October 29, 2004

EDITORIAL

The Return of the 'Butterfly Ballot'

R esidents of Ohio's largest county, Cuyahoga, who are voting by absentee ballot this year have to solve a brainteaser. They were each given a ballot with candidates' names, arrows pointing to the right and small numbers. And they each got a punch card with hundreds of little boxes and a number inside each one. A voter is supposed to ignore the arrows on the ballot - which appear to be there by mistake - and punch out the chad in the box on the punch card whose number corresponds to the candidate selected. If, instead, the voter follows the arrow and punches out the chad in the box it points to - as would someone voting in person, with a machine to align the ballot and punch card - that vote could be counted for the wrong candidate, or no candidate.

Ohio is a critical swing state, with 20 electoral votes and dead-even polls. The more than 75,000 absentee ballots that have been requested in Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, could decide the election. Although the ballots include instructions that theoretically guide people on how to use them properly, the county elections board has been fielding calls from confused voters. There is no way of knowing how many voters are simply punching the wrong holes and mailing their ballots.

One lesson of the 2000 election mess was that badly designed ballots can disenfranchise voters. Palm Beach County's infamous "butterfly ballot" apparently caused many voters to select Pat Buchanan when they really wanted Al Gore. In Duval County, presidential candidates' names were on two pages, and the instructions said "vote on all pages." So thousands of voters chose more than one candidate, voiding their ballots. Nationwide, 2 million of the 100 million presidential ballots cast were not counted because they were unmarked, ambiguous or spoiled, a Caltech/M.I.T. study found. There is no telling how many more recorded choices the voters did not intend.

After 2000, election officials should have committed themselves to using professionally designed ballots that make it easy for voters, including those with limited literacy or poor vision, to make selections quickly and accurately. But there are already reports this year, from places like Orange County, Fla., of poorly designed ballots that may well cause more votes to be thrown out.

There is no great mystery about how to do better. Graphic artists, including the nonprofit Design for Democracy project, know how to make ballots that are simple and intuitive. Unfortunately, our election system leaves ballot design to the whims of local officials, who often make bad choices. There should be

national ballot standards, including a requirement for testing before Election Day. Americans have enough to do in deciding on their votes without having to puzzle over how to get their choices to count.

Making Votes Count: Editorials in this series remain online at nytimes.com/makingvotescount.