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MAKING VOTES COUNT

About Those Election Results

There have been a flood of reports, rumors and theories over the last 12 days about problems with the presidential election. The blogosphere, in particular, has been full of questions: Why did electronic voting machines in Ohio add nearly 4,000 phantom votes for President Bush, and why did machines in Florida mysteriously start to count backward? Why did the official vote totals for Ohio's largest county seem to suggest that there were more votes cast than registered voters? Why did election officials in yet another part of Ohio lock down the building where votes were being counted, turning away the press and public?

Defenders of the system have been quick to dismiss questions like these as the work of "conspiracy theorists," but that misses the point. Until our election system is improved - with better mechanics and greater transparency - we cannot expect voters to have full confidence in the announced results.

Electronic voting proved to be, as critics warned, a problem. There is no evidence of vote theft or errors on a large scale. But this country should have elections in which the public has no reason to worry whether every vote was counted properly, and we're still not there. In Franklin County, Ohio, one precinct reported nearly 4,000 votes for President Bush, although the precinct had fewer than 800 voters. In Broward County, Florida election officials noticed that when the absentee ballots were being tabulated, the vote totals began to go down instead of up. Voters in several states reported that when they selected John Kerry, it turned into a vote for President Bush.

These problems were all detected and fixed, but there is no way of knowing how many other machine malfunctions did not come to light, since most machines do not have a reliable way of double-checking for errors. When a precinct mistakenly adds nearly 4,000 votes to a candidate's total, it is likely to be noticed, but smaller inaccuracies may not be. There is also no way to be sure that the nightmare scenario of electronic voting critics did not occur: votes surreptitiously shifted from one candidate to another inside the machines, by secret software.

It's important to make it clear that there is no evidence such a thing happened, but there will be concern and conspiracy theories until all software used in elections is made public. Voters who use electronic machines are entitled to a voter-verified paper trail, which Nevadans got this year, so they can be sure their votes were accurately recorded.

The outrageous decision by Warren County, Ohio, to lock down the building where votes were being counted is an extreme example of another serious problem with the elections: a lack of transparency. In some states, reporters are barred from polling places. The wild rumors about Cuyahoga County, Ohio, where the official results appeared to include an extra 90,000 votes, were a result of its bizarrely complicated method of posting election results, which is different in even- and odd-numbered years. The nation needs to develop an election culture in which officials in every part of the country automatically keep things as open - and as simple - as humanly possible.

Besides election equipment that is easy to check for error, the strongest defense against conspiracy theorists is election officials who act with openness and integrity. Here, too, the current system is at

fault. Ohio and Florida, two of the key states in the election, have highly partisan secretaries of state who favored the Republicans all year in their rulings. If we want the voters to trust the umpires, we need umpires who don't take sides.