

Policy in Practice



Vote Counts More Accurate—but Still Not Perfect

Perhaps nothing demonstrates more clearly how much better states and counties have gotten at counting votes than a look at how other entities do it.

Republican presidential caucuses in 2012 were plagued with problems. Several states were embarrassed by snafus following their caucuses, which are run by political parties rather than by public officials.

In Iowa, an 8-vote election-night win for Romney was later converted into a 34-vote victory for Rick Santorum, with party officials admitting that they didn't, in fact, know the actual number. (The state party chair resigned.) Counting of caucus votes was slow enough in Nevada to raise doubts during the delay, while in Maine, the GOP decided to declare Romney the statewide winner even before some counties had held their caucuses. "It's been stunning to watch," said Cathy Cox, a former Georgia secretary of state. "Caucus voting looks like the Wild West of voting."

Election experts agree that vote counting has generally gotten quicker and more accurate since presidential election results in Florida were disputed all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2000. After that controversy, the federal government devoted billions of dollars to help states modernize their voting machinery, leading to widespread adoption of electronic, touch-screen voting.

But not only has the money from the 2002 Help America Vote Act run out, but the machines it helped buy are nearing the end of their useful life, according to a 2014 report by a presidential commission on voting, which concluded that the nation faces an "impending crisis in voting technology." The commission recommended that localities invest in tablets so that people can vote on machines similar to what they use every day and governments can make use of the devices between elections. Few places are ready to pony up the millions of dollars required, however.

Voting in the United States is a highly decentralized process. Every state has its own rules, which are then generally implemented separately by individual counties. State and county election officials continue to suffer embarrassing moments, as when New York City found nearly 200,000 uncounted votes a month after the general election in 2010, an oversight Mayor Michael Bloomberg called "a royal screw-up." New York elections since then have also been marked by long lines and legal challenges, with the city moving back to 1950s-style lever machines for its 2013 mayoral election. New York is not alone in having a hard time producing fast, accurate results. In 2014, Washington, D.C., was unable to extract the results from five electronic voting machines, delaying the results of a primary election in which the incumbent mayor was defeated. Despite concerns about electronic voting that were raised from the start, such screw-ups are generally caused by human error.

Problems caused by the improper reading of paper ballots are what spurred innovations in voting machines over the past decade. And concerns remain about electronic voting machines. In at least some polling places in 16 states, machines don't produce any paper trail that can be used as a backup in case of a recount or dispute. And about half the states have systems that are vulnerable to hacking, especially when it comes to military personnel voting overseas, according to a 2012 study by researchers at Rutgers Law School. That means the job of counting votes remains more complicated than it looks—as GOP caucus organizers have found. "If you can't produce pretty instantaneous results, people are going to lose confidence in the results and you're going to open up the floodgates to opportunities for fraud," says Cox, the former Georgia official.