

July 9, 2004

## An Umpire Taking Sides

**E**lections should not be managed by partisan politicians. Right now, a major flaw in the American electoral system is that the top election officers in most states are men and women who are publicly rooting for the Democratic or Republican side. This year in Missouri, it's hard to imagine that voters can have great confidence in the objectivity of the secretary of state, Matt Blunt, who is active in the Bush-Cheney campaign and is himself a candidate for governor. He has insisted on staying on the job, and he has ruled on important election matters in ways that help his own campaign.

Missouri is one of the most politically divided states. Gov. Bob Holden, a Democrat, was elected in 2000 by roughly 21,000 votes out of nearly 2.3 million cast. Jim Talent, who is Missouri's junior senator, and a Republican, was elected in 2002 by about 22,000 votes. In this year's presidential race, a few thousand votes could determine whether Mr. Blunt becomes Missouri's next governor. And they could determine who wins Missouri's 11 electoral votes and, perhaps, the White House.

One of Missouri's biggest political battles this year has been over scheduling a referendum to ban gay marriage. Republicans wanted it on the ballot in November so it would draw conservatives to the presidential and gubernatorial elections. But Governor Holden, who is responsible for setting the date, scheduled it for August, the next time state voters would go to the polls. In a letter to the governor, Mr. Blunt challenged the decision and implied that he would insist on pushing the vote to November.

The Missouri Supreme Court ruled, 6 to 1, against Mr. Blunt. The majority opinion, which was joined by two justices appointed by John Ashcroft when he was governor, held that Mr. Blunt had no right to "frustrate the governor's constitutional authority" to choose the date of the election.

Right now, Mr. Blunt is trying to stop St. Louis from holding early voting this fall. The Missouri legislature voted to join the majority of states that allow voters to cast ballots in advance of Election Day. St. Louis — where many voters were wrongly prevented from voting in 2000 because of the incompetence of election officials — announced plans for early voting, a move that would give eligible voters a better chance of making sure that their ballots were properly cast. Republicans have opposed early voting in the city, which has a large black population and votes overwhelmingly Democratic.

Mr. Blunt is trying to stop the St. Louis plan, decreeing that although the new law generally calls for early voting, it does not authorize it to occur this year. That conflicts with the interpretation of the law's bipartisan sponsors, who told The St. Louis Post-Dispatch that the law allows St. Louis to vote early if

the city picks up the extra cost, which it has agreed to do. The state attorney general, who is likely to be asked for his views, should support St. Louis's effort to allow early voting.

There is one group, however, that Mr. Blunt is going to extraordinary lengths to help vote — and it is one that usually votes Republican. He is allowing soldiers in combat zones to vote by fax, even though election officials will be able to read the ballots as they come in. Mr. Blunt's willingness to abandon the secret ballot, one of the most important safeguards of American democracy, is troubling. It is all the more so when the voters are members of the military who are being asked to vote for or against their commander in chief.

These decisions may reflect Mr. Blunt's honest beliefs. But by ruling consistently in his own party's favor, he invites cynicism about the electoral process. Secretaries of state should recuse themselves from making decisions about elections when they are running for office, or have endorsed candidates who are. And states should overhaul their election systems to put such decisions in the hands of people who are not immersed in the political fray.

[Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)