

December 8, 2004

MAKING VOTES COUNT

New York's Electoral Mess

If New York State's 2006 elections are a logistical disaster, we will have Gov. George Pataki and the New York Legislature to thank. They have needlessly delayed passing legislation to adopt new voting machines and make other important election reforms. The slow pace might almost be forgivable if they had been hard at work, scrutinizing the complex issues involved. But it seems to be the result of lobbyists' fighting over lucrative contracts, and Albany's usual legislative ineptitude. It is time for the governor and the Legislature to get serious.

After the 2000 election mess, Congress allocated up to \$3.9 billion to the states to pay for new voting machines and other reforms, including statewide databases of registered voters. It turns out to be fortunate that New York did not rush to start spending the money. Some states bought Diebold electronic voting machines that do not produce a voter-verifiable paper trail and cannot be trusted.

But New York has acted so slowly that it has put the 2006 elections at risk. Even after the legislation is adopted, bids will have to be evaluated and machines purchased. Election workers will need to be trained to operate the machines - and, critically, to ensure that there are no security lapses. Voters will need to be educated. John Ravitz, executive director of the New York City Board of Elections, wanted to introduce the new machines in waves, starting in 2005. Now it will be a huge challenge to have them in 2006.

The Senate and the Assembly have both passed bills, which still need to be reconciled. Both bills require voter-verifiable paper records for electronic voting, and audits of those records to check that the machine tallies are correct. On the minus side, both houses want to keep the odd and unnecessary full-face-ballot rule, which requires that all candidates' names appear on one page. It will inflate the cost of voting machines, and the added expense is likely to mean fewer machines and longer lines at the polls. The Legislature also needs to come up with an expansive list of acceptable kinds of identification for new voters so eligible voters are not wrongly turned away.

Lobbyists are already salivating over the money available for voting machine contracts, and Albany likes to divide up such spoils behind closed doors. But it is important that every aspect of the contracts involving voting machines and the statewide voter database be transparent so the public can see that the voting process is not being compromised.

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