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I. In Focus This Week

A Ballot-Less Nightmare in the District

No fuzzy math: High turnout + not enough ballots = election-day chaos

By [Dan Seligson](#)

Electionline.org

WASHINGTON, D.C.— During the past seven years as a journalist covering election reform and as an election administration analyst for both [Stateline.org](#) and [electionline.org](#), I drove around on election day looking for trouble. Which polls had long lines? Where were voters having problems casting ballots? What precincts were drawing the other reporters, campaign volunteers and poll watchers?

On Tuesday, I didn't have to go far.

It was my own polling place, a short walk from my house in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood in the northwest section of the District of Columbia. And I was the touch-screen ballot clerk.

As my precinct descended into chaos during the evening rush, and as I scrambled to activate voter cards, help people navigate the touch-screen machine and explain why the system required three separate verifications before casting the ballot, I caught myself thinking: *damn, this is the place that was always out there on election day and I always wanted to find.*

Then I thought – *I really want to get out of here.*

It was my third stint as a poll worker, which I consider not only a community service, but an essential component of my understanding of the election process.

My first was a 2006 mayoral primary. It attracted a huge turnout, as primaries usually do, since the winner among the Democrats is assured victory in this basically [one-party town](#).

I served as a precinct technician in that election, responsible for the functioning of both the optical-scan and direct-recording electronic (DRE), or touch-screen voting machine. Both are offered in the District; however, the vast majority of voters opt for the paper-based optical-scan system.

The second, a 2007 special election to fill a school board seat, had a miniscule turnout. We averaged only a few voters an hour, and fewer than 100 for the entire day.

Neither one prepared me for Tuesday's primary.

A brief summation – we ran out of ballots three times. Voters waited well over an hour during the evening rush to cast ballots on a DRE voting system without voter-verified paper trails many said they had strong objections to using. Some voters might have cast two ballots. The provisional voting system was cumbersome and confusing. The DRE audio output confused the only voter of the day who needed it. The Spanish-language ballot wasn't programmed in Spanish.

But on to the specifics:

- One of the first voters of the day, a neighbor who serves on my community's condominium board of directors, asked me why she had two ballots. "Is one for practice,"

she asked. I took one of them and apologized for the error. Then another voter asked the same question. Apparently, the first batch was sticking together, or else the paper ballot clerks just weren't noticing. Either way, I hope we followed the "one person, one vote" rule, but I wouldn't stake my life on it.

- By late morning, 500 voters, the vast majority of whom were Democrats, had cast ballots. It became clear we were about to run out. The District's Board of Elections delivered another packet.
- A Spanish-language ballot on the direct-recording electronic machine was less than half programmed. A voter who chose the Spanish language option saw the election name, "presidential preference primary" and the date in Spanish. However, all other controls on the DRE, "next," "review," "previous" and "touch here to cast ballot" were in English, causing confusion among a number of voters, including one who accused me of telling her she "made a mistake" when I told her the review button was used if she wanted to make any changes or corrections on her choices.
- The three separate verification screens – one to review the choices, the second to cast the ballot and the third which asks if voters are sure they want to cast the ballot -- confused some and annoyed just about everyone else.
- The instructions for visually-impaired voters confused the one man who used the audio system. When I listened along to see if I could offer assistance, I heard the slow-talking male voice instruct me to "touch the yellow triangle." I wondered aloud whether District officials and Sequoia technicians realized that people who can't see also can't see colors.
- Instructions on casting provisional ballots on the DRE (a necessity once we ran out of paper ballots) were exceedingly difficult to follow. The precinct captain had to call the headquarters for step-by-step instructions at least three times during the day. During that time, all of the voters in the precinct lined up to use the DRE had to wait, as the precinct's only card activator, was tied up.
- We ran out of ballots again in the mid-afternoon. This time, the city delivered another small batch, but said "this would be the last time," sounding somewhat punitive. (I guess we should have discouraged people from voting?)
- As we started to run low on ballots, a voter came over after making a mistake marking her choice. Another ballot clerk, who was growing concerned over the dwindling pile of ballots, admonished the voter for "not paying attention."
- Just before 6 p.m., at the height of the evening rush, we ran out of Democratic ballots for the last time. Voters started lining up behind the one method alternative for voting – using the DRE machine. About every third voter expressed concern that the machine would not count their vote. Comments reviews ranged from "cool" to "evil." As the touch-screen clerk, I was the gatekeeper, and when tempers started to flare, they tended to flare in my direction. At the worst of the line, voters waited approximately 90 minutes to cast a ballot – after waiting 15-20 minutes to check in.
- Throughout the day, we were short on the blue index cards (for Democrats) that are handed to ballot clerks to make sure the number of voters who check in does not exceed the number of ballots cast. We resorted to using scraps of paper. At the end of the day, when we performed our counts, the scraps of paper were either bundled together with the index cards or rewritten if we had the time to do it. If the election is audited, good luck to the examiners working their way through the scraps and ripped white paper that is supposed to represent each Democratic Party voter.

