

**October 27, 2004**

**MAKING VOTES COUNT**

## **The Three-Hour Poll Tax**

**I**n Florida, which has begun early voting, elderly people have waited for as long as three hours, sometimes in the blazing sun, to cast ballots. There is every reason to believe that lines will be longer on Nov. 2. Lines that make voters wait for hours are a national disgrace, particularly for presidential elections. They discourage participation, particularly by the poor and infirm.

The day after the 2000 election, the newspapers were filled with horror stories about lines at polling places. A voter in Lehigh County, Pa., waited in line from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Parts of Virginia also had three-hour lines. In St. Louis, voters who had been wrongly removed from the rolls waited for up to three hours at the election board to confirm that they were registered, and lined up again at the polls.

Election officials invariably attribute delays to "unexpectedly large" turnout. But the 2000 turnout was not especially large. The real problem is that there are often too few machines and poll workers. In Florida, where there is every reason to expect an extraordinary turnout next week, The St. Petersburg Times reports that three counties in its area - Pinellas, Hillsborough and Pasco - will have far fewer machines than in 2000. The counties are betting that it will take each person less time to vote on their new electronic voting machines, but it may well take more.

There is anecdotal evidence that waiting times vary considerably by geography. Urban polling places seem to be the most crowded, and poor jurisdictions may have less money available to buy voting machines. In *Bush v. Gore*, the Supreme Court suggested that election systems could not vary significantly from county to county. By this logic, substantial variations in waiting times should be unconstitutional.

There is an urgent need for a nationwide study of voting times. National standards should be developed for acceptable waiting times, and for how many voting machines a precinct should have for a given number of voters. There are few things in modern life that force Americans to wait in line for three hours. Voting should not be one of them.