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ELECTION 2004

State voting worries persist

BY LESLEY CLARK AND PETER WALLSTEN
lclark@herald.com

During this month's Democratic presidential primary in Florida, an elections staffer in Polk County mistakenly gave five voters extra ballots -- giving them the chance to vote twice.

In Bay County in the Panhandle, a technical error gave Richard Gephardt more votes than presumptive nominee John Kerry -- even though Gephardt had dropped out six weeks earlier.

In Miami-Dade, a Herald reporter registered as having no party affiliation was urged by a precinct staffer to vote in the Democratic primary after the poll worker mistakenly activated the wrong ballot on the touch-screen voting machine.

The incidents were minor, but nothing is trivial in the state that decided the presidency by just 537 votes in 2000. After a four-year remake of the voting system designed to shed the state's bumbling image, the March 9 voting revealed lingering evidence that Florida could once again find itself the center of unwanted attention.

In the Polk case, for example, officials admit they were lucky that their inability to retrieve several illegally cast votes did not affect the outcome as it might in a tight race.

"We were very thankful there was a 20,000-vote difference," said Lori Edwards, the county's elections supervisor. ``Had there been a closer margin we would have been very nervous."

The primary voting also revealed a vulnerability that has received scant attention: the critical role of poll workers who receive little training and nominal pay for what can be a 16-hour day.

TOUGH PRESS

The glitches led to a scorching editorial in The New York Times, *Florida as the next Florida*, questioning the state's reforms and predicting great confusion again in 2004 if the problems are not addressed.

The controversy has once again thrust Florida's chief elections official into the national fray to defend the state's voting integrity -- only this time it's the prim, glitz-free Glenda Hood rather than the headline-grabbing Katherine Harris.

OBSTACLES

"I'm trying hard to overcome the ghosts of the past," Hood said in an interview in which she defended Florida's reforms.

"We are under the microscope whenever there's any flaw," Hood said. ``No system is perfect, but I can tell you the flaws that occurred [in the primary] fell totally in that category of human error."

Hood, the former Republican mayor of Orlando, said she is concerned not about the new touch-screen technology, but about the need to find more and better workers to staff polling precincts on Election Day.

Some counties are trying to create partnerships with businesses to allow employees to take a day off and work the polls and find other creative ways to bring younger, tech-savvy workers to help voters.

With elections taking place on Tuesdays and polls open for 12 hours beginning at 7 a.m., officials admit it's hard to broaden the pool of poll workers beyond seniors and others who don't work.

"It's an ongoing mission of this office to recruit and train poll workers," said Constance Kaplan, Miami-Dade's elections supervisor.

But many critics say this month's primary and other recent elections showed that even the best-trained poll workers can't overcome flawed technology.

In January, for instance, state Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff of Fort Lauderdale won a special election by just 12 votes. Although state law required a manual recount with such a slim margin, local officials were at a loss to explain why 134 ballots were cast without votes for any candidate -- rendering any recount futile without a true paper record.

TOUCH SCREENS

During this month's primary, some voters across the state complained that the touch-screen machines failed to give them access to every race in which they were entitled to vote.

Critics say that many problems could be averted with a simple solution for the touch-screen machines: a printed version of the computerized ballot, which is required by new laws in California and Nevada, giving voters the chance to confirm their selections and elections officials a hard copy to consult if there is a close or contested count.

Florida's touch-screen systems can produce an image of every ballot cast over the course of a day, but critics say those images are not reviewed by the voters themselves and could easily be wrong or, worse, fraudulent.

A bill introduced by U.S. Sen. Bob Graham calls for printers to be added in time for the November elections, while U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler of Boca Raton has filed a federal lawsuit demanding paper trails for touch-screen systems.

The Bay County glitch, in which officials knew immediately that Gephardt did not really win the most votes and were able to correct the problem, offered further evidence that a paper trail could be critical.

Elections officials say they are not necessarily opposed to printers -- but fear that rushing their use would only further complicate matters in what will already be a high-pressure election for Florida.

But the official position of the supervisor's state association is that paper receipts are redundant.

"The [current] equipment can provide the authorities with the ability to demonstrate the votes actually cast if a recount or some similar issue presented itself post-election," according to a position paper prepared by the association. ``The issue of creating a paper trail for each voter is unnecessary except to eliminate the paranoia of the critics of these systems."