- D.C. delivered more ballots around 7:20 p.m., giving the much-preferred option of paper to Democratic voters again. The lines dissipated in about 20 more minutes, and by 8 p.m., we were ready to close on time.
- The District closes registration rolls nearly one month before elections. Voters and poll workers alike marveled at the Board of Election's miscalculation of ballot distribution. The media, the voters and poll workers all knew a competitive primary in a politically active city with an overwhelming number of Democrats would draw a huge turnout. Yet, we ran out of ballots three times, while the same happened elsewhere in the city. Whatever formula was used to allocate ballots for the primary has to be reconsidered. It was an utter failure on Tuesday.
- The District's closed primary – in which only registered party members can cast ballots in the election – left many confused and more than a few disappointed. A few Republicans said they wanted to vote for Sen. Barack Obama (D). Statehood/Green Party members said they weren't expecting the ballot that they received and independents wanted to be able to vote at all.
- While the District has no requirement for voter identification, the vast majority of voters presented their drivers' licenses or voter registration cards twice without being asked; once when checking in and again to receive their ballot.

Throughout the day there were a few bright spots.

Our precinct captain, Mary, was absolutely unflappable. As chaos raged around her, she remained competent, attentive and in control. Her steadiness anchored the rest of us as things got ugly. In the District, precinct captains have an incredible array of responsibilities, from setting up polling places to organizing registration lists, signage and ballots at the end of the day. They troubleshoot, fill in for workers eating lunch and communicate with unhappy voters. Mary handled them all.

When things were calm, the sense of community in the precinct was overwhelming.

While some voters were understandably upset at the long lines, most said they were pleased to see the high level of interest. Some first-time voters said they really enjoyed the experience – even though many said they were disappointed they wouldn't get to use paper ballots.

The results produced a clear winner in my precinct and in the rest of the city, so it seems unlikely that all of the problems we experienced will amount to much. In my experience, that's usually the case. A large margin of victory overshadows even the messiest election. But this was one of the messiest I can recall.

Foul weather, few problems mar largely successful Potomac Primary

Despite assurances by officials, some problems still persist for voters

By [M. Mindy Moretti](#)
Electionline.org

Voters in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia turned out in record numbers on Tuesday despite a late afternoon ice storm and often being confronted with long lines and no paper ballots.

Election day in Maryland started off with relatively few problems statewide, although there were [reports](#) of a small number of polling places opening late.

Karen Migdail, who lives in Bethesda, Md. was thrilled by the difference in voting in 2008 as compared to the disastrous vote in 2006.

"I love the electronic cards," Migdail said in reference to the state's DRE machines. "Unlike last election cycle when the system didn't work at my polling place, everything worked perfectly this time."

Also in Bethesda, voter Clare Winslow enjoyed breezing through her polling place in mid-afternoon and took a moment to talk about Maryland's electronic machines.

"I guess because I'm so used to computers I have faith in the actual voting machine," Winslow said. "However, I did have a slight twinge of doubt about dropping the card into the cardboard box afterwards. Somehow you go from very high tech to very low tech which is a bit weird."

In Virginia, some voters faced greater delays in the parking lot than what they did in the polling place.

"It was crazy. There was a line of cars around the block waiting to get into the parking lot to vote," said Northern Virginia voter Amanda Clark. "My voting experience, one I got to the polling place, was a total snap."

Some voters in Virginia did experience problems other than traffic though. In [Roanoke](#) polling places had to be moved because of wind storm the previous night.

For District voters, who more often than not walk to their polling places, traffic wasn't an issue, but turnout was.

Max Schulz arrived at his polling place in Northwest D.C. at 8 a.m. and found lines stretching way out the door.

"I waited about a half an hour in the freezing temps in a line that did not move, then bagged it," Schulz said later in the day. "I went back at noon and only had to wait about 5 minutes."

