Making Every Vote Count

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In waging his contest of the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore's mantra is Make Every Vote Count (except the votes of servicemen). But Gore's pious platitude should be subject to qualifications. We want to count only one vote per person. We want to count only votes cast by citizens eligible to vote. We want to count only ballots containing votes that can be objectively read, not votes that permit election officials to speculate about or "discern" (in David Boies's word) what may have been in the voter's mind.

We do not want to count phantom votes or re-created votes. And, of course, we want a scrupulously honest count monitored by observers from both political parties.

It's long overdue for the American people and the media to focus on the inefficient voting systems used in most of the country which produce error rates in excess of automatic recount thresholds, plus so many possiblities for cheating with so little risk.

We need a system that does not permit the counting of phantom votes, i.e., (1) votes by people who have died, or moved away, or don't exist, or claim invalid addresses (such as abandoned public housing units or warehouses), (2) votes for which there is no paper trail to verify that they were legally cast, and (3) voting machine counters showing more votes than there are names of eligible voters on the registration list.

We need a system that screens out illegal voters, i.e., (1) votes by illegal aliens (apparently a commonplace practice in California), (2) votes by felons (the Miami Herald is reporting that up to 5,000 felons may have illegally voted in Florida including hundreds in Palm Beach County), (3) votes by persons who are allowed to vote without signing the voter registration application, and (4) votes by persons whose signature does not match the signature on the precinct register.

We need a system that does not permit the counting of re-created votes, i.e., (1) permitting election officials to "discern" the votes of those who failed to vote properly by trying to imagine what was going on in the voter's mind, a mystical reading of chad (like tea leaves) using constantly shifting standards, and (2) votes by the mentally incapacitated or people in nursing homes who are voted (note the passive tense of the verb) by the practice of "assistance voting" with "help" from a partisan campaign worker.

We need a system that does not permit multiple voting, i.e., (1) by persons driven from precinct to precinct to cast several or even dozens of phantom votes, and (2) by college students who vote at their college location and absentee from their homes, too.

We need a system with absolute security at all times to guard the ballots and the voting machines, with guaranteed observation by both parties of the setting and reading of the counters.

Here are the bare essentials to reform the way votes are currently cast and counted. (1) Registration at least 30 days prior to an election should be mandatory for all voters in order to check proof of residence and citizenship, and to give election clerks time to delete obsolete registrations from other jurisdictions.

Same-day registration, allowed by some states, is an open invitation to fraud. Likewise for the 1993 federal Motor Voter Act, which allows people to register to vote by mail for federal elections on forms that can be picked up at any government office.

(2) On Election Day, every voter should be required to show a picture I.D. and a voter registration card with a bar code that is scanned into a computer for verification, and should sign with a signature that matches the one given at the time of registration.

(3) Before every election, all registration lists should be systematically purged of all persons who have died, moved away or been convicted. In the computer age, there is no excuse for not doing this.

If machines are used, they should kick out a paper receipt so the voter can verify that his vote was properly recorded and so that a paper record is available for a recount. The rules for absentee voting and assistance voting should be substantially tightened.

Voting by mail should be prohibited because it destroys the secrecy of the ballot. Internet voting should never be permitted because of its susceptibility to manifold fraud.

The protections against vote fraud should be as detailed and tough as the protections every bank takes to protect our money. We should make cheating as difficult and dangerous as robbing a bank.

The whole process of self government is at stake if we can't rely on the integrity of the ballot box. What can "one man one vote" or "count every vote" possibly mean if our votes aren't honestly counted - - or if our votes are diluted by phantom or illegal votes?