

Give voters better information

by Cecilia Martinez

Voters in Florida recently flocked to the polls in record numbers to participate in a crucial primary. While the Supreme Court did not have to declare a winner this time around, the polling was by no means flawless. Voters reported problems such as uncertainty over their correct polling location and confusion over which party's primary they were allowed to participate in.

Instances were also cited where poll workers misinformed voters about the Democratic primary that was being held that day and gave them the wrong ballots as a result.

Such difficulties were mirrored on Super Tuesday and in other states that have held primaries so far this year. These instances underscore the fact that little progress has been made in improving election administration since the high-profile failures in the 2000 election exposed the profound weaknesses in the electoral process.

Too much is at stake in this election for the results to be marred by disputes and irregularities. We must start by putting aside the partisanship and evolve from a myopic focus on vote tampering and fraud toward a new focus on providing voters with easy access to the basic information they need in order to make it to the voting booth.

The recent problems in Florida were reported to the 866-MYVOTE1 voter alert line, a national voter-assistance hotline that aided hundreds of thousands of voters in the 2004 and 2006 elections and will be active for the 2008 election. The hotline was created in response to the 2000 election fiasco as a means to better inform and empower voters by providing information on poll locations, allowing voters to record messages reporting problems at the polls and connecting them to local election administrators. The overwhelming response to the hotline and data collected by it demonstrate that we must revise our priorities to achieve real election reform.

Sixty-five percent of the calls to the hotline in 2006 were from callers seeking to ascertain their polling location. Twenty percent of calls were from citizens complaining about registration difficulties, which accounted for the largest percentage of complaints to the hotline. Registration-related grievances from callers included questions as to whether they were registered, in what jurisdiction they were registered, and how to register or transfer their registration.

With the enormous interest the election is currently generating, we cannot afford to squander this opportunity to better engage the citizenry in the process. Failure to conduct an orderly and fair vote will only serve to reinforce the lack of faith that many voters have in the process and in their government and will discourage further involvement. We must act now to harness innovations in telecommunications and information technology to develop systems that efficiently assist voters and enhance the voting process. This will include providing information directly to voters as well as to poll workers who often are not

well-informed or properly trained to assist voters.

After the 2000 election debacle, the federal government responded by enacting the Help America Vote Act and establishing the Election Assistance Commission. The purpose of these actions was to assist states in modernizing their voting equipment and in improving their election administration procedures and training in order to prevent the voting irregularities that incited much outrage and diminished voter confidence in the electoral process. While the initial effort was marked by bipartisan cooperation, that mood did not last long. Presently, politicians in Washington and in state capitals across the country are divided along party lines over issues such as electronic machine paper trails and voter ID requirements. The result is that little progress has been made in addressing the serious problems plaguing the voting process.

The problems that have been identified by the voters themselves as the primary barriers to their participation have been largely ignored. Thousands of voters across the country have been effectively disenfranchised because they were misinformed or could not get the information they needed. Ensuring that ballots are counted is important, of course, but the lack of a fundamental information infrastructure that facilitates easy access to simple information such as poll location and registration status is preventing voters from getting the opportunity to cast a vote in the first place.

In this era of remarkable technological advancements, there is no excuse for the inability of voters to get quick answers to simple questions so that they can participate in choosing their leaders. Providing better information to voters in an easily accessible manner must be a major focus of efforts to increase voter participation and improve election administration. Elected leaders and election administrators on the state and federal level must work together to strengthen the election process before November.

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