



Another Lesson from Florida: Education is the Key to Better Elections

By Tova Andrea Wang

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In 2000, the disorder of the presidential election in Florida forced the country to realize that its voting procedures were much less reliable than anyone had imagined. Now, at long last, Congress has responded to the problem by passing significant election reform legislation.

However, as last year's mayoral election in Florida confirmed, one of the most effective ways to improve the election system is increased voter education. Yet neither of the bills the House and Senate have passed do enough to educate voters about the voting process.

In the area of voter education, Congress should look again at the bill originally co-sponsored by Senator Dodd with Representative John Conyers (D-Mich), and supported by many advocacy groups. That bill required states to mail to voters and publish a sample ballot, information on poll hours, and a notification of voter's rights. It also required a sample ballot to be posted at all polling sites.

Experience shows that this provision is likely to do more to reduce voting error rates than measures like the pledge of \$400 million to help states eliminate punch card machines that is provided in the House bill. Additional federal funding is clearly required for machines that make all polling sites fully accessible to the disabled and to language minorities. However, the key to addressing the broader problem of high voter error rates, which was emphasized by administrators appearing before the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, co-chaired by former Presidents Carter and Ford, is to do more in terms of voter education. Ironically, their belief that this was the priority in solving the problems that emerged in 2000 was shown to be on target in 2001 – in Florida.

The mayoral election in Miami was the first major election in Florida since the presidential election. As the Florida legislature passed legislation funding the elimination of punch card ballots statewide by 2002, Miamians were faced with using the old system one more time as they went to vote for mayor and other local officials.

Election officials took extra measures to avoid the embarrassment of the 2000 election. For example, in addition to regular poll workers, each polling site had a "tutor" to demonstrate how to use the punch card machine properly. Yet the November 7 election was again marred by punch card problems.

As *The Miami Herald* reported, overall Miami voters were more successful with their punch card technique in 2001 than 2000; only 2.7% of the mayoral vote was thrown out as spoiled, half of what the rate was the previous year. However, undervoting and overvoting remained pervasive in the same counties that had the biggest problems in 2000. In the five precincts where more than 9% of the votes for mayor went uncounted, all were predominantly low-income, black neighborhoods that had similar problems during the 2000 presidential election. For example, in Miami's "Little Haiti," a neighborhood where more than half of households make under \$25,000 per year, 15% of the 396 ballots cast were spoiled. Two-thirds of those were overvotes, indicating that they were unintentionally spoiled, not a purposeful "none of the above" vote.

Due to the closeness of the election, a runoff was to be held November 14. Election officials had another opportunity to do better. This time every poll worker was given a script to read to voters telling them they could not vote for more than one candidate and reminding them to check their ballots for hanging chads.

That one added measure – a measure that increased the amount of information provided to voters – made a huge difference. This time, *The Miami Herald* reported, only 1.28% of ballots were discarded because of overvoting or undervoting, citywide. Even more encouraging was that in the five precincts with the highest number of uncounted ballots in the November 7 election, where spoilage rates were between 9% and 15%, the rates plummeted to between .29% and 2.7%.

The results of the Miami election in 2001 raise the question of whether we are allocating our resources properly between technological fixes and investments in improving the human capacity of people to help cure the system. Why not try doing something that has been shown to work – sample ballots, instructions given to voters in advance of the election and improving poll worker training?

Once again, Florida elections can show us the way.

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