

*On the Inside Looking Out*

## An Election Administrator's Perspective

by Conny B. McCormack

In the aftermath of the November 2000 Presidential Election, one of the closest in U.S. history, significant misleading information has surfaced concerning election administration and ballot-counting processes in this country. The goal of this article is to detail and then dispel some of the most common election myths that have arisen.

### **MYTH #1: All ballots are counted on election night.**

**REALITY:** In the weeks following the November 7, 2000 Election, six million additional votes were counted for Bush and Gore before the certification of official results by the 50 states.

Election administrators must balance two fundamentally conflicting desires for instantaneous and final election results that the public has on election night. In actuality, it is possible to attain both speed and accuracy – but at different stages of the process. Speed is achieved on election night with unofficial election results. However, accuracy must await certification of complete, official results. Although timelines differ from state to state, certification occurs within several days to several weeks following the election in order to tabulate additional eligible ballots and correct errors.

The volume of ballots remaining to be counted after election night has increased tremendously in many states primarily due to easing of restrictions permitting many more voters to cast ballots by mail. Verification processes differ from state to state, but checking the signature is typically required for each absentee or mail ballot before it is opened, sorted, and tabulated. In jurisdictions with large volumes of mail ballots, to finish these processes requires several days or weeks after election night.

In addition, some states have adopted extensive, provisional, voting procedures to segregate ballots cast by voters whose eligibility to vote cannot be determined at the polling locations and, therefore, require post-election research and resolution by the elections office. Also, many states have laws mandating extensive, vote-auditing procedures before certification of their totals. These include a variety of automatic recount-procedures and other double-checks, such as comparison of the number of ballots cast to the number of voters who signed-in at each precinct.

Rather than decry the delay, the public, including candidates and media, needs to recognize that these important post-election procedures enhance the integrity of the ballot-counting process.

### **MYTH #2: The pervasive use of antiquated voting equipment is the problem.**

**REALITY:** Although technology upgrades are definitely needed, election administrators know that equipment is only one of the many facets to the problem of elections.

Indeed, all vote-counting equipment works perfectly in a laboratory setting. To offer feasible solutions, reform proposals must address problems and errors associated with 1) people (voters, poll workers, election administrators and staff, vendor personnel, candidates, and the media); 2) procedures (vague

and conflicting laws and inconsistent policies); and 3) technology (outdated computer systems, voting equipment, and tabulation systems).

### **MYTH #3: The United States should adopt one uniform vote-counting system.**

**REALITY:** One size does not fit all. Even within one state, for example, California, it makes no sense to assume an appropriate system for Alpine County with 771 registered voters would be the same as the technology needed for Los Angeles County to operate under legal requirements to produce ballots in seven languages for 4,102,182 registered voters. Diversity of electoral equipment from multiple vendors strengthens the electoral system and fosters innovation. A single source of tabulation equipment and software might even be a target for fraudulent manipulation.

### **MYTH #4: It is within the sole authority of election administrators to ensure proper conduct of elections.**

**REALITY:** Multiple agency involvement is a major factor outside the control of election administrators that results in compounding the instances for error in elections. This problem is especially acute with regard to the role of states' Motor Vehicle Departments in voter registration or of the U.S. Postal Service in absentee-ballot delivery. Election administrators are frustrated by being given the responsibility for all electoral errors without the authority to manage key components of the process.

### **MYTH #5: Between 2% and 7% percent of ballots are discarded by election equipment.**

**REALITY:** Over-votes and under-votes have completely distinct ballot characteristics. An over-vote occurs when a voter casts more votes in a contest than the allowable one vote per candidate. Over-votes are due to voter confusion or lack of knowledge about voting instructions. Conversely, an under-vote occurs when no vote is recorded for any candidate in a given contest. When examining under-voted ballots, the vast majority is found clearly to be the result of voters skipping that contest altogether for whatever reason, because they contain no mark whatsoever. Only infrequently does an under-vote occur due to a voter incompletely marking a ballot or punching a partial hole on a punch-card ballot. Therefore, subsuming these two categories under one, as well as interpreting ballots containing over-votes and under-votes as "discarded ballots," are inappropriate and misleading.

In conclusion, as the U.S. Congress and State Legislatures grapple with numerous proposals for electoral reform in search of their illusive goal of conducting "a perfect election," they need to craft solutions that address the complexity of problems election administrators confront.

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