



Stateline

The Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments

Volume 10, Number 1 • January 2001

Michigan Secretary of State Candice Miller outlines her plans to proceed toward a statewide uniform voting system and her proposals for increasing voter participation. (Photo: Michigan secretary of state's office)



some people in Michigan were literally voting the same way people did in 1890. We can do better than that.”

More uniformity

Kowall wants his state to move toward a uniform way of voting, most likely the optical scanning system already used in parts of Michigan and different municipalities around the country. In Illinois, Democrat Rep. Mike Boland of East Moline plans on presenting legislation that would make optical scanning the voting process used across the state.

Both representatives believe optical scanning is the best way of combating the undercount problems seen during the recent presidential election. “I’ve heard people say, ‘Why should I vote if it’s not going to count anyway,’” Kowall adds. “That is discouraging, and in the future, we need to give people better assurances.”

Although Illinois’ undercounts were less publicized than those in Florida, there were a significant number of them. In Cook County, where residents still use punch ballot cards, more than 120,000 undercounts in the presidential race were reported. Meanwhile, the Chicago collar county of McHenry — only one of a few in the state that currently utilizes optical scanning — had a total of 12 undercounts, Boland says.

Moving toward a uniform system would be extremely costly — for the states, local municipalities or both. Boland’s plan would provide state-funded incentives to counties to upgrade or replace their machines. If the Michigan Legislature mandated uniformity in election machines, the state would be obligated by its constitution to fully pay for the new equipment.

Christopher Thomas, director of the Michigan Bureau of Elections, says start-up costs could run anywhere from \$35 million to \$70 million in his state. He also warns that state leaders should proceed cautiously and not be too quick to follow the advice of vendors eager to sell their equipment.

“I can’t really say that I believe there is a best voting system out there right now,” he adds.

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Time for a change?

Recent election causes call for better voting machines, process

by Tim Anderson

As people anxiously waited more than a month for a court decision to finally resolve the race for president, many made up their minds on at least one aspect of the historic election: they didn’t want the country to ever go through the wearisome process again.

Work at improving election systems rests in large part with states, and calls for reforms to procedures in Florida — whose voting machines and election process became fodder for political pundits and comedians alike — came instantly. But how would voting systems in this region be judged if they received similar national attention and scrutiny?

That question obviously has been on the minds of some policymakers here, as evidenced by various election reform proposals made in the Midwest during and after the wild events last November and December in Florida.

“The Florida situation was more of a nightmare than anyone would have thought possible,” says Michigan Rep. Mike Kowall, a Republican from Waterford/White Lake townships. “It certainly made us look at things more closely and try to determine ways to avoid the situation in our state. This election,

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Stateline Midwest is published monthly by the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments.

Annual subscription rate: \$60. To order, call 1-800-800-1910.

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Michigan commission given task of finding best voting system

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“There really is not one on the market that deserves that kind of recognition. They all have flaws, and none of them has all of the things I think would be best for our elections process.”

Calls to proceed with caution may be difficult for those who believe now is the best time to reform the election process. For example, the costs of upgrading equipment may never seem more palatable to people because the chaos of the presidential election is still in their minds.

“In the past, we would have been pleased to have uniformity in one county, let alone the entire state,” Thomas says. “Up until now, there hasn’t been the political will to do it.”

In addition, legal questions have arisen about whether the use of different voting machines and

dissimilar ways of counting votes within (and maybe even between) states violate the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Thomas doubts that Supreme Court justices would rule that the lack of uniformity in voting machines would be ruled unconstitutional. Still, if groups of people can prove that their votes are not being counted as well or accurately as other ballots cast, they may have a case in court.

“Improving the election system is costly, but you can’t put a price on democracy,” Boland says. “Plus, if you don’t change, you may have legal costs because of lawsuits brought from individuals and groups who believe their constitutional rights are being violated by such an antiquated system.”

Kowall adds: “With everything that has happened, I think this is a good time to get started on improving our election process, but we also need to step back and make sure we’re doing the right thing.”

Finding the right system

Republican Secretary of State Candice Miller is planning to chair a committee of Michigan senators and representatives that will be charged with determining what kind of uniform voting system the Wolverine State should implement.

“The one positive that has come out of the presidential election is the potential for some progressive reforms,” she says. “Now is the time to seize the opportunity and improve the

system. The system has been exposed. At the same time we’re mapping the human genome, we’re still using 50- or 100-year-old equipment to elect our public officials.

“We want to evaluate each of the systems we have now in Michigan and determine which one we want to use, or decide we want one that we don’t have right now. The technology probably exists to do it, but the cost has been considered prohibitive in the past.”

Like her counterpart in Michigan, Minnesota Republican Secretary of State Mary Kiffmeyer is hoping the voting system in her state improves as a result of the 2000 elections. Although none of the Minnesota

precincts uses punch card ballots, the quality of optical scanning equipment varies. Some machines immediately notify voters if their ballots have been rejected, while others do not.

The ability of voters to double-check their votes while at the polling place is essential to the success and integrity of a statewide, uniform election system, says Michigan

Sen. Chris Dingell, a Democrat from Trenton. He believes people should receive verification and a printout of their ballots at the polling site. This would “reassure individual voters that their intentions have been accurately recorded on their ballot and that their vote will be counted,” Dingell says.

No cumulative numbers are available on the extent to which various voting equipment is used around the country. The National Association of State Election Directors is currently compiling that information. The numbers, though, are sure to vary substantially from state to state.

In Michigan, of its 5,376 precincts, 3,006 use optical scanning voting, 1,443 utilize punch card systems, 693 employ some kind of lever voting machines, 137 use paper ballots and 97 operate direct recording electronic systems. Thomas believes only

Oklahoma and Louisiana have statewide uniformity in the voting machines they utilize.

Voter intent

Scenes of local officials in Florida holding up ballots to decide whether a vote should count were shown over and over during the post-election confusion. Boland was watching, and he hopes the

“This presidential election was a shock to everyone. It was a great civics lesson, and now we need to try to make some changes based on what we learned.”

Rep. Mike Boland
Illinois

Illinois General Assembly enacts a statewide standard for counting punch cards until they are eliminated altogether. He wants to bring the so-called “sunshine law” to Illinois. According to the statute, if light shines through the punched card, the vote counts.

Michigan’s standards, developed in 1978, state that a valid punch card vote is one in which the chad is completely removed or hanging by one or two corners. There are no exceptions to this rule.

After ballots are cast, the bipartisan Michigan Board of State Canvassers convenes to certify the election. No recounts are possible until after the election is certified. If recounts are requested, the Michigan Secretary of State’s

Bureau of Elections oversees the process. The Board of State Canvassers has final say on how the recount should be conducted — by hand, machine or both.

Boland would like the recount process changed in Illinois.

Currently, he says, the candidate has to pay for precincts to be checked and then take the evidence to a judge, who decides whether the recount should proceed. Boland believes a machine recount should be provided any time there is an election with a margin of seven-tenths of 1 percent or less. Where there is a margin of one-half of 1 percent or less, a hand recount should be required, he says.

“I’m pretty sure that both sides of the aisle will be interested in making significant changes,” Boland concludes.

“These problems can affect anybody, either a Republican or a Democrat. This presidential election was a shock to everyone. It was a great civics lesson, and now we need to try to make some changes based on what we learned.” 🗳️