

***“The Role of Election Management Bodies in Promoting a Customer-Centric Approach in Modern Elections”***

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Thank you. It is a pleasure to be participating in the fourth Annual Meeting of Election Management Bodies and I thank the Central Election Commission of Georgia under the leadership of Ms. Tamar Zhvania and her staff of professionals and experts for their hospitality and organizing what has become the annual high point of the calendar. I thank as well the co-organizers, our good friends of the International Centre for Parliamentary Studies.

I would like to touch upon an issue I see growing out of the fusion of increasingly sophisticated forms of voting technology and election management that I believe poses a challenge to election administrators across a spectrum of levels and competencies. This is, namely, how to continue to focus on customer-centrism towards electoral stakeholders as a necessary companion to the ever-increasing role of election technology. First I think I should define what exactly we mean by the electoral stakeholders in this case. Obviously first and foremost this includes the voters, both those traditionally voting in their home districts to those who are abroad and certainly more difficult to reach. But it also includes a range of other participants in the electoral process including, political parties and candidates, staff of election management bodies, government ministries, legislatures, electoral dispute resolution bodies, domestic and

international election observers, media, voters and prospective voters, civil society, and the donor community and electoral assistance agencies

Unless the election management body works hard to create and sustain sound relations with those stakeholders, a variety of challenges may arise including suspicions and misunderstandings, and this will ultimately generate lack of public confidence and trust in the electoral process in general and of the election commission in particular. Although stakeholder management is critical to the success of an election management body, this subject is not always prioritized among election professionals.

As in the business world, where companies are required to invest in customer satisfaction in order to attract more customers and thereby enhance their profitability, the election management body should 'know its audience' so that its services and goods are tailored and responsive to the requirements of its customers (stakeholders). This helps to develop customer confidence in the election authority and also generates support and goodwill towards the election authority's policies and practices which in turn enhances its credibility.

To state it another way, there is a correlation between stakeholder support and the credibility of the election management body: the lesser the stakeholders' support towards the election authority, the lesser its credibility. For example, an election management body may organize an election which, technically speaking, may be clean and flawless, but if stakeholders are not involved and made aware of the process, their suspicion and distrust may lead to a rejection of the election outcome. Against this background, it is important that the electoral authority foster transparency and a

participative approach which involves stakeholders in the way it administers the whole electoral process; the Georgian Central Election Commission is a good example of a successful, customer-service oriented election management body in this regard.

It is the duty of the election management bodies to have short-, medium- and long-range plans in place in how to maintain communication and continue serving the needs of the various constituents. Very often the only time a voter, for example, will think of elections is during the immediate election period itself, which is to be expected. If they hear some information or news about the elections outside of this immediate period surrounding the elections, more often than not it tends to be something perceived as negative or a problem that has emerged as a result of the election preparations. The more efficient the election process, on the other hand, the less notoriety an Election Management Body receives. The opposite is also true, in that when problems emerge and are not addressed quickly and resolutely, negative attention follows. Unfortunately voter perceptions are often formed from singular experiences, and even word of isolated problems in the voting process can have a negative effect on voter opinion of the election management body. If all goes well during the election process, little will be heard about the election commission's efforts.

A major consideration that conditions voter opinion of late in the United States is the wait time required to cast a ballot. The performance of election management bodies has often been assessed based on wait times to cast a ballot; an individual's experience in a case of a long wait time can morph into a generalization about the work of not only a precinct election commission but also the higher electoral bodies. Voting is of course a very personal experience; much the way a customer shopping for goods or services

will judge a vendor based on the shopping experience and performance of the product, changing stores so-to-speak if the experience is unsatisfactory, so too will voters assess the election process and those administering it if the experience is negative. The key difference is that unlike the case of for-profit businesses selling goods and services, the election “business” is actually a monopoly; voters cannot turn to an alternate election commission or voting process if they are unsatisfied with the performance of one.

