Ranking the voting systems: Project studies how well states run their elections

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Charles Stewart III is the Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Political Science at MIT. Credit: ILAVENIL SUBBIAH

Do you live in a state that runs its elections particularly well, or poorly? And how would you know? Until recently, says Charles Stewart III, the Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Political Science at MIT,

questions on election performance have inhabited a "data desert"—so while it has been apparent at least since the disputed 2000 presidential contest that election administration in the United States could be improved, hard numbers on the subject have been hard to come by. Until now, that is, thanks to a new assessment system: the Elections Performance Index, released today by the Election Initiatives project of the Pew Charitable Trusts, a Washington-based research group. The index, which evaluates states in 17 different categories using data from the 2008 and 2010 elections, derives in large part from Stewart's research and organizing efforts; he has worked closely with Pew throughout its development. MIT News spoke with Stewart about the project.

Q. What is the aim of this project?

A. Running elections in the United States is a data desert when it comes to assessing how well things go. People judge elections more based on anecdotes or breathless worries. We need hard numbers so people can focus on concrete ideas about election reform. There's a lot of data sitting around, not being used in a systematic way.

We have 17 different metrics of election performance. They range from things like the percentage of a state's absentee ballots that were rejected to the average wait time to vote in recent presidential elections. We found that you can usually peg specific policy choices to these numbers.

We have a measure of the accuracy of voting machines, called the residual vote rate, which was pioneered by the Caltech-MIT Voting Technology Project, and we can demonstrate that it's better to have optical scanners compared to other voting machines—and that there are better and worse ways of implementing these technologies. There are some states that have really low residual vote rates, meaning one-half of one percent of votes lost; there are some that are still over 3 percent, like

West Virginia.

States with election-day registration have more people registered to vote … [and] people in those states are less likely to say that they had registration problems that kept them from voting. Jurisdictions that have electronic voting machines tend to have longer lines than those with optical scanners. In most of these cases, we have ideas about what states might do to improve voting.

The first release of the Elections Performance Index is a baseline that allows us to follow how elections are improving into the future. For instance, as data from the 2012 election becomes available, we will be able to conclude whether we are on an upward trajectory in how we conduct elections across the country.

Q. So what were some of the notable overall conclusions you reached about which states are performing best or worst?

A. There are a number of states like Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, which tend to have performance numbers that are in the top group. And there are other states, notably South Carolina, California and New York, which tend to be in the bottom ranks. It's easier to link together the top-performing states, because there does appear to be a tier of upper Midwestern states that have long traditions of progressive, good-government politics, and have long applied best practices to public administration.

The other thing that ties a lot of the good-performing states together is the presence of election-day registration. If you're in a state that has election-day registration, it suggests a willingness of state and local government to be cooperative and to view elections as a cooperative

effort on the part of election officials and citizens. States that resist it are likely to view what happens on Election Day not as good-willed citizens trying to have their voice heard in government, but rather a problem of the wrong people trying to vote. It's an attitude about elections.

Some of the states at the bottom of the list have historically had low voter-registration rates, and have probably underfunded the administration of elections over the years. California is an odd case, because we often think of California as being in the forefront of administrative reforms. But California has a lot of policies that leave what I call a lot of paper on the table at the end of Election Day; they have a lot of provisional ballots and they reject a lot of absentee ballots. It means if there ever were a close election in California, you would have a lot of ballots—absentee, provisional—that could be challenged and could easily call into question the outcome of the election.

Q. To what extent can you find variations within a state? And what if elections officials just don't have the incentive to improve voting procedures for partisan reasons? Won't that likely remain an ongoing issue?

A. The website and index will reflect the performance of states without much reference to particular geographic areas. But it is part, we hope, of a larger effort to drill down deeper into these numbers. The dataset that we amassed to support the index has a lot of measures that are at the county level. So although the index itself will report, say, the percentage of absentee ballots that were rejected by a state, the dataset underlying that reports the percentage of absentee ballots rejected in every county in most states.

A big goal of the program is to make the index the start of a

conversation, not the end of a conversation. We are really trying to jumpstart the scientific analysis of election administration. Even a decade after the Florida fiasco [the 2000 presidential election recount], there still is a limited number of people who are serious about studying the improvement of elections in a systematic way. It is still dominated by advocates and ideology.

We hope this raises knowledge about election reform. Unless you have a really terrible disaster on Election Day, the running of elections is not normally something that draws the attention of most citizens. By raising the profile of election administration, we hope to add more citizens into the mix, to voice their expectations that elections can be run well. And even in places doing OK, people can ask: How could we do better on measures where we're not doing well? Maybe the good-performing states can teach something to the poor-performing states, and maybe citizens can start demanding that of their public officials. Certainly people do that in education, public health, and other areas of public policy, where there are usually at least some people in the state capitol demanding change.

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