Clean and Open Elections Task Force

Meeting Notes, March 27, 2018

I. Participation
In attendance
Joe Beckmann, Nate Clauser, Vishal Doshi, Ariel Horowitz, Andrew Levine, Sara Oaklander, Josh Rosmarin, Nick Salerno

Not in attendance
Annie Connor, J.T. Scott, Eric Weisman

II. Disclosure Laws – Ariel Horowitz
Notes will capture themes and general conversation – Content is in a separate handout

Overall
- Refer to handout for restrictions and requirements

Issues
- State law only applies to entities within Massachusetts
    - Is this true? It's unclear how the notion of "jurisdiction" is applied. If you do business in a jurisdiction, aren't you subject to their laws?
    - Google and Facebook in the past not providing this information, but pressed to do it by city election officials in Seattle
    - Requiring ad targeting information from providers as well as expense information could be very interesting
- Could a nefarious actor avoid disclosure, especially through online advertising?
- Disclosure spending around ballot questions – state provides guidance on this. Should be same rules on candidates for ballot questions.
- Blockchain based balloting – lots of noise right now but many disadvantages
- Could put forward a recommendation that city expands its requirements for disclosure with a stricter definition and statute – but keep downstream implications in mind

What is it that we actually want to know from disclosure?
- That money is being used honestly
- In kind contributions
- Results could be better publicized

What might our recommendations address?
1. Make existing data more readily and easily accessible in more digestible formats
    - focusing perhaps on key performance indicators
    - publicize the availability of the data

2. Identify gaps between OCPF requirements and our standards and pass stricter regulations than the state – requiring more disclosure (transparency) relative to more platforms (e.g., Facebook) and applicable inside and outside of MA
    -   Somerville could hold itself more accountable to existing laws and even more stringent standards
    -   We could require advertising platforms to track and report

Questions
    -   What is the benefit to transparency of asking online advertisers to disclose their targeting methods?
        o   When targeted at people who are grouped by certain traits/qualities, like in the Cambridge Analytica case, this could be grounds for disclosure
        o   Similar to asking for campaign mailing lists
    -   Is current system already operating as it needs to?
    -   What's effect of disclosure on something like Facebook advertising where cheap, well targeted ads could flip a close election?

III. Alternative Voting Schemes – Vishal Doshi
Notes will capture themes and general conversation – Content is in a separate handout

Arguments for ranked choice
    -   Could reduce polarization by eliminating primaries – need to appeal more to the center
    -   Fairness argument – candidates selected have broader support
    -   Frees people to vote for candidates, like third party, because their second choice still matters
        o   Can lead to more representation and hearing of minority voices
        o   Eliminates spoiler effect
    -   Having a single election to eliminate primaries → cost savings

Questions around ranked choice voting
    -   How it operates in systems with both at large and district councils
    -   Are there enough contested elections that ranked choice matters?
    -   Could it encourage more candidacy?
    -   What effect does it have on two party system?
    -   Is there evidence that ranked choice increases candidate participation?

IV.   Further Discussion re Candidates/Campaigns

What recommendations might we be considering to encourage participation by candidates?

1. Increase training for potential candidates
    -   publicize available trainings
    -   provide financial support for participation
2. Increase civic education in general
    -   Support expanded/enhanced communication about what's going on in the city
    -   Expand (and change?) coverage of city business – new approaches, new platforms

Are we interested in further professionalizing the roles of Aldermen and School Committee members?

Barriers to address: cost to run, time required, pay scale

1. Recommend increases in salary for aldermen (and school committee members?) *(Note: we acknowledged we've not researched the role of SC members and challenges to candidacy)*
2. Recommend addition of paid staff

V.   Timeline

-   Nick, Sara, and Andrew will talk more about jurisdictional questions, particularly around consolidation
-   Next meeting is April 12th, which will be about the particular issue of election consolidation
-   April 24th: Begin to put together recommendations in a larger session