

SPECIAL INITIATIVES

Statewide Uniform Electronic Voting Initiative

The unprecedented events of the 2000 presidential election raised public awareness of a nationwide problem that was not new, but that had not previously received sufficient attention. Most equipment used to cast and count votes is antiquated. Many systems currently in use have unacceptably high error rates, and some appear to be extraordinarily prone to voter error or incomplete results computation. Error rates also vary widely from county to county, and even from precinct to precinct within counties. The advances in technology that have positively transformed so many aspects of our commercial life have not, for the most part, been applied to the business of elections. Too many voters in too many communities cannot be assured that their electoral choice will be properly computed when votes are counted.

In the 2001 session, the General Assembly recognized the need for electoral reform and passed Senate Bill 213, which put Georgia at the very forefront of national efforts to improve the management of elections. To fulfill the legislative mandate of a modern, uniform system of voting for every Georgia citizen, Governor Barnes is recommending \$54,000,000 in bonds to establish a uniform voting system in every county by November 2002 by purchasing voting machines, as well as, \$3,366,586 to provide the necessary resources for voter education and technical support.

THE 2000 ELECTION: A WAKE-UP CALL FOR REFORM

A careful analysis of the 2000 general election results reveals that, unfortunately, the existence of significant numbers of under votes discovered across the nation was true for Georgia as well. The election resulted in 93,991 Georgia ballots, or 3.5%, not registering a vote for President of the United States, a rate that compared unfavorably with the national under vote average of 1.9% and the Florida average of 2.9. In fact, the Georgia under vote rate was one of the highest in the nation. The equipment utilized for gathering votes is varied, inconsistent, and, in many cases, outdated. Consider the four systems available to Georgia voters: paper ballots in 2 counties, punch cards in 17 counties, lever machines in 73 counties, and opti-scans in 67 counties.

Media coverage of the 2000 presidential election led some to believe that the problem of inaccurate voting systems begins and ends with punch cards and “hanging” or “dimpled chads.” Georgia data, however, reveals that error rates in fact vary widely, even among counties using the same equipment. Optical scan is the most modern of the four systems, and while some optical scan counties demonstrate good accuracy rates, it is also true that some of

the highest under vote rates in the state were found in counties using optical scan equipment.

Having four different voting equipment platforms in use creates other problems as well. It is nearly impossible to conduct effective statewide voter education, to help make sure voters understand how to properly use the equipment and cast a valid ballot. Likewise, local election officials offer literally 159 different approaches to training poll managers and poll workers in how to prepare for and conduct an election.

IN PURSUIT OF ELECTION REFORM

In light of the well-documented deficiencies of the Georgia election system, Governor Barnes, the Secretary of State and legislative leaders, initiated a bi-partisan reform package in the 2001 General Assembly with the adoption of Senate Bill 213. Provisions of the legislation established the policy and the framework for Georgia to move very aggressively toward identifying and deploying essential changes in the election system. Chief among these changes was the policy directive that, subject to funding, “...the equipment used for casting and counting votes in the county, state and federal elections shall, by the July, 2004, primary election and afterwards, be the same in each county in this state and shall be provided to each county by the state”. With adoption of this provision, Georgia became the first state in the nation to set a deadline for the installation of a uniform voting system.

Senate Bill 213 also provided authorization for the state to conduct a pilot project to test and evaluate the use of electronic voting systems during the 2001 municipal elections. To oversee the pilot project, and to offer recommendations to the General Assembly and Secretary of State as to the best solution for a uniform election system, the “Twenty-first Century Voting Commission” was created. Based upon the recommendation of Governor Barnes, \$200,000 was appropriated in the FY 2001 Amended budget to support the Commission and to conduct the electronic equipment pilot project.

21ST CENTURY VOTING COMMISSION COORDINATES PILOT PROJECT

To fulfill the legislative assignment to develop recommendations for a uniform voting system by December 31, 2001, the 18 members Voting Commission began work in April on the pilot project. The first task was to select cities that would best represent the economic, geographic, demographic and political diversity of the state. Thirteen cities would combine to conduct the most extensive test of electronic voting equipment in the nation. Each municipality was teamed with one of six electronic

SPECIAL INITIATIVES

voting equipment vendors that had met both national and state certification standards, as required by state law. Through a short term lease agreement, the vendors agreed to provide sufficient certified electronic voting equipment, known as “direct record electronic” (DREs), extensive training of local election officials as well as a sufficient number of public demonstrations to promote voter understanding of the project and equipment.

During the Voting Commission meetings held in five different regions of the state, two major mandates consistently voiced by voters, election officials and Commission members were: (1) the antiquated equipment in the state must be replaced; and (2) concerted efforts to inform and involve the general public are critical for success. In light of the need and demand for voter education, Governor Barnes allocated \$65,000 from discretionary funds to provide grants of \$3,000 to \$5,000 to each pilot city for temporarily employing “voter education coordinators.” These local citizens worked with election officials and equipment vendors to devise an agenda for public demonstrations of the electronic equipment. Active registered voters in each pilot city also received a direct mailing that discussed the electronic voting pilot project and provided instructions as to how to cast a ballot on the particular devices being tested in their city.

VOTERS RESPOND POSITIVELY

Polls opened on November 6, 2001 with much attention from voters, local and state officials, visitors from out of state, and the media focused on the 13 pilot cities. The experience was flawless. Throughout the day, voters expressed a positive experience and election officials gained confidence in the system. Poll closing proved efficient as well, with all DRE systems generating final election results in all cities within 30 minutes.

