

FLORIDA

A familiar feeling of cynicism blanketed Florida in the weeks leading up to November 4, even though state officials had worked to ensure a smoother election than in previous cycles.

Heading into the general election, Florida election officials pushed to implement the state's new "no match, no vote" voter registration policy by checking names of voter registration applications against flawed public databases. If the voter's name or information was inconsistent, her application would be rejected. The databases that the registration lists were checked against were notoriously unreliable. This lightning rod injected a familiar anger and frustration in Floridians still simmering from 2000. Election Protection partners, led by the Brennan Center for Justice, litigated to lessen the disenfranchising impact of the law.

During the early voting period, problems at overburdened early voting sites were dramatically lessened when Governor Charlie Crist courageously issued an executive order to extend voting hours for the week before Election Day. While this solution enabled millions of Floridians to cast a ballot early, registration, polling place and voting equipment problems still cropped up across the state on Election Day.

REGISTRATION PROBLEMS

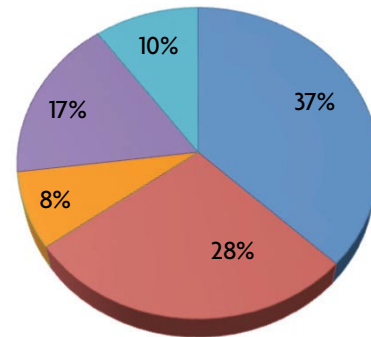
High registration rates meant that voters were either turned away at the polls because of registration issues or told to vote by provisional ballot. Other voters found they had not been added to the rolls because their registration did not match driver's license or social security information under Florida's no-match, no-vote law. Additionally, Election Protection received reports from voters who had registered through the Department of Motor Vehicles, but upon arriving at their polling place and showing ID, were told they were not registered. Overall, 37 percent of the problems Floridians reported to the Election Protection hotline involved a registration issue.

ABSENTEE BALLOTS

Administrative time and resources spent on processing registrations and comparing voter lists complicated other parts of election administration. Many voters reported never receiving their absentee ballots, despite timely requests. Some came to the polls, only to be forced to vote provisionally because records showed they had requested an absentee ballot. The residents of a hospital in Broward County who had requested absentee ballots did not receive them in time to vote. In another example, a voter named Harvey D. from Coconut Creek, FL, had suffered a

Types of Problems

- Registration
- Polling Place
- Voting Equipment
- Absentee
- Other (intimidation, ID, accessibility, etc)



There were more than 1,100 reports that required EP expertise. These cases were largely registration issues that resulted from the state's "no match, no vote" law and polling places that were overwhelmed by record turnout.

Turnout

2004: 7,640,319

2008: 8,390,744

"He's probably not going to get his vote in, and that's that."

— Harvey D's daughter,
Coconut Creek, FL.

Harvey is disabled and never received his absentee ballot.

stroke. Neither Harvey nor his wife, who is his primary caregiver and cannot leave him alone, were able to go to their polling place on Election Day. In anticipation, they had requested absentee ballots well ahead of time. Their ballots had still not arrived when they called the hotline on November 4, disenfranchising the couple.

POLLING PLACE PROBLEMS

Difficulties with voting machines were prevalent across the state on Election Day, and were the second biggest problem reported to the hotline. Over the course of the day, at least three dozen polling places in populous areas all across the state — Manatee, Orange, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Lee, Palm Beach, Pinellas, Duval, Volusia, Broward, Escambia, Lee, Leon and Sarasota Counties — reported significant problems with their optical scanning machines. This breakdown of optical scanners had a cascading effect of additional problems in many locations. When the scanners broke, voters were required to manually insert ballots into a safe box. When boxes filled up, poll workers begin stacking ballots in unsecured locations throughout polling places. This also contributed to long lines and general confusion.

“There’s a three and a half to four and a half hour wait to vote and I can’t find out why.”

— Mary O., Miami, FL

Even though stuffing ballots into bags struck many callers as odd, poll workers were actually following protocol. In other instances, poll workers did not properly carry out their duties. At one precinct in Tampa, two voters showed up at 6:55 pm to vote. Although anyone standing in line before 7 pm should have been allowed to cast a ballot, poll workers shut the doors before these Floridians could cast a ballot. An Election Protection volunteer on site stayed with them, calling the Supervisor of Elections to protest the premature poll closing. The two voters were ultimately allowed in to cast their votes.

LONG LINES

As was the case all over the country, the excitement over the election had prompted unprecedented registration and turnout in Florida. During the early voting window, there were initial reports of Floridians waiting several hours to cast an early ballot — a situation partially alleviated by Governor Crist’s extension of early voting hours. On Election Day, however, long lines persisted.

Hundreds of voters in highly populated areas waited in line well past 9 pm at the Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Miami, and several universities were affected as well. At the University of South Florida in Tampa, voter turnout was wildly underestimated. Nearly 1,900 students were registered to vote at a single polling location with only two poll workers. They could only process between 60 and 90 voters an hour. At the University of Florida, Gainesville, student voters waited past 9 pm to cast their ballots. At the University of Central Florida in Orlando, voters waited in lines upwards of five hours. The Orange County Elections Supervisor sent additional staff members to monitor the situation.