

**Initial Report of the
Election Modernization Committee
September 19, 2019**

The Election Modernization Committee held its first meeting at 7:30pm on August 29th, 2019 in the Lyons Meeting Room at Town Hall. The committee unanimously appointed James O'Connor as Chair and Greg Dennis as Clerk.

The committee discussed a range of potential improvements to voting and elections in Arlington and drafted the following rough prioritization of topics to explore in greater depth at future meetings. The topics listed below are areas for future *study*; none have been recommended for implementation at this stage.

1. Early voting policies and practices

Since 2016, Massachusetts has required cities and towns to offer early voting times for the biennial general election in November, but leaves some discretion left to local election officials as to the days and hours of those times. The committee will investigate whether the discretionary early voting times could be further codified and whether early voting could be offered for town elections, too.

2. Ranked Choice Voting and alternative voting methods

Many municipalities in Massachusetts and around the country are implementing Ranked Choice Voting and other alternative voting methods to bring more voices and choices to their voters. The committee will study which method is best-suited for Arlington town elections.

3. Structure of Town Meeting races

When there are vacancies in Town Meeting seats, there can be confusion due to the simultaneous election of members with different term lengths. Some towns address this by consolidating the race for all open Town Meeting seats in a precinct, regardless of term length, into a single consolidated race, where the longest terms are won by the highest vote-getters. We will study the possibility of doing the same in Arlington.

4. Designated election administrator

The responsibilities for election administration are currently distributed across multiple town bodies, each individually responsible and capable, but nevertheless no single individual is in charge of administering the election. The committee will study whether electoral functions should be consolidated under a designated election administrator.

5. Public engagement in elections

Local elections routinely experience very low voter turnout. The committee will explore new ways to boost voter registration and to inform voters of upcoming elections, particularly among low-turnout voting populations.

6. Status of voting equipment and deployment

The committee is aware that our outdated optical scan voting machines are being replaced with a newer model. There are two models of machine authorized for purchase in Massachusetts, and we would like to learn which of the two was procured and how that decision was made. We will also seek a timetable for the completion of the purchase, staff training, and final deployment of the new equipment.

7. Online voting

Online voting is uncommon in the US, in part because computer security experts believe that votes cast over the internet would be vulnerable to fraud or hacking. Federal law provides for an exception for overseas and military voters, who are allowed to email their ballot to their local town clerk, but in doing so sacrifice the privacy of their ballot. The committee will study whether an online voting solution might be appropriate for military and overseas voting or for low-stakes voting situations, such as non-binding advisory ballot questions.

8. Polling locations and accessibility

Seemingly every election cycle is met with some complaints about polling locations. The criticism usually centers on the distance to the polling place from the precinct, the accessibility of the location by foot or public transit, and the availability of parking at the location. The committee will solicit complaints and suggestions about existing polling places and explore potential improvements to their location and accessibility.

James M. O'Connor