Voters responded overwhelmingly positive to electronic voting “ease of use”, with 97.2% stating that the equipment was “very easy” or “easy” to use and also responded at a rate of 89.6% that they found this “review and confirmation process” helpful.

The Commission’s commitment to educate and inform voters in advance of the election also proved successful. Results of the survey indicate that nearly seven out of ten voters surveyed recalled receiving information and voters expressed a strong desire to move to DRE as the uniform voting system for the state with 94.5% expressing that they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree”.

VOTING COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the first-hand experience of conducting and witnessing elections using electronic devices, as well as weighing all components and resources brought to bear for a successful pilot project, the Twenty-first Century Voting

Commission unanimously approved the following recommendations:

- (1) The uniform system shall be a DRE voting system used for precinct voting, and if authorized by new legislation, for in-person “advance” or “early” voting;
- (2) The uniform system shall also be composed of an optical scan voting system to be used for absentee voting;
- (3) The uniform system will be operated by an election management system or software program; and
- (4) The state should seek to maximize benefits of deploying a uniform system that will translate into long-term benefits for local governments.

The need to upgrade election equipment is apparent. Public opinion survey findings showed extremely high public support for Georgia’s election reform efforts. Nearly four out of five polled approve of the uniform statewide voting initiative, and some 69 percent of respondents said they support increased state spending for modernizing election equipment.

Since the events of November 2000, Georgia is one of only three states to undertake tangible public policy changes to achieve election reform.

To fulfill the mandate of SB 213 that the voting system “...be the same in each county in this state and shall be provided by the state...” proposed plans for deployment will seek to secure a vendor capable of providing each county during the implementation period with:

- A complete election system;
- Adequate training and training resources for election officials, poll managers and poll workers to the point of instilling confidence in their ability to conduct an election independently; and
- Equipment warranty and maintenance, as well as technical support for a prescribed period.

Intergovernmental agreements between the state and counties will identify certain minimum standards as (prescribed by Senate Bill 213) for long-term technical support and adequate polling places, in addition to storage requirements. After the implementation period, counties would be responsible for maintenance of the systems, as well as for the purchase of additional or replacement election units.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT VIA “CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE IN ELECTIONS”

Recognizing the need for immediate and long term technical support, Governor Barnes recommends funding a proposal by Kennesaw State University in the amount of \$500,000 to create a “Center for Excellence in Elections”, that would serve as a technical “help desk” and election training center for local election officials. This function serves to compliment an ongoing arrangement with

SPECIAL INITIATIVES

Kennesaw, whose computer science department has for many years served as the testing and certification entity for all Georgia election systems.

VOTER EDUCATION INITIATIVES

Lessons learned in the electronic equipment pilot project make clear that a framework for coordinated voter education is critical to the success of statewide deployment. With the advent of a uniform voting system, the ability to conduct a statewide voter education program -- through a training video, "How to Vote" pamphlets, and other communication vehicles -- becomes a more cost effective initiative of the state. To create voter education materials, Governor Barnes recommends \$1,443,370.

Along a similar vein, voters and elections officials in each city praised the introduction of "voter education coordinators". In that light, the Governor recommends funding 13 positions to serve as regional voter education coordinators to provide a critical and consistent link between the state and local election officials. The Governor also recommends that one-time grants of \$4,000 to \$10,000 be provided to local governments to again help support short-term voter education coordination. For both elements of this voter education outreach initiative, the Governor recommends funding of \$1,423,216.

STATEWIDE UNIFORM VOTING BY NOVEMBER 2002

Governor Barnes concurs with the findings of the Secretary of State and the Voting Commission that the state is ready to move forward with a uniform system and is confident in the recommendations regarding electronic voting systems. Therefore, the Governor recommends funding in the amount of \$54,000,000 in bonds to purchase over 18,000 voting machines for full deployment statewide prior to November 2002.

Statewide deployment of a uniform election system within the next year offers a number of important advantages, including:

- Assures equitable treatment of all voters in every county and region by deploying the most accurate, convenient and reliable systems in all jurisdictions simultaneously.
- Minimizes voter confusion and maximizes the benefits of voter education efforts by converting all 159 county systems to the new uniform electronic platform at the same time.
- Achieves economies in deployment through regional approach for installation and training
- Builds on the recently gained experience and expertise of election officials who participated in or observed the Pilot Project.
- Assures all Georgia citizens that their government is committed to quickly addressing their concerns about the accuracy and fairness of elections.

By taking a leading role in election reform, Georgia is also setting the stage to be among the first states to participate in federal assistance. Based upon the current provisions of the most promising Congressional election reform initiatives, including legislation passed by the House of Representatives, Georgia meets all conditions for receiving matching funds, except for requirements that states offer "provisional balloting" and for standardized definitions of what constitutes a "vote", both of which will be proposed in the 2002 General Assembly. An evaluation of proposed funding formulas suggest that Georgia would be eligible to receive approximately \$50,000,000 to \$60,000,000 in federal funding for equipment replacement and voter education.

Georgia is poised to be the national model for election reform. Governor Barnes recommends that Georgia build on its strong start in modernizing election systems and that the uniform voting initiative be taken forward to full deployment.