One possible and unfortunate alternative, particularly in cases of “on the fence” voters, i.e. non-party, non ideologically rigid voters, is simply not to vote at all, which would represent a failure of the election process and potentially counteract carefully-crafted efforts and the resources associated with them to encourage voter turnout among the mass of historically undecided voters (a sizeable percentage of whom make their decisions only on election day, at the polling station).

Other reasons why people don’t vote, in particular undecided voters, according to survey research such as one conducted in the state of California is a “lack of time” to do so, or the perception (gained through past experience) that voting is a lengthy endeavor that requires more than a few minutes to undertake, thereby conveying a negative experience of the process (and those administering it) and possibly of the election itself. The effect is compounded on young or first-time voters, who may be turned off by elections based on a negative experience at the polls. Given the need to court young and first-time voters for long-term engagement in the election process, it is imperative that good customer service efforts target these voters in particular. When more people participate in an election, the democratic process more accurately reflects the will of the people.

I don't want to say too much about voter psychology as we have the real experts in the room with us here, Drs. Harrison and Bruter, who will be presenting their research on the topic in the Georgian and other comparative contexts tomorrow I believe, but clearly there is an emotional connotation associated with voting. Here in Georgia the findings suggest, as I am aware, that nearly two-thirds of voters like the atmosphere of the polling station (63.8%), which suggests that one's personal election experience portends one's feelings generally about the state of elections, in this case which are seen quite positively by voters in Georgia. I look forward to hearing more about the interplay of voter emotions and attitudes towards elections in subsequent presentations.

As an election observer, pollworker, polling chairman and voter myself, I have witnessed various reactions to the voting process. In the U.S. there is an interesting transformation during national and high stakes elections when wait times are at their longest. Voters often display increased levels of anxiety, irritation and anger when waiting for longer than 10-15 minutes, to say nothing of the two-plus hours many waiting in line during the 2012 presidential election. When finally receiving either their paper ballot or a card allowing them to vote on the touch-screen machine there is a palpable expression of relief for many voters as their overall mood appeared to change for the better; not only was this due to the fact that their long wait was nearing an end, but it was in part due to the training of the polling commission workers, with the tone set by the chairperson of the commission, engaging voters on a personal and personable level as individuals even for a brief time to confirm their names on the voters list and issue ballots or voting cards for electronic voting. Good customer service on this, the lowest

level of election engagement (with voters directly), can help offset voter angst and potential negativity.

Though the focus of any election is of course on the outcome, the voting experience plays a large role in voter participation in future elections, and voter participation is an essential component of elections themselves, as low turnouts can be seen to dilute the results of an election. I would say as a side remark that there have been studies done as to why people choose not to vote, both in surveys by IFES and many others, which can range from country-specific factors such as trust in the election process or belief that voting can make a difference, to lack of information, to lack of time, as well as to voter apathy and electoral fatigue. I believe one's past voting experience itself is a subset of all of those reasons.

Regarding the introduction of technology into the electoral process, technological innovation is designed chiefly to improve customer service and the voting experience by making the voting process more efficient, transparent and less time consuming. It benefits all stakeholders by allowing for more expedient compilation and reporting of results and is supposed to minimize the possibility of human error and generate greater confidence among voters. Some have questioned the transparency and ability to visually verify results electronic voting, which of course spans a wide variety of voting technologies, from internet-based forms used successfully in Estonia and other countries, to touch-screen voting to forms of electronic counting of paper ballots.

Electronic polling books for voter registration have become standard in many places, and new technologies featuring smart phone applications exist (through both election management bodies as well as independent civil-society organizations) or are

envisaged to supply voter registration information, general election information, and, eventually, the ability to vote. While voting via internet and or mobile devices is far from standard practice in most of the world, it is imminent and will be seen on a far wider scale in the coming years. According to a 2012 survey<sup>1</sup>, 56% of young Americans (age 18-34) want to vote via their smart phones. And the trend is, not unexpectedly, that the younger a voter is, the more inclined he or she is to want to vote via a mobile application. Additionally, statistics show that 60% of smartphone or tablet owners would cast a vote on those devices.

