

GOT ENOUGH MACHINES & BALLOTS?

Every jurisdiction is well aware of the expected heavy turnout in November, and responses to inquiries to state and local officials recognize that. Almost every jurisdiction plans to have enough of everything for every registered voter (including last minute additions) – and then a little extra. Despite such assurances, there are some danger signals, and here are a few thoughts that might help avoid a meltdown.

- Having enough machines and ballots for every registered voter would do the job IF voters were spread out equally among every precinct, not to mention equally among all the hours that polls are open. The problem is that overflow only has to happen at a few precincts for there to be a disaster. If 95 % of the levies in New Orleans had held during Katrina, the City would still have had to be evacuated, and while floods of new voters at a few precincts may not produce Katrina-like results, it will surely mean that there will be long lines and many voters who go home before casting their ballots. So the key inquiry for every jurisdiction should be to try to identify past problem precincts and current precincts in which registrations are increasing at well above average rates, and target your attention on them. Unfortunately, most data is not focused at the precinct level, but that does not mean that state and local officials cannot find it – if they make that a priority.
- Many jurisdictions are using paper ballots, counted by optical scanners. Assuming that everyone prints more than enough ballots for each locality with different races, that is not the end of the possible problems. (Hopefully the press will not react as some segments did in one Southwest state in the primary when they accused officials of wasting money and helping their friends by ordering too many paper ballots.) Most voters are used to marking their ballot in private, which means that not having enough voting booths may create the bottleneck. But getting more booths may be expensive and take up space needed for other purposes, and so many jurisdictions are opting for tables with portable privacy screens that are much less expensive and can be folded up until needed. One county in Ohio has gone to a second back up, even cheaper and smaller – clipboards, for those who are willing to suffer a little inconvenience and possible loss of privacy in exchange for getting through the process much quicker.
- Most polling places will have machines of some kind, and breakdowns are inevitable. Some problems require real techies to fix, but having one savvy poll worker at each location – perhaps a teenage volunteer -- should help solve some routine jams etc. And for those who are concerned about costs, savings from not having “too many” support staff seems like the class penny-wise, pound foolish approach.