

Election Reform in Florida: A Step in the Right Direction

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After a year of intensive work updating their voting machines, Florida's county election supervisors once again find themselves on the front pages of newspapers across the country with another "catastrophic failure" on their hands. Little, it seems, has changed.

Take a closer look: there is clear evidence of improvement. Getting new voting equipment on-line was a major thrust of the efforts in Florida. Compared with the performance of equipment in the past, the new technologies of casting and counting ballots look like clear improvements.

We have calculated the rate of residual votes (under and over votes) for the largest counties in Florida for the 2002 Democratic Gubernatorial Primary and for the last three Gubernatorial General Elections in Florida, in 1998, 1994, and 1990. These counties are Brevard, Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach, and Pinellas.

The residual vote rate, it appears, has been substantially reduced as a result of the election reform efforts of the past year. Across these large counties, 1.8 percent of Democratic voters recorded no vote for governor. In past elections, the average has been 3.1 percent. The 2002 primary shows a 40 percent improvement. The largest apparent improvements came in Brevard and Duval counties, which switched from Punch Cards to Scanners, but all of these counties show substantial improvements in their capacity to record and count votes.

The true lesson of the most recent Florida election is that the efforts to improve voting technology in Florida were not in vain. This lesson is being repeated throughout the country, in those states and localities that have taken the lead in upgrading their election equipment. Unfortunately, efforts to upgrade equipment in other states have lagged far behind those in Florida. The fact that the congressional election reform bill is currently stalled in a House-Senate conference committee hasn't helped matters any.

Current events in Florida also illustrate how better technology is just a first step in improving the functioning of democracy. Most of the problems reported by journalists covering the 2002 Primary Elections in Florida did not concern equipment malfunctions, but problems encountered preparing for Election Day. The most egregious reports of late-opening polls, for instance, were due to inadequate training and recruitment of poll workers. Helping counties recruit, train and retain poll workers should be Florida's next step, and a high priority throughout the country. The report of the National Commission on Federal Election Reform (the Ford-Carter Commission) provides a blue print for expanding the ranks of people who serve our country every election day.

As the nation enters the peak electoral season, citizens will be looking to Florida and other states that experienced problems in 2000 for evidence about whether it is possible to make every vote count on Election Day. One unfortunate feature of the current scrutiny of Florida is that unless

we are careful, we can lose sight of what solutions have worked thus far and what remains to be fixed. The technological solutions are easy to identify and implement, and Florida has shown that new equipment does make a difference. Improving the quality of election administration, from the polling place to the county court house, is more complicated and difficult to implement. But as events in Florida this past week have so aptly demonstrated, having spent two years scrutinizing the *machines* that count ballots, we now need to turn even more attention to the people who purchase and operate the machines.

Residual Vote Rates
for Selected Florida Counties

	2002 D-Primary	2002 Voting Equip.	Average	1998 General	1994 General	1990 General
Brevard	1.0%	Scanner	4.2%	2.6%	4.5%	5.4%
Broward	2.0	DRE	2.6	2.7	1.9	3.3
Dade	n/a	DRE	3.2	4.0	2.7	3.2
Duval	2.2	Scanner	3.4	3.1	2.5	4.5
Hillsborough	1.6	DRE	2.3	2.7	1.9	n/a
Palm Beach	2.3	DRE	3.1	3.7	2.3	3.3
Pinellas	n/a	DRE	2.2	2.3	1.9	2.3
Total	1.8		3.1			