

The 2000 Election: A Wake-Up Call For Reform and Change

Report to the Governor and Members of the General Assembly

Office of Secretary of State Cathy Cox

Executive Summary

For weeks following the November 7th, 2000 election, our nation was gripped by the unfolding drama of the Florida recount. Those extraordinary events and intense media and public scrutiny of the process caused millions of Americans to wonder: Are elections in my state any more accurate? Can I be sure my vote was counted? Why is election equipment so antiquated? Would a close race in my community throw the process into chaos? Isn't there a better way to cast and count votes? What do we need to do to increase the accuracy and integrity of elections?

The Florida experience should serve as a wake-up call for election officials throughout the nation -- including Georgia. Could Florida's problems just as easily have been Georgia's problems? The answer is unquestionably yes. Like Florida, we have several different voting technologies. Like Florida, counties in Georgia have different methods of counting votes, with differing levels of accuracy. Like Florida, tens of thousands of voters cast ballots that did not register a choice in the presidential race. In fact, the percentage of ballots in Georgia that showed no presidential choice (what we call "undervotes") was actually higher here than in Florida. And in some counties, more than one in ten ballots registered undervotes.

Election officials have known for years that much of our equipment is antiquated, that sufficient investment in new technology has not been secured, and that different systems can lead to differing levels of accuracy. But, few others outside the world of elections management focused on the problem. And little, if any, political consensus existed to adopt -- and pay for -- the reforms needed to make our election systems more modern, more user-friendly and more accurate.

The Florida experience can be a catalyst for reform and change. And so we believe the time has come for a thorough accounting of Georgia's registration and election systems -- their strengths and weaknesses. That is the rationale behind this report.

To compile the report, we studied data from the November election and analyzed current statutes and procedures. Even more importantly, we sought out and reviewed the criticisms and suggestions of hundreds of interested Georgia citizens, election officials, civic groups and participants in the political process. Concerns about the accuracy of voting equipment and the integrity of election outcomes are by no means the only issues they raised. Many were frustrated by long lines at the polls, confusing procedures, broken equipment, problems with registration and a host of other issues we have compiled in this report.

We recognize there is not an easy prescription for every problem. Elections are complex events with a host of players and interests. But, we believe there are reasonable, practical and affordable solutions that can dramatically improve the performance of Georgia election systems, provide our citizens with more convenience and offer Georgians more assurance that their votes will be accurately counted.

Among our recommendations:

- **Adopt Statewide Uniform Electronic Voting Initiative**: Authorize, fund and deploy by 2004 a Statewide Uniform Electronic Voting Initiative (SUEVI) to create a single method of voting consistent in every county in the state. We believe new electronic systems offer the best option for error-free, user-friendly voting equipment.
- **Implement Early Voting**: To enhance convenience and reduce election day gridlock, implement Early Voting, joining 26 other states that already have some form of early or open absentee voting.
- **Move General Primary Date**: To address declining Primary turnout, move the General Primary from July to the third Tuesday in August, a date more convenient for Georgia families.
- **Overhaul Voter Registration System**: Upgrade the state's voter registration database from the slow, unreliable, inflexible, and expensive mainframe system to a flexible state-of-the-art server-based system.
- **Pursue Poll Worker & Poll Location Alternatives**: Seek new alternatives to assist counties in securing new poll locations and recruiting and training poll workers, both of which now are in short supply.
- **Streamline Polling Place Procedures**: Consider new procedures to streamline paperwork procedures at the polls and move voters more quickly through the voting process.
- **Consolidate Authority to Remove Deceased Voters from Rolls**: Provide the Secretary of State new authority to remove deceased voters from the rolls and assure a more accurate voter roll, responsibilities that currently lie solely with the counties.
- **Modernize Voter Information Resources**: Utilize new centralized technology solutions to offer citizens quicker, easier means to locate their precinct and verify their voter registration.
- **Reengineer "Motor Voter"**: Consider options to reengineer the voter registration process at DPS driver's license facilities to minimize errors and reduce confusion.

We hope you find the following report useful as we look for new solutions to make Georgia's registration and election processes the finest in the nation.

Nothing is more important to the health of our democratic institutions than assuring that elections are fair to all and accurate in their outcomes. There is work to be done to fully achieve those goals. We welcome your comments and suggestions as we undertake that effort together.

Note: To obtain additional copies of this report, please call the Secretary of State's office at 404-656-2881, or you can access this document on the web at www.sos.state.ga.us.