

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Elections Reform: Overview and Issues

Kevin J. Coleman

Analyst in American National Government
Government and Finance Division

Eric A. Fischer

Senior Specialist in Science and Technology
Resources, Science, and Industry Division

Summary

The remarkable circumstances of the 2000 Presidential election are quite unlikely to be repeated, but Florida's role in determining the outcome may be remembered as a turning point with respect to the nation's election system. Previously obscure details of voting and vote counting have become the focus of public attention, and various state and national commissions are studying the voting process. Some states have already made plans to replace voting equipment and adopt other improvements before the 2002 election cycle, while others are considering similar changes.

As Congress considers legislation to reform the voting process, a number of issues have emerged as part of the debate: the reliability of different types of voting technologies; voting problems and irregularities in the 2000 election; problems for military and overseas voters; the electoral college; and early media projections of election results. (For a discussion of campaign finance reform issues, see CRS Issue Brief IB87020 and [<http://www.congress.gov/brbk/html/ebcaml.html>].) This report will be updated periodically to reflect new developments.

Voting Systems

After election day, the media focused attention on specific problems with punch card voting. In the months since then, however, broader questions have arisen about error rates, costs, counting standards, and other issues, as election officials consider upgrading current systems (for an in-depth discussion, see CRS Report RL30773, *Voting Technologies in the United States: Overview and Issues for Congress*). Elections in the United States are administered at the state and local level, and the federal government does not set mandatory standards for voting systems, nor does it provide funding to state and local jurisdictions for the administration of elections. While initial reactions to problems raised by the election tended to focus on technological fixes such as eliminating punchcards, a consensus appears to be emerging that the issues, and the solutions needed,

are more complex. Those solutions are likely to involve trade-offs among such diverse goals as cost, speed, accuracy, security, reduction in voter errors, and ease of use.

Currently, five different technologies are in use — paper ballots, lever machines, punchcards, marksense forms (also called optical scan), and electronic systems — and most states use more than one kind. Each has advantages and disadvantages with respect to error rates, cost, speed, recounts, accessibility to disabled persons, and other characteristics. Differences in actual performance in elections are difficult to measure accurately, however, and depend on many factors other than the technology, such as the familiarity of voters with the equipment, the complexity and design of the ballot, local standards and practices, the condition of the equipment, and the level of competence of pollworkers.

States also have different requirements for voting systems — for example, whether the full ballot must be displayed on one page, whether votes are tabulated in the precincts or at a central location, whether straight-ticket voting is provided, and how accessibility requirements are to be met. Moreover, election jurisdictions within states differ in how they configure and use the systems to meet local needs. As a result, no clear consensus has yet emerged among election administrators and other experts on what systems are best. Many believe that a diversity of systems promotes innovation and increases the difficulty of systematic fraud, and is therefore preferable. Others believe that a uniform voting system, at least within each state, can be made sufficiently secure, and would be more efficient and more likely to ensure that all voters have equal opportunity to cast their votes.

A central issue for Congress is what role the federal government should play in addressing the concerns that have been raised about voting systems, in particular with respect to funding and standards. The cost of providing fully accessible voting equipment nationwide has been estimated at \$3–5 billion, according to Doug Lewis of the Elections Center. That does not include administrative costs, voter education programs, training of pollworkers, and so forth. Some have proposed federal funding for upgrading current systems, in the form of discretionary or formula grants administered through the Federal Election Commission (FEC), the Department of Justice, or other agencies, or that the federal government should contribute to defraying the cost to local governments of holding federal elections. Others believe, in contrast, that improvements in other aspects of election administration and in voter education would be more effective than upgrading technology. Still others state that an integrated, systemic response is needed that involves all aspects of election administration. Some observers also believe that significantly higher investment in research is needed to develop better voting systems, while others state that current knowledge and levels of investment are sufficient to make any needed improvements.

One focus of current debate is whether a need exists for more standardization. In the 1980s, the FEC developed voluntary standards for computer-based voting systems (see [<http://www.fec.gov/elections.html>]). Most states have now adopted those standards. Some have suggested that mandatory, rather than voluntary, standards be adopted nationwide for existing voting technologies. Such standards might also be expanded in scope from the current set, which does not address factors such as ballot design, election management, or voter error. For example, standards might require that a voting system prevent or reduce overvotes or provide common procedures and standards for recounts.

Others have proposed that standards be broadened but remain voluntary, or that the matter be left to state and local jurisdictions.

The U.S. Constitution gives Congress the authority to regulate congressional elections (see CRS Report RL30747, *Congressional Authority to Standardize National Election Procedures*). The Voting Rights Act (see 42 USC § 1973; see CRS Report 95-896, *The Voting Rights Act of 1965, As Amended: Its History and Current Issues*) prohibits discriminatory voting practices and, along with the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act, also sets some requirements for elections with respect to accessibility (see 42 USC 1973aa-1a, 6, and ee). Congress could also attach conditions to the receipt of any funding provided for voting systems or election administration.

