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Faulty system for democracy

By **Alexander S. Belenky and Richard C. Larson**/ As You Were Saying...
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All Americans use service systems. We use some of them on a daily, weekly and monthly basis, some others not that often. To stay in business, private sector services compete for the customers while public sector services must meet certain local and federal standards.

As customers, we require attention, we don't tolerate long service lines and we expect reimbursements or at least apologies for service mistakes. Receipts accompany every service transaction to avoid uncertainties and to make it available for auditing. America's services industry is one of the best in the world. Advanced technologies, building on the frontiers of services science and first class management, allow service companies to operate worldwide.

In contrast, as voters, we accept hodgepodge performance in voting systems. Nobody competes for our satisfaction, and no voting standards exist. The last two presidential elections and the 2006 midterms showed that in every state, we were, in fact, on our own in exercising our right to vote. Widely reported long voter lines caused many would-be voters to abstain. And new voting machines seemed to lose some votes in 2006, with only about 40 percent of all eligible voters casting ballots. Reliable services for counting and auditing votes cast are still unavailable.

We have a systems problem, not just a machine problem.

A voting precinct is in some ways like a fast-food restaurant, a bank lobby or a retail store. A given number of "servers" provide service to "customers." In a precinct, the servers are of two types: support personnel and voting machines, and the customers are the voters. There is, however, a principle difference: In federal elections we come to precincts only once in two years. But while this shouldn't depreciate the value of voting services, the existing treatment of them is unacceptable.

Effective operation of everyday service systems requires deep scientific and engineering expertise - in forecasting demand, in training service personnel, in estimating service times, in creating contingency plans etc. A large services firm does not allow local managers to devise their own unique strategies to deploy scarce resources. While some local strategies may turn out fine, many would fail - causing customer dissatisfaction and lost market share.

To stay competitive, the national firm contracts reputable systems designers to develop resource management systems, steered by "services science" thinking. These systems provide guidance for locals to collect data and fill in the details. Usually, the contractors assume legal responsibilities and supervise their systems long after they are installed nationwide.

In contrast, local election authorities on their own choose both voting machines and their deployment to match patterns of voter arrivals. Should voting machines malfunction, the often accepted "contingency plan" is extended voting hours for weary queued voters. Mismatches between supply and demand for servers aren't anybody's fault. Manufacturers of voting machines rather than designers of voting systems compete for selling their products. As a result, nobody competes for the quality of servicing the voters.

Services science can help design reliable voting systems based on common principles though adjustable to local conditions. Specialist contractors should compete, offering such adjustable turnkey systems for managing and monitoring voting services, incorporating contingency measures for atypical situations.

The resulting resource management system would determine the types of voting machines - guaranteeing effective security and auditing of the votes cast - and the numbers of the machines and personnel in each precinct so that voter waits would not exceed some maximum.

Solving a systems problem requires a systems approach. Services science - so successfully used in the private and public sector - can make a difference in designing and operating voting systems, disallowing voting services to put our democracy at risk.



Vote needed: Boston shopowner George Kariotis gives good advice, and all the better if the process is simplified. (Staff file photo)

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