Security and fraud prevention are the biggest issues still to be overcome before this becomes possible across the U.S. and other countries, though it is reasonable to expect this to happen at least on a pilot basis within a period of years. Again, the main concern is preserving the secrecy of the vote and preventing hacking; given the prevalence of personal data on mobile phones it is not unreasonable to expect that a voter's physical movements could be tracked and personal habits and preferences discerned by candidates, political parties, interest groups or malevolent outsiders intend on disrupting or skewing the election results. Smartphones may be used to deliver deceptive voter information.

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As we know internet voting is already a reality in some places in the world today. Election smart phone applications, or "apps," are very prevalent today and growing here in Georgia it is a matter of time before smart phone or tablet voting happens. While the legislation to permit this will have to be carefully crafted and passed by national parliaments, it is clear, returning to a customer-centric approach, that election

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<sup>1</sup> <http://venturebeat.com/2012/09/19/mobile-voting/>

management bodies need to recognize the trend and demand of its voters, particularly youthful, future voters whose engagement in elections over the long-term may depend on the responsiveness of electoral authorities to meet their demands for availability of technological innovations to encourage their participation.

After the exceptionally long lines during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, which were often blamed on lack of preparation by election management bodies (though were more a function of limited budgets to accommodate the rush of voters with sufficient voting stations, personnel, and timeframe within which to cast ballots in person) the call for alternate means of voting grew louder. While a few states have experimented with mail-in voting, the next national elections, this year for seats in the United States Congress (the mid-term congressional elections) will see some states employ voting centers and technology that will allow voters from virtually any precinct to vote at the closest voting center irrespective of region of residence, using technology that can load the proper ballot wirelessly on a voting tablet. Technology of this sort is also highly adaptable to the requirements of voters with disabilities. While falling short of smart phone voting, the multiple safeguards built in would allow for pre-voting on one's home computer, with vote confirmation and verification via bar code loaded onto a smart phone and scanned at a voting center or election precinct.

As the youngest group of voters mature and comprise the majority of voters in a country, the expectations and electoral innovations will change with them. Some even envision no need for pollworkers in the future if the voting process is conducted exclusively through electronic means. Others argue that total security will never be



possible in an elections using mobile technology, and at present there are limits to what technology can offer in terms of voter secrecy, ballot integrity, and verification of results.

It is interesting to hear young persons debating the merits of remote or smart phone voting. A common opinion in the U.S. among university students is that it would actually lead to increased voter turnout, by enabling young voters to use a familiar technology and complete the task quickly; this presupposes that younger voters have less tolerance for waiting in lines and are perhaps more predisposed to instant gratification than older generations. It would also lower the cost of voting and save time for voters. Digital voting could provide the means to enable more American voters to cast votes. According to a report released by the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 50 million Americans didn't vote in the 2008 presidential election and 90 million didn't vote in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Millions of people said this was because they were out of town, had transportation problems or were too busy to get to the polls. Internet voting could in fact enable millions more people take part.

A recent report from the Federal Communications Commission found that 94 percent of Americans currently have access to the Internet,<sup>3</sup> meaning they could potentially vote online without going to a polling place. What if voting were extended to mobile phones? The Pew Internet & American Life Project recently found 85 percent of American adults have a mobile phone, with about half of them having smartphones — numbers which are almost certain to increase rapidly in the next few years. Internet

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<sup>2</sup> [http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/disruptions-casting-a-ballot-by-smartphone/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/disruptions-casting-a-ballot-by-smartphone/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2012/0824/Got-broadband-Access-now-extends-to-94-percent-of-Americans>

and mobile technology could bring voting to citizens who are historically under-represented in the current electoral process simply by eliminating the need to get to a polling place.

