We see that a near majority of voters are skeptical where they weren't a few years ago.

We see that social media and broadcast media provide more than enough narratives to keep the skeptic fires burning.

What can we do to increase trust?

This paper will offer several ideas based on a few decades in elections starting with punch card counting in San Diego in 1980 through our last election in the City of Los Angeles in 2017.

In summer 2019, we delivered NASS a white paper titled "Trust is our most important product".

The theme was a discussion of the major technical parameters for trustworthiness for each of the functional areas of voter and election management. These are parameters such as certification, testing, isolation of key components and resiliency.

The most constrained area for many years has been voting equipment with the demand to keep it unconnected from the internet and to have its source code reviewed.

The least constrainable area is communication of essential information about changes in voting locations / times for which communications infrastructure and security are essential.

The 2019 paper did not deal with the fact that people might work to make distrust of elections a priority despite many technical assurances. Maybe those assurances need to become the showpiece of elections offices such that they're drummed into people ahead of time.

As we prepare for 2022 and 2024, the publicly accessible discussions of distrust do not seem to be diminishing. This leads to the question of what can we do to make it harder for people to convince other people and often, themselves, that elections could be significantly broken.

This requires that we bring as many sceptics as we can in from the cold into the elections orbit.

This will likely require social engineering to convince skeptics, amateur or professional, to bear witness to the entire registration and elections process and to inspect the entire physical and digital environment where elections and registration tasks are performed.

Such social engineering might start with "You can't complain if you don't participate." or maybe, using reverse psychology, "We can't let you see what goes on in here."

Before anyone thinks I'm speaking tongue in cheek, let me be clear. I am saying that elections departments, to get ahead of the "skeptics", will develop plans for major transparency.

The number of people granted access must be kept small to allow office work to continue.

To get the most bang for the buck, the people granted access will likely need to be vocal sceptics with a public following in the broadcast media and social media paired with supporters of the process and the elections workers, also with a public following.

Taping debates in the elections office conference room between such public representatives could contribute to a perception of openness of the elections officials to being questioned.

Those of us who work in running elections have a deep trust that almost everything happens above board, with integrity and with great attention to avoiding errors?

That's because we see how many steps are involved in preparing and running elections and how many people oversee and proof those steps?

Maybe one more step to restore trust is to show the public their elections workers come from a diverse demographic almost guaranteed to represent many political positions.

Without breaching the elections staff right to privacy, you could share the length of time serving and a sketch of education and prior employment.

Transparency in the elections process is a broad subject. I'm encouraging all who read this paper to start transparency discussions in your own offices and communities.

Beyond Transparency

With voting equipment being the most challenged component of the elections process so far, let's look at how we might beat the sceptics at their own game.

In key states, the sceptics have been calling for audits of the tabulation. They have been able to get their hands on county tabulators and fuss over them and for some, make them unacceptable for future use because of the possibility of tampering.

To counter this theater of "What if?", the elections authorities could suggest a Count Off – a side by side counting of as many precincts as needed – between equipment under the control of the county and equipment obtained separately that the sceptics programmed with assistance from the vendor.

The equipment could be the identical make and model or it could be from a vendor or other third party who offers a generic ballot counter.

The purpose of the battle of the ballot counters is to exude confidence to the point that people who want the system to work would not stay on the fence because of the incessant fraud propaganda.

We believe a large majority want the system to work and would like to see a strong offense from the elections authorities.

It's human nature when attacked for doing what you know is good work and never having been strongly attacked before, to put up one-off defenses thinking the attack is a one-off.



We now know these are not one-off. It's time to prepare an onslaught of positive messaging and demonstrations to blunt and deflect the messaging from the people crying fraud.

It's time to invite people that are crying fraud to read and comment on the EAC and state certification processes and reports and how the processes were developed with all kinds of public and technical input. Make the naysayers do their homework.

It's time to let people know if they can't offer constructive suggestions on how to make the process more trustworthy, they are not part of the solution, they are part of the problem.

It's time to publicly invite anyone who has been unleashing negative comments in your neighborhood to participate in tours, training sessions and supervised election duties.

While we're at it, let's consider that our field has made one bad call from a PR standpoint.

I doubt that any concerned voter wants to hear about a "risk limiting audit". That raises red flags left and right.

Whose risk is it limiting – election officials, election workers, candidates, vendors, winners or losers in a close race, party chairs?

Also important from a PR standpoint – why aren't we doing a complete audit? "Risk limiting audit" seems to say: "I'm too tired, I'm too busy, I don't think anyone is watching."

Let's start the New Year with a new name – maybe "statistical audit".

OK.... Let's bring in the offense and take charge of the game.

Where some think they can expose fraud, let's expose honesty and smart management.

Best Regards,

John Medcalf, VOTEC CEO