

Electronic Voting

Something amiss in Ohio

By Kevin Quirk

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COLUMBUS, Ohio, November 5, 2004—As soon as the theft of the 2000 election in Florida was over, I vowed that come 2004 I would go to the next epicenter. So there I was on Election Day standing in the rain in Columbus, just outside the Christian academy that served as the Precinct 42 A-B polling location, wearing my white wind-breaker with “Voting Rights Team” printed in black letters on the back.

For 11 hours at that site and earlier at another Columbus polling place, I did my part. I was there to help ensure that no voter would be subject to Florida style intimidation, lies, manipulation, misinformation, or anything else that might prevent them from casting the votes that could lead to a Kerry victory in Ohio and in the nation. Thousands of other volunteers who had stormed in from all over the country were positioned across Columbus, Cleveland, Warren, Youngstown, Dayton, and other potential hot spots either to get people to the polls or to make sure that once they got there they would feel, in Kerry campaign lingo, that someone “had their back.”

We all did our part. But in the end, the big picture that I’m looking at tells me that we were, most likely, just one person short. I’ll explain why in a moment. First, some bright spots.

Election Eve: I’m at a union hall with hundreds of attorneys and other concerned people like me to be trained in the most relevant voting laws and procedures. During introductions, women and men of all ages explain how they felt called to come from California, New York, or Washington for their first campaign ever, or maybe the first one since McGovern-Nixon. Ohio State grads from the West and South say they have come back to defend their home turf. A retired veterinarian and his wife from Richmond, Virginia, just down the road from me in Charlottesville, have rendezvoused with 11 family members to volunteer here together. A training leader tells us she left her job at MTV. We are energized, prepared, and full of hope.

Election Day, 6:30 a.m.: The second man in line at the Precinct 53F polling site across the street from a Budweiser plant tells me, “I haven’t been this excited since I voted for Truman in ’48!” I watch at least a dozen disabled voters climb out of vans to wheel or limp to the entrance with looks of deep commitment and purpose. But then the Republican challenger stationed inside the polling location escorts an elections official outside to move back the flags designating the 100-foot point I could not cross. Seeing how my new location would leave me less able to reach approaching voters, I call headquarters. I’m being redeployed.

10:30 a.m.: At the Christian academy, an ironic locale for a largely minority precinct, I team up for the rest of the day and night with Tony, a tax attorney from Maryland, and Michael, an African-American Vietnam War vet from Columbus. For hours we help hundreds of arriving voters sort out questions. Is this the right place? Do I need to show my ID inside? What do I do if I recently moved? How long is the wait? What do I need to know about using those voting machines for the first time?

For many, we are the source of answers. For others, we are a presence, a strong, comforting presence. We’re there to head off hanky-panky, and to let the other guys know that we are watching. Dozens of African-Americans thank us for being there. Many proudly announce they are voting for the first time. With great pain, I have to explain to one woman that since she registered less than 30 days ago, she really

would not be allowed to vote. But my spirits rebound when I confirm to a troubled man of Middle Eastern descent that he is properly registered and his assigned polling place is just around the corner.

Other voters coming out tip us off about problems inside, though as we sort them out we understand they are minor—nothing like the scary stuff we feared and prepared for. The only real voting deterrent is the wait, an average of 1 ½ to 2 hours at our site and, from what we hear, 3 hours or longer at other Ohio polling places. Those hearing about this from the media are imagining hundreds of people waiting in long lines extending for city blocks. Wrong. Many people wait more than an hour in a short line of maybe 30 voters. Why? Not enough voting machines.

I learn that Columbus has about the same number of machines they used in the 2003 mayoral election, where the turnout of course was much, much lower. And this time, the presidential ballot is jammed in with a long slate of local elections and about a dozen complicated referendums and initiatives. Best guess for average time in the booth: 5 to 7 minutes. You can bet that this arrangement is not by coincidence. It didn't stop those who came out from waiting two hours. "It's the least I can do to get that man out," many tell us when we thank them for their patience. But we're wondering about those who heard the average wait and are deciding, often out of need, that they can't come out.

8:30 p.m.: A woman approaches us and explains she is waiting for her mother, one of the elections officials inside, to finish processing the last of the voters who made it in line by the 7:30 p.m. cutoff. She tells us she works in Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell's elections department. Like us, she's been hearing all the exit polls that point to a pretty overwhelming Kerry victory in Ohio and the nation. "Now you're going to find out what it feels like," she says. "Anything that goes wrong in the country, you'll be blamed for it."

I'm not celebrating yet. I know about her boss Blackwell and all the ways he already tried to suppress the Kerry vote with bizarre rulings like denying new registrations that didn't arrive on 80-pound card stock. I also know all about Wally O'Dell, who happens to live in Ohio and who happens to be the chief of Diebold, the company that happens to own the voting machines being used in much of Ohio. Months ago O'Dell happened to publicly declare that he would deliver the state for his friend Bush.

"The night is young," I tell my team members.

So the counting begins and as the media "officially" reports it, gosh darn it those exit polls just turn out to be "wrong" again just like they were "wrong" in Florida in 2000. Right. The former reporter in me knows that one of two things is true. The exit polls really were wrong, even though that almost never happens. Or, in some secluded room, the likes of Blackwell and O'Dell and/or their henchmen were making a few "adjustments" to the numbers in those machines that no one else happens to have any right or authority to examine or check.

The corporate media, of course, will not even acknowledge this second possible truth. But for people like me who passionately stood guard all over the state to stop a possible theft, the second truth lingers in our noses like the smell of a spilled coffee cup from 14 hours ago. If only the Democrats had fought harder for the right to a paper trail for every voting machine in Ohio and in every other state where possible "adjustments" might have been going on. If only they had fought for the right to at least have an observer in the Ohio room where the votes that decided our country's future were being plucked from those touch screen machines.

That's where we didn't have that one person, say a Jimmy Carter type, who quite possibly could have made all the difference. That's the place where we were one person short. In the end, it's very possible that this is all that mattered.

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