



# Comprehensive election reform efforts stall in many states

by Jeff Greco

For a brief moment after last year's presidential election, the nation was focused on the mechanics of voting. Outraged voters heard stories of broken machines, confusing ballots, faulty exit polls and untrained workers. As the election hung in the balance, a somber parade of legislators called for reforms to relieve the nation of the possibility of another national nightmare on Election Day.

But the 2001 legislative session has come and gone, and few states have comprehensively addressed the issue. Florida, Georgia and Maryland have completely overhauled their voting machines and election laws, and several other states have taken important steps to eliminate antiquated equipment. But in the Midwest, the scene of several exceedingly close contests last November, only seven of more than 150 election-related bills have passed. Few funds have been appropriated, and even fewer have been spent.

Frustrated supporters of election reform offer no shortage of explanations, but agree that financial constraints and jurisdictional concerns are serious obstacles that few legislatures have been able to overcome. Flagging public interest in the issue has not helped either.

Indiana Rep. Kathy Richardson, who co-sponsored the only wide-ranging reform in the Midwest this year, is an elections supervisor herself and knew all too well that public interest would be key to the measure's success.

"There was a sense that we had to strike the iron while it was hot ... to get people fired up," the Noblesville Republican says, noting that her own experience taught her that "it would have to be an extraordinary time" to get money allocated for such an arcane issue. Richardson and her colleagues introduced the bill in January, just weeks after President George Bush took office, and managed to enact legislation by early May, when the issue's visibility was still strong.

Public opinion, in fact, cut both ways on the issue. Richardson says legislators "were fortunate to have the support of newspapers" but found that the voting public was already focused on other issues in what would prove to be a full and contentious legislative session. Many voters found that the 2000 election had left a bad taste in their mouths that often translated into a lack of willingness to revisit an issue that had been so heavily scrutinized in the aftermath of the presidential race.

In Wisconsin, legislators were unable to agree on broad policy goals. Republicans who focused on preventing ineligible voters from committing fraud clashed head-on with Democrats intent on opening up the process to new voters.

## County concerns

Public disengagement and partisan squabbling

were minor obstacles compared to the often-entrenched opposition of county leaders unwilling to divert resources toward new voting equipment rather than roads, schools and other necessities.

Indiana legislators who faced competing budget demands of their own hoped to entice counties to take action by offering matching funds that they could use to purchase modern voting equipment.

Richardson acknowledges that counties may still find the multimillion-dollar price tag difficult to swallow — and to date, no action has been taken — but the legislation contains enough incentives to at least re-ignite a debate that has already grown cold in many quarters.

Rep. Jonathan Weinzapfel, a Democrat from Evansville who co-sponsored the election reform bill with Richardson, says a key provision of the new law is a clause authorizing the state to speak on behalf of more than one county to purchase equipment at discount rates. "The state has certain advantages in this arrangement," he says. "It has the ability to purchase a large volume of items at a drastically reduced cost." Savings passed along to counties could put once unaffordable voting equipment within the reach of many of the 36 Indiana counties that still use punch card voting.

In other states, county leaders often opposed uniform regulations as an unnecessary intrusion into local affairs. Counties that had already replaced antiquated equipment — often at great cost — objected to subsidies for those that still used punch cards, lever machines and even paper ballots. In addition, many counties that had never experienced problems are finding the expense of new voting equipment difficult to justify — particularly when funds are tight.

## Financial constraints

Several Midwestern states conducted extensive surveys of how state election procedures might be changed. Michigan, Ohio and Iowa, among others, released comprehensive reports calling for everything from issuing state bonds for new voting equipment to increasing pay for election workers.

But hopes that such funding might be available were dashed when a slowing economy, revenue shortfalls and diminishing hopes of receiving federal matching funds made the cost of even modest reforms too high for most states to consider. Richardson says the recent tragedies in New York and Washington, D.C., further dampen the prospect of receiving federal funds, while a sputtering economy leaves at least the short-term budgetary outlook for most states uncertain at best.

Still, proponents of voting reform say there is a lot that states can do without appropriating large sums — a challenge many states have already accepted. Indiana, Kansas and South

### Varying voting methods

Different kinds of election equipment are used around the country. This chart indicates the percentage of counties, precincts and the U.S. population that uses each kind of voting equipment. In some areas, more than one kind of system is used (mixed).

Type of equipment	Counties	Precincts	Population
Punch card	18.4%	33.4%	32.4%
Data vote	1.8%	4.0%	4.0%
Lever machine	15.3%	21.8%	18.2%
Paper ballots	13.1%	2.9%	1.4%
Optical scan	38.8%	24.7%	27.2%
Total electronic	8.2%	7.3%	8.9%
Mixed	4.5%	5.9%	7.9%

Source: Election Data Services Inc.

Dakota took steps this year to create and maintain a statewide voter database, reducing the possibility of fraud and streamlining the voting process on Election Day. Kansas and Ohio implemented new recount regulations designed to eliminate the kind of ambiguities that produced Florida's epic 36-day recount battle. A new Ohio law also specifies how election workers should examine, handle and record punch card votes, a critical process in a state that still uses punch cards in 70 of its 88 counties.

Elections officials also agree that voter education is another important deficiency that can be addressed with relatively few resources. Kansas Secretary of State Ron Thornburgh notes that "most technology in use today is already exceedingly accurate and secure — as long as voters follow the rules." But rules are complicated and voters are often too embarrassed to seek assistance. Richardson says that most of the confusion she has witnessed as an elections supervisor stems from voters who are simply "uncomfortable with machines used only once or twice a year." Standardized procedures across county and state lines could reduce such problems, and Richardson, Weinzapfel and other Indiana legislators are now serving on a task force that will be making recommendations to that effect. Better training for elections workers is also important; Richardson hopes that a recently authorized voting system education fund will pay dividends in future elections.

As states focus on hot-button issues, legislators face a daunting challenge to generate interest in elections reform, find new sources of funding for modern equipment and come to agreement on policy goals. And with the specter of the Florida recount fading fast and new national priorities emerging, many state legislators fear that only an elections crisis of their own could sufficiently galvanize support for needed reforms. "Too often in government," says Weinzapfel, "there is a tendency to delay action on matters like this until it is too late and the mess has already taken place." ✨