Electronic Voting

Document reveals Columbus, Ohio voters waited hours as election officials held back machines

By Bob Fitrakis
Online Journal Guest Writer

November 17, 2004—One telling piece of evidence was entered into the record at the Saturday, November 13, public hearing on election irregularities and voter suppression held by nonpartisan voter rights organizations. Cliff Arnebeck, a Common Cause attorney, introduced into the record the Franklin County Board of Elections spreadsheet detailing the allocation of e-voting computer machines for the 2004 election. The Board of Elections' own document records that, while voters waited in lines ranging from 2-7 hours at polling places, 68 electronic voting machines remained in storage and were never used on Election Day.

The Board of Elections document details that there are 2,886 "Total Machines" in Franklin County. Twenty of them are "In Vans for Breakdowns." The county record acknowledges 2,886 were available on Election Day, November 2, and that 2,798 of their machines were "placed by close of polls." The difference between the machines "available" and those "placed" is 68. The nonpartisan Election Protection Coalition provided legal advisors and observed 58 polling places in primarily African American and poor neighborhoods in Franklin County.

An analysis of the Franklin County Board of Elections' allocation of machines reveals a consistent pattern of providing fewer machines to the Democratic city of Columbus, with its Democratic mayor and uniformly Democratic city council, despite increased voter registration in the city. The result was an obvious disparity in machine allocations compared to the primarily Republican, white, affluent suburbs.

Franklin County had traditionally used a formula of one machine per 100 voters, with machine usage allowable up to 125 votes per machine. The county's rationale is as follows: if it takes each voter five minutes to vote, 12 people an hour, 120 people in ten hours and the remaining three hours taken up moving people in and out of the voting machines.

Once a machine is recording 200 voters per machine, 100 percent over optimum use, the system completely breaks down. This causes long waits in long lines and potential voters leaving before casting their ballots, due to age, disability, work and family responsibilities.

A preliminary analysis by the Free Press shows six suburban polling places with 100 votes a machine or less, and only one in the city of Columbus meeting or falling under the guideline.

The legendary affluent Republican enclave of Upper Arlington has 34 precincts. No voting machines in this area cast more than 200 votes per machine. Only one, ward 6F, was over 190 votes at 194 on one machine. By contrast, 39 Columbus city polling machines had more than 200 votes per machine and 42 were over 190 votes per machine. This means 17 percent of Columbus' machines were operating at 90-100 percent over optimum capacity while in Upper Arlington the figure was 3 percent.

In the Democratic stronghold of Columbus, 139 of the 472 precincts had at least one and up to five fewer machine than in the 2000 presidential election. Two of Upper Arlington's 34 precincts lost at least one machine. In the 2004 presidential election, 29 percent of Columbus' precincts, despite a massive increase

in voter registration and turnout, had fewer machines than in 2000. In Upper Arlington, 6 percent had fewer machines in 2004 One of those precincts had a 25 percent decline in voter registration and the other had a 1 percent increase. Compare that to Columbus ward 1B, where voter registration went up 27 percent, but two machines were taken away in the 2004 election. Or look at 23B where voter registration went up 22 percent and they lost two machines since the 2000 election, causing an average of 207 votes to be cast on each of the remaining machines. In the year 2000, only 97 votes were cast per machine in the precinct. Thus, in four years, the ward went from optimum usage to system failure.

Jeff Graessle, Franklin County Election Operations Division Manager, told the Citizen's Alliance for Secure Elections (CASE) Ohio voting rights activists that Franklin County does not use a simple 100 votes per machine guideline. Rather, they allocated their machines in the 2004 election based on a new criteria determined by *active* registered voters. Hence, an affluent area like Upper Arlington which has shown a consistent pattern of active voters is rewarded with more machines and fewer losses. A less affluent area of Columbus where voters miss voting at more elections and may only come out in a hotly contested election, like Bush-Kerry, are punished with fewer machines.

Of course, there's a direct correlation between affluence and votes for Bush and below medium income areas and votes for Kerry. Franklin County, Ohio's formula served to disenfranchise disproportionately poor, minority and Democratic voters under the guise of rewarding the "likely" voter or active registered voters.

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