

The Election Center

national association of election and voter

registration officials

12543 Westella, Suite 100 Houston, TX 77077 281-293-0101 FAX: 281-293-0453
or 293-8739

WEBSITE: www.electioncenter.org E-MAIL: services@electioncenter.org

Standard Times Op-Ed by R. Doug Lewis, Executive Director, The Election Center, Houston, TX

06-2005

The election process in America works exceedingly well for voters all over America and yet there are groups and partisan activists who continue to blame the process and election administrators alleging that, at best, the process is broken or, at worst, that elections are being stolen.

Is the process perfect? No. Just the sheer numbers involved lead us to a point where there are just too many variables to assure perfection: there are 165 million registered voters (122 million of whom went to the polls in 2004) in roughly 7,000 election jurisdictions in America, in some 200,000 polling places using more than 800,000 voting machines, served by 1.8 million poll workers. More voters than at any other election in the last 40 years showed up on election day in 2004. Any event, any business with that kind of overwhelming numbers would be challenged if more customers than had been seen in 40 years showed up on the doorstep.

Democracy cannot survive long without fair, free and honest elections. Thanks to our nation's devoted election officials, the election process is functioning as designed. Perfect, No. But accurate? Fair? Yes. Are there concerns and can we make improvements? Again, Yes.

On June 7, The Election Center released publicly the National Task Force Report on Election Reform for Election 2004. The real experts, the nation's state and local election officials, produced a set of recommendations dealing not only with current challenges but concerns for both the immediate and long-term future. The officials did not tell the nation to stick with the *status quo*, but rather called for action by state legislatures which can improve the process for all voters.

The Election Center is a national nonpartisan nonprofit organization that works with government employees who do voter registration and election administration. The Center's members are those dedicated people who are unseen by most voters and yet they make it possible for all of us to vote.

Recognized by the report are needed changes and modernization in order to ensure the continued and improved health of America's elections. Some of the recommendations are intended for policy makers within each state and are technical refinements to assure

that voters rights are protected or enhanced by procedural changes. The recommendations can be read in the report at www.electioncenter.org but not covered here.

Some groups raised questions about whether elections can be manipulated by voting equipment and have focused their efforts on attempting to force new electronic voting devices to produce a paper ballot. Americans need to be assured that voting equipment cannot easily be manipulated and it is virtually impossible for someone to change the outcome of an election and *get away with it*. The recommendations encourage appropriate federal agencies to develop guidelines for a voter to verify their vote, some of which involve paper but many of which do not.

The examination of past elections, and the trials of current elections, leads election officials towards ideas for tomorrow to ensure that democracy works and prevails. Redesigning elections, investigating new and different possibilities outside the ordinary is the next step in election reform. Most Americans don't know that we haven't always voted the way we do today. There have been huge changes in the methods of voting within our nation's history but many generations have become accustomed to the precinct voting we do today.

Another evolution of voting appears to be on the horizon and we can go to fewer but better known public locations which will reduce our needs for massive numbers of facilities which are accessible to disabled and elderly voters, reduce our need for massive numbers of poll workers on Election Day, and better serve voters by establishing Vote Centers throughout the county. We may even be able to conduct elections for up to five days in the not so distant future if we just rethink how and why we do some of the things we do.

Voters clearly have proven to us, through the use of early in-person voting, that they like the convenience of voting in locations other than the polling site on Election Day so Vote Centers are another logical evolutionary step. And if we institute multiple day voting (as we currently do with early voting), we can eliminate many of the reasons for complaints about long lines, or provisional voting, or not being able to get to the polls on Election Day -- or even the excuses for why people don't vote.

Elections in America are in good hands. Changes are likely. And voters will continue to be well served by an evolving process.