

Guest Editorial

America's 2000 Presidential Election

by Herbert E. Alexander



As the drama of the 2000 American Presidential Election unfolded, we asked many questions about the nature of the problems, whether they were isolated or widespread, systemic or technological, managerial or operational. Perhaps what happened in the Florida election and its aftermath implicates all these factors. Yet whatever occurred in Florida could have happened in numerous other states with similar balloting

systems. To seek a perfect election is an ideal, but in reality, flaws can be expected in any system. Rarely does a discrepancy of a few hundred votes determine the outcome as in the case of the 2000 Presidential Election in Florida.

On November 7, 2000, more than 100 million voters participated in the closest popular vote for president since 1960. It was only the fourth time in American history when a candidate, who lost the numerical vote but won the Electoral College vote, was elected president, as had occurred in 1824, 1876, and 1888. The Electoral College is a uniquely American phenomenon applicable only to presidential (and vice-presidential) elections.

No country elects so many public officials as does the U.S.; in excess of 500,000 are elected over a four-year period. The American system also provides for elections for nomination of candidates, both in primaries among several candidates and in run-offs between the two finalists to establish a clear majority – making American campaigns among the most expensive per capita.

The United States Constitution provides that “the times, places and manner” of holding elections be prescribed by each state. In turn, the states have largely delegated to the counties responsibility for determining voting methods and locations. Thus, in the American federal system, it is mainly counties – more than 3,000 of them supervising more than 200,000 polling precincts – that choose and pay for voting methods, based on state law. Accordingly, there are diverse balloting systems among the states and even within a single state; there were five different voting systems among Florida’s sixty-seven counties.

Moreover, the length of the ballots in most states, comprised of both federal and non-federal candidates, complicates the counting of votes. Human frailty, among both voters and

election officials, makes a perfect voting system unlikely. Critical analysis is called for in order to obviate such inherent human imperfections in the system. Essentially, what is needed are systems that are trustworthy; that define what constitutes a vote; underscore the importance of every vote; provide accurate and reliable vote counts, and if necessary, recounts; nonetheless, systems that recognize the values of diversity and federalism.

Numerous groups have established official and unofficial task forces and commissions to study the problems and to make recommendations for improvements, among them several universities and computer companies. Congress may enact legislation to establish a national commission and may appropriate funds to help states and counties to upgrade their systems.

Under consideration are standardized or nationalized voting (at least for federal elections) with respect to:

- uniform poll-closing hours in a nation with three time-zones (by permitting early voting in Alaska and Hawaii)
- universal recount procedures
- uniform voter-registration that may entail use of social-security numbers for identification
- establishment of statewide voter-registration databases
- weekend or holiday voting
- voting external to the polling place, which includes voting by mail or internet, by military or absentee voting, or by those out of the country



Clearly, voter-education programs are an essential element to improve voting systems, increase turnout, and contribute to acceptance of election outcomes. Election workers also need education and re-education, if improved voting standards are to be achieved.

The 2000 Presidential Election elicited suspense, suspicion, and speculation about fairness and accuracy. But the transition of power from one party to the other was uneventful, and acceptance of the eventual outcome was widespread, despite some lingering mistrust and cynicism about whether a true count had been made.

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