Other Issues in the 2000 Election

Reports of problems in Florida and elsewhere in the nation during the 2000 election raised concerns about specific failures and the overall integrity of the election system: voting problems and irregularities; problems with ballots from military and overseas voters; the electoral college; and media projections of state outcomes before polls had closed.

Voting Problems and Irregularities. Allegations of voter intimidation and voting irregularities in Florida and elsewhere prompted several investigations, including a series of hearings conducted in Florida by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights [<http://www.usccr.gov/vote2000/flstrpt1.htm>]. In March 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced a Justice Department voting rights initiative that includes increasing the number of federal monitors who oversee the voting process, hiring a new senior counsel to supervise enforcement of federal laws and recommend changes, and adding an additional eight lawyers to the voting rights staff (for more information on this initiative, see [<http://www.usdoj.gov/ag/speeches/2001/0307civilrightspressconf.htm>]).

Some are concerned that the National Voter Registration Act (42 USC 1973gg et seq.), the “Motor Voter” law, may have added ineligible voters to the registration rolls. For example, there were media reports that hundreds of felons had voted in the election, even though most states do not automatically restore voting rights for ex-offenders. There were also reports that some new motor voter registrants were unable to cast ballots on election day because their registrations could not be confirmed, even though the law provides for casting provisional ballots in such cases. And in Florida, some eligible voters reportedly were improperly purged from the voter rolls when counties checked registration lists before the election. A number of bills have been introduced to amend or repeal the National Voter Registration Act.

Military and Overseas Voters. Members of the military and U.S. citizens who live abroad are eligible to vote absentee in federal elections under the provisions of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (42 USC 1973ff-6). Controversy in Florida concerning military and overseas ballots centered on two issues — the requirement that ballots must be postmarked by election day and the deadline for counting them (10 days after the election) — neither of which is addressed in federal law. Because federal law leaves such details to the states, postmark requirements for returning ballots vary by state.

The law is administered by the Secretary of Defense through the Federal Voting Assistance Program office in the Department of Defense [<http://www.fvap.ncr.gov>]. After the election, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen directed the Defense Department Inspector General to investigate issues with military and overseas citizens' ballots and to recommend changes to the law. In Congress, a number of bills have been introduced to address problems with voting by those covered by the existing federal law (see CRS Report RS20764, *The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act: Background and Issues for the 107th Congress*).

Electoral College. For the first time since 1888, the winner of the popular vote in the election did not also win a majority of the electoral college vote. Governor Bush won 50,456,169 votes (271 electoral votes) and Vice President Gore won 50,996,116 votes (266 electoral votes), a Gore plurality of 539,947 in the popular vote [<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/results/index.president.html>]. President Bush is the fourth President to win the Presidency despite losing the popular vote, a list which includes Presidents J.Q. Adams (1824), Hayes (1876), and Harrison (1888).

Although there have been hundreds of proposals introduced in Congress during the past century and a half, electoral college controversy in the 2000 election has renewed calls for abolishing or modifying it (see CRS Report RL30804, *The Electoral College: An Overview and Analysis of Reform Proposals*; for an analysis of 107th Congress legislation, see CRS Report RL30844, *The Electoral College: Reform Proposals in the 107th Congress*).

Uniform Poll Closing. There is renewed congressional interest in uniform poll closing legislation because of early and inaccurate media projections on election night. In the 2000 election, the networks projected a Gore victory in Florida before the polls had closed in the Florida panhandle, but subsequently withdrew the projection. Furthermore, proponents of uniform poll closing argue that projections of the winner in key states may depress voter turnout on the West Coast if it appears that the election is or will be decided before polls close in the West. Several uniform poll closing bills have been introduced in the 107th Congress, and hearings were held on February 14, 2001.

Alternative Methods for Registration and Voting

As Congress, the states, and various commissions and task forces explore ideas for reforming the elections process, recommendations may include alternative methods to register and vote, some of which are currently used in some of the states. Due to the fact that the states, rather than the federal government, have administered elections since the country was founded, laws and practices vary considerably with respect to the many complex details of the voting process. Innovations in some states, which may now be considered more broadly, are universal absentee voting, early voting, same day voter registration, declaring an election day holiday, and Internet voting.

Absentee voting. Voters in many states can request an absentee ballot for specific reasons only, such as illness or travel, that would prevent the voter from casting a ballot in person on election day. But recent trends in some states, including California and Washington, allow any voter to request an absentee ballot, sometimes called "no fault" absentee voting. In Oregon, elections are conducted entirely by mail

[<http://www.sos.state.or.us/executive/policy-initiatives/vbm/execvbm.htm>]. All registered voters automatically receive their ballots through the Postal Service, without needing to make a ballot request, in contrast to absentee procedures in other states.

