

What New York's New Voting Machines Can Tell Us About Democracy Assistance

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Voters in New York City yesterday were confronted with a new voting system for the first time in about a century. While I had always liked casting my vote for Barack Obama and other recent candidates on the same type of machine, and perhaps even the same machine, that my grandparents used to cast their votes for Franklin Roosevelt and Fiorello LaGuardia, not everybody shared this view. The new technology used on Tuesday [generated some controversy](#) as voters struggled to figure them out, glitches occurred and many were confused. Michael Bloomberg, the city's mayor, referred to Election Day with the new machines as "a royal screw-up, and it's completely unacceptable."

In my polling place things ran smoothly, perhaps because I was the only voter there and had plenty of attention and assistance. The glitches in the new system, however, seemed to overshadow the more important point, that the new system, at least the way it was implemented yesterday does not meet basic standards for free and fair elections, particularly with regards to the secrecy of the ballot. After voting, I turned my ballot to a poll worker who tried several times to scan the ballot before asking me to fill out another paper ballot which was successfully scanned. This poll worker struck me as an honest person with no real interest in knowing how I voted, particularly given that it was a primary, and I don't think paid attention to how my ballot was filled out, but she very easily could have looked. As people become more familiar with the new system this problem will go away because most voters will scan their ballots themselves with little need for assistance from poll workers, but it is likely that will take several years.

My experience voting yesterday was another reminder of how election fairness is a political issue, but one to which we keep seeking to apply technical problems all around the world. The reason thousands of New Yorkers, although undoubtedly frustrated with delays and other problems, did not get upset about the ballot secrecy issue is that most of us believed that the poll worker and police officer standing only a few meters away did not care about how we voted. In most cases these people were there to try to do their work and help the process move smoothly. This feeling might have been different in a general election, but we won't know that until November. It was the political environment, one where there is a high level of confidence in election fairness, that ameliorated a rather egregious technical flaw in the new system in New York.

In many countries where democracy is not strong, democracy assistance organizations work to help craft laws that specify precisely how the ballot is handled after the voter has voted. These laws would preclude the opportunity for election officials see a given voter's ballot. In most cases these laws would also be honored largely in the

breach. This is because if governments, election officials and parties are not open to free and fair elections, technical solutions, such as more technology and better election laws cannot work.

To genuinely improve elections, and other democracy related issues, there needs to be a synergy between technical and political solutions. The first step to doing this is to recognize the political nature of the challenge of strengthening democracy. It is intuitively clear to most observers that many countries are not democratic because their leaders don't want democracy, but this recognition does not yet underlie enough democracy assistance work other than in the most extreme undemocratic cases.