

Accessible Voting Equipment Fairs: Having a Voice in What Comes Next

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During the week of August 10, the Massachusetts Secretary of State's Office held a series of Accessible Voting Equipment Fairs across the Commonwealth. Fairs were held in Middleton, Northampton, Brockton, Watertown and Worcester, giving voters with disabilities and other members of the public an opportunity to try equipment that could potentially become the next generation of accessible voting technology in Massachusetts.

I attended the Worcester fair, and after weeks of advocating for Worcester to be included, it was especially gratifying to see it happen. Advocacy from members of the disability community also helped lead to Watertown and Worcester being added to the schedule. Seeing people come through the doors, try the equipment and share their opinions made all that effort worthwhile.

What struck me most was that this did not feel like a demonstration where vendors simply showed us their products. We were testing them. We were asking questions. We were finding things that worked well and things that didn't. Most importantly, people were listening.

Four vendors participated in at least some of the fairs: Democracy Live, ES&S, Smartmatic and LHS. Because the LHS system would require many Massachusetts cities and towns to purchase new tabulators, I chose not to test that equipment. The other three systems are compatible with the universal tabulators already used in Massachusetts.

Democracy Live

The Democracy Live system impressed me with its modular approach. Much of the equipment consists of standard, off-the-shelf components, including an HP printer and tablet. That could be a significant advantage over the life of the equipment. If one component fails or needs replacement, the entire system would not necessarily need to be replaced.

Another thoughtful feature is a call button that allows a voter to request assistance from a poll worker.

There are areas that need improvement. When first using the equipment, important accessibility controls such as volume, speech rate and screen curtain are not as easy to locate as they should be. I also found the controller less intuitive than some of the others I tested.

What impressed me, however, was how Democracy Live responded to our feedback. Their representatives wanted to hear what we thought. When we suggested changes, they listened and seemed genuinely interested in making improvements. For me, that willingness to listen to the people who will actually use the equipment matters.

The system also uses a QR code to open the ballot rather than having the voter insert a ballot to begin. At first, I wondered whether that should be considered a negative. After thinking about the actual voting experience, I am not convinced that it is. A blind voter who needs assistance locating the accessible voting machine will already be accompanied to it by a poll worker, who can easily scan the code to begin the voting session. That voter may also need assistance locating the tabulator after completing the ballot.

Smartmatic

Smartmatic demonstrated two systems, the 100 and 500 models.

For me, the 100 model has a significant problem: it does not produce the same complete ballot used by other voters. Instead, it prints a record containing the voter's selections. I believe voters using accessible

equipment should be able to cast the same type of ballot as everyone else, so I could not support that option.

The 500 model offered a better experience, but presented a different concern. The ballot must be inserted into the device in a particular orientation. We learned that a physical indication, such as a slight tear, could be used to help a blind voter determine how to position it. That raises another equality concern. A blind or low-vision voter's ballot should not have to look or feel different from everyone else's ballot in order to use the accessible equipment.

Those concerns aside, I found Smartmatic's actual voting interface very easy to use. The sound was good, the control pad was intuitive, and the larger buttons could be particularly helpful to voters with dexterity issues. Some of the instructions at the end of the voting process could be clearer, especially when it is time to print the ballot.

ES&S AutoMARK

Massachusetts voters have used AutoMARK equipment for approximately 20 years, so there is already considerable familiarity with ES&S and its equipment.

The newer AutoMARK is smaller, lighter and more streamlined than our current machines. Instead of controls built into the machine, it has a handheld controller. I found the controls easy to use and the overall voting process smooth.

My concern is the printer.

Ink cartridges can create problems when equipment sits unused for extended periods. An accessible voting machine might be used by someone early in the morning and then sit for hours before another voter needs it. If the cartridge dries out or a printing error occurs, election personnel may need to call someone from the city or town clerk's office to replace the cartridge and reboot the machine.

Imagine being the voter waiting while that happens.

In Worcester, with 50 precincts and election officials dealing with any number of issues on Election Day, getting someone to a polling location could take time. As equipment ages, this concern becomes even greater. Accessible voting should provide independence, but it should also provide reliability.

More Than Testing Machines

One of my favorite parts of the Worcester fair was talking with other people who were testing the equipment. It was fun. We compared experiences, asked questions and shared our opinions. More importantly, we felt included.

Our voices mattered.

I also had a candid conversation with Bridget Murphy from the Secretary of State's Office about how Massachusetts is approaching this decision and what purchasing new equipment could mean for individual cities and towns. One issue that is especially important to me is maintaining a statewide standard. Massachusetts currently has one accessible voting system across the Commonwealth. I believe there is real value in continuing to have one standard so that a voter can expect the same accessible voting experience regardless of where they live.

Bridget collected email addresses from participants and plans to send surveys seeking additional feedback, something she did throughout the week at the other fairs. She was clearly energized by the turnout across the Commonwealth.

I had worked with the Secretary of State's Office to spread the word about the fairs to partners throughout the disability community, and seeing that participation was particularly rewarding. I was also grateful that requests to include Watertown and Worcester were heard and acted upon. It demonstrated what can happen when state officials and the disability community work together.

Looking Ahead

After testing the equipment in Worcester, my two strongest options are Democracy Live and the new ES&S AutoMARK, with a slight advantage going to Democracy Live.

The modular, off-the-shelf design is appealing from a long-term maintenance standpoint. More importantly, Democracy Live representatives listened closely to the accessibility feedback we provided and appeared willing to make changes. If improvements can be made to the controller, particularly making volume, speech rate and screen curtain controls easier to locate and use, I believe it could be a very strong option for Massachusetts.

No system I tested was perfect, and that is exactly why these fairs were important.

Accessible voting equipment should not simply allow a person with a disability to cast a ballot. It should allow us to vote privately, independently and with the same confidence and dignity as every other voter.

For one week in August, Massachusetts gave voters with disabilities an opportunity to help shape what that experience could look like for years to come.

I am grateful that we had a seat at the table, and I hope our voices continue to be heard as the Commonwealth makes this important decision.