The Technical Evolution of Oregon's Alternate Format Ballot Platforms

"Most places require the voter to go to the ballot. But in Oregon, the ballot comes to the voter." -- Secretary of State Bill Bradbury, 2007.

Abstract

This is the abstract of a presentation to be given at the EAC/NIST Accessible Voting Technology Research Workshop to be held April 1-2, 2013 in Washington, DC. The purpose of the proposed discussion and demonstration is to describe and show the five year evolution of the accessible platforms used by Oregon's Alternate Format Ballot, from the specially configured PC's and peripheral devices in 2008 to the off-the-shelf consumer-focused tablets in use today.

There are many reasons for this evolution and the authors feel we are at the tip of a revolution in "remote voting", whether for a voter with a disability or a UOCAVA voter.

The fact is, "remote voting" takes place anytime a voter is able to mark a ballot at their leisure and in privacy at a location of their own choosing. It gives those individuals who are unable to get to a polling place due to time, geography or physical constraints access to a ballot.

In Oregon, Vote-By-Mail has provided voters with a low-tech but very real version of "remote voting" since 1998. But, as good a job as Vote by Mail does at providing privacy and convenience to the majority of voters, it still left many voters dependent on others to help them mark their ballot.

In 2007, the Oregon Secretary of State contracted with the Five Cedars Group, Inc. (then known as OakTree Digital) to develop and implement an accessible HTML-based ballot called the Alternate Format Ballot (AFB). Since then, two Large Format Ballots (paper, 8.5" x 14" and 11" x 17", 18pt font) have been added to assist voters with low vision, including macular degeneration.

The development of these AFB formats was in response to the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) requirement to provide equal access to the voting process for people with disabilities that ensures privacy and independence.

In Oregon, this meant that the ballot needed to be delivered to voters in an accessible format that works within the existing Vote-by-Mail process.

The AFB has now been used successfully in statewide elections and General Elections since the May 2008 Primary, almost five years ago.

Oregon's AFBs were designed to enable individuals across a wide range of disabilities, including those with vision impairment, who, for whatever reason, are unable to mark a standard ballot, to vote in much the same manner as all Oregon voters: independently and privately at home, or another place of the voters' choosing.

> *"The AFB has given me the ability to do something I've never been able to do in my 18 years of being a registered voter -- it has provided me the opportunity to mark my ballot privately and independently."* -- Angel C. Hale, Oregon Commission for the Blind

A registered voter can receive an AFB (HTML or the large print version) by contacting their local election office and requesting it. New registrants can indicate the need for an alternate ballot format when registering through the Oregon Centralized Voter Registration (OCVR) system.

The original "Accessible Computer Systems" (ACS) used for the AFBs were PC's and laptops purchased specifically for the counties' to assist voters in the county election offices. The hardware vendor carefully configured each system with Microsoft's XP Home Edition (SP2) OS to run the HTML AFBs with multiple input devices. The screen reader software was specially configured and programmed to work closely with the ballot's HTML and JavaScript to recognize where the voter was in the ballot and give the appropriate verbal/text responses.

Today, with the advent of standardized HTML platforms, the AFB is basically hardware agnostic. It's being used by voters with disabilities at home and overseas voters, or on military bases. They can use their own equipment and with their screen readers of choice (JAWS, ZoomText, Window Eyes, etc.).

With the plethora of new digital tablets (Windows 8, Android or IOS driven), with far superior native accessibility software, the AFB platform choices have exploded. Not only do we have opportunities to use low cost hardware but potential voters probably already have these devices in their hands. Apple, Samsung, Microsoft, and even Google and Amazon, have tablets and smart phones that could all be used as the accessible ballot marking devices-of-choice in the future.

The new tablet hardware may be exciting but there are five software and peripheral device support criteria for a system to be able to act as an accessible ballot platform. These will be discussed in detail, as time allows.

The success of Oregon's Alternate Format Ballot process has won over voters, those with a disabilities and UOCAVA, and even skeptical county elections staff. Moving from dedicated hardware platforms, that were difficult to set up and use, to common, off-the-shelf devices that are in general use has expanded the opportunities for greater acceptance of the AFB.

(The contents of this paper represents the opinions of Five Cedars Group, Inc. and do not reflect Oregon public policy or the views of the Secretary of State's office).

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