By late afternoon, the greatest fear of any Mid-Atlantic election official had set in...bad weather. What forecasters had initially said would be rain or possibly some sleet turned into an all-out ice storm with traffic in some parts of Virginia and Maryland being tied up for hours.

At 7 p.m., an hour before the polls were set to close, the [Maryland State Board of Elections](#) obtained a court order to keep the polls open for an additional 90 minutes. Chris Dwyer of Cheverly, Md. was thankful for the extra time even if he had to cast a provisional ballot.

"The whole way here [to his polling place] I was worried about not getting in an accident because the roads are really bad and I was also worried about not being able to vote," Dwyer said. "I'm just glad now that on my way home I'll only have one thing to worry about."

Virginia and the District of Columbia did not extend their polling hours.

After polls closed in the Potomac Primary, results were reported quickly, except in the District where a [problem](#) getting the voting-machine cartridges from the polling places to the Board of Elections slowed down the count.

CLARIFICATION: Last week's Super Tuesday wrap-up for California by Paul Gronke said that "most precincts" in Orange County had problems with at least one voting machine. That sentence

should have read that “most precincts [he] visited” had at least one machine down. After consulting his notes, Paul reports that 7 out of 8 polling places he visited in Orange County had at least one voting machine out of commission on Super Tuesday. Thanks to Hart InterCivic’s Peter Lichtenheld for flagging the error. – Doug Chapin, Director

II. Election Reform News This Week

This week, Colorado Secretary of State Mike Coffman (R) announced a [schedule to review his decision to decertify several voting systems made last December](#). The announcement comes after the passage of House Bill 1155 which gives greater flexibility to Coffman to consider modifications and additional security procedures. “Before the passage of House Bill 1155, this process could have taken several more months to complete, but under this new law, we will have the answers to the clerks by the end of next week,” Coffman said in a statement. According to Coffman, all of the additional testing has already been accomplished by the Testing Board. The testing data has been analyzed, and the Testing Board is now drafting its final report. However, no final decisions will be made until Coffman has had the opportunity to first listen to testimony from county clerks, the vendors of electronic voting equipment and concerned citizens at a public hearing to be held next week.

Voters in Connecticut are participating in a series of statewide public hearings about the state’s new optical-scan voting system. The most frequent complaint to date has been concerns about [the lack of privacy the new system provides](#). According to *The Day*, about 25 people attended the hearing and expressed a myriad of complaints about the machines. Lack of privacy was a top issue, with complaints that privacy booths are too close together, or that election workers could see voters’ ballots if they had questions or problems with the ballot. Melinda Valencia, a volunteer with CT Voters Count, said state officials recommend that the privacy booths be placed at least 3 feet apart. “You have a lot more room standing behind someone at a CVS,” Valencia said in testimony before the legislative committee.

South Dakota legislators gave final approval this week to a law that would make [voter registration records public information](#). According to *The Associated Press*, legislators were surprised a few weeks ago to learn that voter registration cards had never been designated as public records. S.B. 131, passed unanimously by the House, requires county auditors to keep cards and make them available for public viewing. The measure was approved earlier by the Senate. It now goes to the governor.

III. Opinion This Week

Arizona: [Saturday voting](#)

California: [L.A. County poll workers](#); [Absentee ballots](#); [Voting system](#); [IRV](#); [L.A. County ballots](#)

Florida: [Voting systems](#); [Early voting](#)

Georgia: [Voter purges](#)

Iowa: [Voting systems](#)

Mississippi: [Voter registration](#)

New York: [Voting systems](#)

Ohio: [Voting systems, II](#)

Pennsylvania: [Polling places](#)

Texas: [Election oversight](#); [Vote centers](#)

Virginia: [Local primary](#)

Some sites require registration

IV. Job Postings

All job listings must be received by 12 p.m. Eastern on Wednesday for publication in our Thursday newsletter. Job listings are free but may be edited for length. Whenever possible, include Internet information. Please email job postings to mmoretti@electionline.org

