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**EDITORIAL OBSERVER | MAKING VOTES COUNT**

## **Where the Action's at for Poll Watchers: Ohio as the New Florida**

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In a sleek law firm conference room 19 stories above Park Avenue last Thursday night, the subject was where people wanted to go to monitor elections this week. A few hands shot up for Florida, and more for Pennsylvania. But while Florida may still be the marquee name in election mismanagement, Ohio is where most people wanted to be on Nov. 2. The most inscrutable of all the swing states, it's where the Republicans have filed objections to 35,000 new voter registrations and are sending 3,600 poll challengers, mainly to heavily minority precincts that tend to produce Democratic votes. The law students and lawyers in the Midtown law offices, volunteers for a group called Election Protection, wanted to be there, too, pushing in the opposite direction.

The legacy of Florida 2000 was public knowledge of a secret that election officials had long kept to themselves: that every year millions of eligible voters are wrongly prevented from voting, and millions of votes are thrown out. Many states, including Ohio, still use punch-card machines that produce the hanging, dimpled and pregnant chads Americans expected to see eliminated after the last fiasco. Reckless voting-roll purges are still throwing eligible voters off the rolls. And this year has produced new outrages, such as Glenda Hood, the Florida secretary of state, ordering election officials to throw out voter registrations when applicants fail to check a box saying they are citizens - even though they swear they are elsewhere on the form.

In the face of this government indifference and hostility to voters, private citizens have begun to step in. When Election Protection, a nonpartisan coalition of more than 50 groups, ranging from the League of Women Voters to Rock the Vote, sent out a call for volunteers, the response was overwhelming. A thousand people showed up to be trained in a single day last month at Columbia Law School. The coalition will send out 25,000 poll monitors next week to "high risk" precincts in 17 states, and operate a toll-free nationwide hot line, 1-866-OUR-VOTE, on Election Day.

More voters are disenfranchised every year by incompetent or malevolent election administrators than anything else. During Florida's August primary, Election Protection monitors observed a poll worker shouting through a bullhorn that no one would be allowed to vote without photo ID, even though Florida

law does not require voter ID. Anyone who has spent any time observing local voting officials at work can attest that there is enough incompetence out there to cover a multitude of disenfranchisements. Still, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that at least some of these officials are intentionally trying to stop eligible people from voting. Ohio's secretary of state recently issued an order, which he rescinded in the face of loud protests, that voter registrations submitted on insufficiently thick paper would be thrown out. Last week, Missouri's secretary of state said there was nothing wrong with groups that run registration drives throwing out registrations that they promised to hand in.

Inevitably, the sight of all these eager young people piling onto buses to help people vote in other states calls up comparisons to the civil rights movement in the 1960's. If nothing else, the latest generation of voter rights advocates are identical in their enthusiasm. Last week in New York, Jon Miller, a third-year law student, was training his fellow volunteers on what to expect after they board their buses for Ohio at 9 Monday night. When they arrive the following morning, he said, they will pick up a stack of voter bills of rights, put on their You Have the Right to Vote T-shirts, and arrive at their assigned polling places by 5:30 a.m. "Even though you've just gotten off an eight-hour bus ride," he assured his charges energetically, "you are going to feel fresh and great."

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