In the conversation among the U.S. university students, also cited was the enfranchisement of persons with mobility issues who would not need to come to the polling station, which may or may not be accessible. At the same time, the students expressed trepidation about the allowance of voting via smart phone, which revolved around security and preventing fraud or hacking. Others suggest that democracy is an active pursuit, and although a vote may be accomplished from the comfort of one's couch, it would encourage the kind of passivity and disconnectedness that society already faces with the onset of mobile communications and social media. Thus, mobile phone or internet voting could be seen as a harbinger of laziness when efforts are already intensifying to encourage young people to be more active in civic participation. In one particularly interesting comment, one student suggested that he believes voting through phones would kind of diminish the personal sense of accomplishment and the feeling people get when they go somewhere else and stand in a voting booth to vote. He posited that "people wouldn't take the whole act of voting as serious if they voted through a text message or the internet."

One way to address the security and hacking concerns would mean assigning digital identities through smart identification cards, similar to what's used in Estonia, so that a voter can securely log into the system and cast their vote. With the correct security technologies in place, like those being developed through cryptography, the

personally-assigned chip could help secure anonymity while at the same time making voting auditable and ensuring everyone only votes once.

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These are the debates that are taking place right now in many countries. But the majority of countries in the so-called democratized world as well as developing democracies still rely, and will for the foreseeable future, on elections managed by human beings and voting systems and processes that nevertheless require person-to-person interaction at polling stations or voting centers. As heads of election management bodies you need to be cognizant of the changing needs and preferences of voters as well as the prevailing mood of the electorate and plan for the next stage of electoral development just as you prepare for the next election cycle.

At the same time, technology will not solve all issues and questions voters may have about the efficiency of election bodies and if there is a crisis of confidence in the system. The confidence and engagement of the electorate, measured through the connection election authorities have with their clients - the voters – is perhaps the best guide in deciding to introduce new technologies and approaches in the voting and registration process. That is, technological innovation, which is subject of course to financial capacity, national budgets, and political will for its introduction, should be a market-driven process, with the market being the attitudes and opinions of the voters and other electoral stakeholders themselves. This again requires having a relationship with the stakeholders, through regular communication not only during an election cycle (through voter outreach and education) but also in-between election cycles, through working groups and advisory committees.

As a general rule, the level of technological upgrades suitable for a country should always be directly related not only to the capacity, but also to the trust and independence enjoyed by its election management body, as these are the elements that will determine their acceptance by the public and, as a consequence, increase trust in the electoral process.

The one aspect of introducing technology applications in electoral processes that has been strongly neglected to date is the socio-cultural dimension<sup>4</sup>. Often the heavy investments in technology are not supported by adequate attention to confidence-building activities aimed at explaining to the stakeholders and the electorate the purpose and the functions, as well as the security control mechanisms, associated with every technology upgrade. Distrust and suspicion can sometimes be the most difficult problem to overcome in transitioning to a new system and might lead to a dangerous loss of credibility for the electoral institution. Too much may be expected all at once from technology upgrades – improved security, transparency and efficiency – and public expectations may be unrealistic.

The example we see here in Georgia of the Central Election Commission engaging stakeholder working groups in issues of voter engagement, enfranchisement of persons with disabilities, reaching out to ethnic minorities, encouraging women's participation in the election process, discussing the use of technology in elections, and other areas serves as a stellar example of how an election management body and its various departments can and should engage with its clients the stakeholders on a full-

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<sup>4</sup> [www.aceproject.org](http://www.aceproject.org)

time basis. This is an example of the customer-centric approach to which I refer in the title of my presentation.