Administrator—Maryland State Board of Elections, Annapolis, Md. The employee will be responsible for election administration improvements related to the training of election officials (including poll workers) and overseeing the administration of a federal grant to assure access for individuals with disabilities to the election process. The federal Help America Vote Act of 2002 authorized federal funds for states to improve election administration, and this position is part of the agency's response to the law. **Qualifications:** A bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university; six years of experience in administrative or professional work; one year of this experience must have involved the supervision of other employees or exercising responsibility for program development; three years of administrative or professional experience in public administration managing a division or unit of State or local government; one year of experience in establishing and implementing training programs, developing training manuals and curricula for adult learners, and experience developing standards for determining the effectiveness of training and assessing performance; employees in this classification are required to be registered voters in the State of Maryland in accordance with the Election Law Article, Section 2-207(d); employees in this classification may not hold or be a candidate for any elective public or political party office or any other office created under the Constitution or laws of this State in accordance with the Election Law Article, Section 2-301(b). **Salary:** \$40,268 – \$64,282. **Application:** Applications may be obtained by visiting our website at: www.dbm.maryland.gov; by writing to DBM, OPSB, Recruitment & Examination Division, 301 W. Preston Street Baltimore, Maryland 21201; or by calling 410-767-4850, toll-free: 800-705-3493; TTY users call Maryland Relay Service, 800-735-2258. **Deadline:** Feb. 29, 2008

Chief Operating Officer — U.S. Election Assistance Commission, Washington, D.C. We are currently seeking a Chief Operating Officer (COO) to lead the operational activities of the agency with the objective of achieving the EAC's goals and objectives. The COO supervises professional responsible for the programmatic and administrative divisions and provides the direction, management and coordination of EAC programs and operations. The incumbent serves as the central recognized authoritative point of contact for matters that cross EAC organizational lines, and ensures that an integrated approach characterizes all projects that require attention from more than one program area; and provides direction and coordination to the Commission's senior staff. **Qualifications:** The ideal incumbent will have experience developing sound policy ideas and their strategic implementation; excellent research, analytical, writing and management skills; strong oral and written communication skills. Strong interpersonal and organizational skills are a must. Individual should possess the ability to present and communicate information effectively to both individuals and large groups. Federal government experience and familiarity with issues impacting Federal elections is preferred. Salary: \$115,317-\$139,600. **Deadline:** The position is available immediately, and the Commission intends to fill it as soon as possible. **Application:** Interested parties should go to www.eac.gov and click on "About the EAC" to find out more about the job and to see the required supplemental questions.

Election Administrative Assistant—Anne Arundel County Board of Elections, Annapolis, Md. Lead or advanced level of administrative support work related to a variety of technical or secretarial services in a local election office. Employees working in the technical areas perform administrative functions not involving policy decisions but requiring a thorough knowledge of the specific functions performed. Employees perform a variety of complex secretarial duties requiring a thorough knowledge of election laws, rules and procedures. Employees in this classification do not supervise but may provide training and guidance to Election Clerks and other support staff. Employees receive general supervision from an Election Director, Election Deputy Director or other designated administrative staff and are expected to exercise considerable tact, discretion and judgment in all areas of work. Matters of confidentiality are given close attention by the supervisor. The work may require travel to schools, nursing homes or other facilities to register voters or provide related services. Employees may be required to work evenings and weekends,

particularly prior to and following an election. **Qualifications:** Graduation from an accredited high school or possession of a high school equivalency certificate; two years of experience applying election laws, rules and procedures in a local board of election office; specialized clerical experience may substitute for the required experience applying election laws, rules and procedures in a local election office at the rate of one year for each six months of the required election office experience. Specialized clerical experience is defined as work in an office, which requires reviewing, verifying and interpreting information in order to make determinations and resolve work problems in accordance with policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures; general clerical experience may substitute for the required experience applying election laws, rules and procedures in a local election office at the rate of two years for each six months of the required election office experience. General clerical experience is defined as work performing a variety of clerical duties, which are clear-cut and typically found in office settings, such as filing, copying, posting data and directing telephone calls; college courses from an accredited college or university may be substituted for the required experience at the rate of 30 credit hours for one year of experience; additional experience applying election laws, rules and procedures in a local election office may be substituted for the required education on a year-for-year basis. **Salary:** \$27,876 - \$43,647. **Application:** Applications and application supplements may be obtained by visiting our Web site at: www.dbm.maryland.gov; by writing to DBM, OPSB, Recruitment & Examination Division, 301 W. Preston Street Baltimore, Maryland 21201; or by calling 410-767-4850, toll-free: 800-705-3493; TTY users call Maryland Relay Service, 800-735-2258. **Deadline:** Feb. 29, 2008

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