Early voting. In some states, voters may cast a ballot in person before election day at voting places established in a county to accommodate an early voting program. Although there are many varied approaches to early voting — where satellite voting places are located, how many days and hours are established for early voting, whether early voting is a county option or whether it is required based on population — the number of states with some type of early voting program is growing. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 13 states now have some form of early voting. [<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legman/elect/taskfc/ppsl/sld013.htm>]

Same day registration. Potential voters may register to vote in person on election day in six states: Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Election day registration accommodates those who wish to participate in an election but failed to register by the close of the registration period. In some jurisdictions, eligible voters must go to the voter registrar's office or board of elections to complete the form, while in others, they may do so at the polling place.

Election day holiday. According to the FEC, 12 states designate election day as a state holiday, although whether schools are closed and state employees are off varies state-by-state [<http://www.fec.gov/pages/faqvdayeprocedures.htm>]. An additional 20 states give state employees some time off to vote, and 26 states also provide for private sector employees to take time off for voting. Bills to make election day a federal holiday have been introduced in Congress in the past, and several are pending in the 107th Congress.

Internet voting. Internet voting was used on a very limited basis during the 2000 election cycle. The Arizona Democratic party conducted a March, 2000 primary using the Internet, and also traditional polling places. In the November election, the Department of Defense conducted a pilot program in which 350 voters who are covered by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act could request and vote an absentee ballot on the Internet. Problems with existing voting equipment and failures in the recent election have increased interest in Internet voting. At the same time, Internet voting from remote locations raises issues concerning voter identification, ballot secrecy, and access for all potential voters. As election officials consider replacing or upgrading traditional voting equipment, it is unlikely that Internet voting will be widely adopted until security and access issues are resolved (see CRS Report RS20639, *Internet Voting: Issues and Legislation*).

National and State Initiatives

Immediately after the November 2000 election, both national and state task forces and other initiatives were established to address voting issues. The National Association of Secretaries of State [<http://nass.stateofthevote.org>] adopted a February, 2001 resolution calling for updated, voluntary national standards and federal funding for voting system modernization, among other actions. The National Association of State Election Directors [<http://www.nased.org>] also adopted a resolution in February calling for increased federal

funding to develop updated and expanded standards. The National Association of Counties [<http://www.naco.org>] and the National Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Clerks [<http://www.nacrc.org>] have jointly established a National Commission on Election Standards and Reform, which is examining several aspects of election administration. The Election Center [<http://www.electioncenter.net>], an association of election and voter registration officials, has established an Elections Reform Task Force to review concerns about election systems and recommend changes. The National Conference of State Legislatures [<http://www.ncsl.org>] has established an Elections Reform Task Force to restore public confidence in state election systems and identify model practices and laws for states to consider.

Several independent national efforts are also underway. The National Commission on Federal Election Reform [<http://www.reformelections.org>], chaired by former Presidents Ford and Carter, is expected to release a report in September 2001 on ways to improve the accuracy and fairness of federal elections. The bipartisan Constitution Project [<http://www.constitutionproject.org>] has established an Election Reform Initiative to develop consensus about improvements in election administration. The California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are engaged in a joint effort [<http://www.vote.caltech.edu>] to determine how to improve the performance and reliability of voting systems.

More than a dozen states have established task forces or other efforts to examine election reform needs [http://nass.stateofthevote.org/Issues/issues_elections.html], and some have produced recommendations. At least five (Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Iowa, and Missouri) have proposed adopting a uniform statewide voting system, as well as other election reforms, and several have also proposed adopting systems that help prevent voter error. Reform legislation is pending in all 50 states, with more than 1,400 bills introduced in state legislatures this year on a wide range of election reform issues. [<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legman/elect/elections.cfm>]

Legislation

Numerous bills have been introduced in the 107th Congress to make broad-reaching changes to the electoral system or to enact more limited changes to specific aspects of the process. A number of bills would establish an election day holiday, modify the existing law for voting by military personnel and overseas citizens, or change the National Voter Registration Act. Of the proposals that would make major changes, some would establish a commission to study the voting process and make recommendations for changes. In a few cases, the commission would be a new, permanent federal agency charged with ongoing responsibilities. A second group of proposals would establish a study commission or new agency and would also provide grant money to states and local governments to purchase new voting equipment or implement voting changes. A few bills would provide grants to the states for specific activities to improve the voting process, but would not create a study commission (For further information on legislation, see CRS Report RL30855, *Election Reform Bills in the 107th Congress: A Comparison*, and CRS Report RL30773, *Voting Technologies in the United States: Overview and Issues for Congress*).