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In terms of mass communication with election stakeholders, traditional methods as we know in many countries include direct mailing, newspaper advertising, and television/radio announcements. Internet communication through establishment of election management body websites became a common and important medium nearly twenty years ago. Depending on one's generation, one may be more familiar with either of these forms of outreach. But in terms of electronic outreach, websites are useful but they represent a passive form of voter outreach, that is, a voter must be motivated to search for information. For several years the medium of preferred engagement of younger voters is social media and text messaging. In a survey of millennial voters<sup>5</sup> (young adults between the age of 18 and 29) in the U.S. from 2012 found that of the "Get Out the Vote" (GOTV) campaign that impacts young voter turnout, Facebook ranked first at 59 percent and text messages ranked second at 50 percent. Only 18 percent of 18-to-29 year olds thought a more traditional phone message would be effective, as the survey showed, which provided "a clear indication that smart phones and other mobile devices have reached a point of heavy market penetration within this youth demographic."<sup>6</sup>

Again, voter habits and preferences must be understood and reacted to by election management bodies in terms of ensuring effective communications to a large audience. The prevalence of smart phones and social media creates obvious

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<sup>5</sup> <http://generationopportunity.org/press/3448/#axzz2uAfir2Tr>

<sup>6</sup> <http://generationopportunity.org/press/3448/#axzz2uAfir2Tr>

opportunities for election bodies to connect with their voters and provide good customer service by catering to their information consumption habits. An active approach to voter communication is essential, particularly as younger voters make up a growing majority of a country's electorate.

The election management body exists primarily to render services to the electorate, and its actions need to show it cares for this major stakeholder. Given the many and wide-ranging tasks that election management bodies perform on behalf of voters, it needs to keep the electorate informed about its activities and programs, and seek its views on the electoral authority's processes and performance.

Means of maintaining contact with the electorate could include<sup>7</sup>:

- publicizing call centers, mail addresses, or email addresses where the electorate can pose questions to the election management body or make comments about its operations;
- advertising for public comment or submissions on the election management body's plans or performance;
- interactive radio or television programming where election commission members or senior staff face questions from voters; and
- regular informational meetings where the election management body consults the electorate on issues of electoral reform and the election authority's performance

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<sup>7</sup> [www.aceproject.org](http://www.aceproject.org)

Many of these channels can be developed at a local level, with data from the electorate being synthesized and discussed with other major stakeholders, such as political parties and the government, at a national level. Concrete recommendations on electoral reform and improving the performance of election management bodies could be formulated from these voter inputs for submission to policy and law-making authorities.

Apart from these direct channels, the electoral authority can use the media to inform and educate the electorate about elections, and also rely on its own publicity activities – such as print and audiovisual information products, and a regularly updated website - to keep voters in touch with its activities. The existence of professional units within the election management body to deal with media relations and voter information assists in these efforts. Other means which an election commission can use to maintain sound voter relations include public inquiry desks at all its offices which members of the public can use to obtain information and lodge complaints. The electoral authority could also set up suggestions or assessment boxes at various strategic places – such as shopping areas or transport hubs - where members of the public can deposit their opinions on the commission's performance.

It is important that the election management body respond quickly and accurately to all questions and comments received from the public. A delayed response, or no response, conveys a public image of an inefficient organization not interested in serving

Regarding one's personal election experience, voter satisfaction with the process is a key to their ongoing participation. Whether or not the de-personalization of the voting experience through internet or smart phone voting ultimately proves to be the

future of voting, the element of customer-centrism must be considered an important and vital part of election management now and tomorrow. A code of conduct for election officials at all levels, introduced and reinforced through training, is another potentially effective means of instilling customer-centrism into election workers. Connecting with constituents, both young and old, including voters with disabilities and minority voters, treating them as valued customers during their election experience, be it even a brief period of contact and interaction, will serve not only the voters' needs but the greater needs of a sustainable, participatory election process as well, and make great strides in bolstering the confidence in the election result and the overall election process. Perhaps as election administrators the best we can hope for is to remain anonymous civil servants and silent custodians of democratic elections, letting the electoral constituents – first and foremost the voters - have the loudest voices in the expression of participatory democracy.

Thank you for your time and attention!