

PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS DUE FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2008

I. Bracing for another Election Day mess

Eight years after the presidential race came down to a bunch of 'hanging chads,' Election Day 2008 could be marked by long lines, equipment failures, and confusion. What happened to voting reform?

Will polling places be ready by Nov. 4?

There are ominous signs they may not be. A record number of voters—including millions who are newly registered—are expected to show up at the polls this year, due to the intense interest in this presidential election. Two-thirds of voters, including those in battleground states such as Ohio, Colorado, and Florida, will be using brand-new equipment that in many places has been plagued by malfunctions. At the same time, more than half the states will be using new statewide databases meant to verify voters' identities and prevent fraud. These systems have themselves been subject to controversy. "You change systems and throw in lots of new voters," says voting consultant Kimball Brace, "and you can plan to be up the proverbial creek."



Many primary voters faced long waits, but Nov. 4 could be worse.

chads, we're going to be looking at pink markers and creases," said Paul DeGregorio of the federal Election Assistance Commission. This form of voting also requires officials to save and securely store millions of pieces of paper. That might not seem too difficult, but in Palm Beach County, Fla.—the epicenter of the 2000 debacle—more than 3,500 ballots went missing in a primary election this August, forcing workers to hunt through bins and leaving a judicial race undecided. Equipment problems delayed results in two other Florida counties, and some other states reported instances of over- or under-counting that have not been explained. But experts say that while there have been technical glitches, their biggest concern is simply that so many people will be voting.

Why so many changes at once?

Consider it a case of good intentions gone awry. After the 2000 Florida fiasco, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act, which provided \$3 billion in federal funds for states to overhaul their voting operations. The good news is that it is now extremely unlikely that the 2008 election will devolve into a debate over hanging or dimpled chads, since punch-card machines have been retired everywhere except Idaho. But many states are still scrambling to get their new systems fully operational, and in fact, some cities and counties only settled on their voting systems within the past several months.

Won't voting be more high-tech?

Not especially. Right after the 2000 election, states spent hundreds of millions of dollars on touch-screen machines. But when they were put into operation, questions quickly mounted about the electronic machines' accuracy and security, as well as the fact that they did not generate a permanent, physical record to audit in the event of a recount. Researchers found, for instance, that certain touch-screen machines could be corrupted with magnets or manipulated with PDAs. As a result, only about 36 percent of voters will be using electronic machines in November, down from more than 50 percent four years ago. Most voters will be casting paper ballots designed to be read by optical scanners. Unlike touch screens, paper ballots can't malfunction or be hacked into, and they can be recounted.

Are paper ballots error-proof?

Unfortunately, no. Optical readers can get "confused" if ballots are bent or folded. If voters aren't precise when they fill out the little box next to a candidate's name, their intention may be open to question. "Instead of looking at

Why is that a problem?

In a word, overload. If the primaries this year were a dry run for the general election, they were not reassuring. With a record 56 million voters participating in the primaries, many polling places were overwhelmed. Several California counties ran out of ballots, and in Ohio, