

November 4, 2004**EDITORIAL**

Lessons of the Ballot Box

When the last of the Ohio returns came in, the 2004 election ended up being outside the so-called margin of litigation. But an uncontested election is not necessarily a well-run one. In Ohio, and around the country, this year's election exhibited flaws that will continue to detract from our democracy until they are addressed. One of the first issues that both parties should commit to is working to produce a first-class elections system.

There were significant problems with the Ohio voting, even though the Kerry campaign determined that a recount would not change the outcome. Incredibly, four years after the 2000 election mess, more than 70 percent of Ohioans still cast their vote on punch-card machines, whose hanging, pregnant and dimpled chads routinely disenfranchise as many as 2 percent, or more, of the voters who use them. Many of the more than 130,000 Ohioans who were forced to vote on provisional ballots were registered voters who should have been on the rolls. The system did not melt down, but there were plenty of problems that showed its vulnerability.

Partisan poll workers challenged voters in Ohio and Florida, relying on laws that in future elections could be used to disenfranchise large numbers of voters and to slow voting in some precincts to a crawl. Voter identification requirements were arbitrarily, and often incorrectly, enforced. Minority voters in some states were the targets of dirty tricks, including leaflets telling newly registered voters that they could not vote in this year's election.

One of the most troubling problems with the voting was the extraordinary lines many voters faced at the polls. In some areas, the wait to vote was four hours or more, and in many cases the longest lines were in minority neighborhoods. Many people literally cannot afford to wait that long to vote, and there were numerous reports of voters leaving the lines without voting. The nation should commit itself to providing enough voting machines and election workers to make waiting times reasonable.

The controversy over provisional ballots, one of the few reforms to come out of the 2000 election, showed that the rules governing them need improvement. Many states quietly adopted laws requiring these provisional ballots to be thrown out if they are cast in the wrong precinct. But election officials are often unable to direct voters to the right precinct on Election Day. A valid ballot should count wherever it is filed. There were also too many reports of absentee ballots duly applied for, including by military

personnel, that did not arrive in time.

Nearly one-third of voters nationwide cast their ballots on electronic voting machines that do not produce a paper trail. As the public has learned more about the vulnerability of electronic voting to errors and intentional tampering, there has been a fast-growing movement to require voter-verified paper trails. Until these are provided, many voters will not have confidence in these machines.

The good news about the election system this week is that more than 114 million Americans, including many young people and new voters, believed in it enough to vote. There is great work to be done, however, to give them the system they deserve.

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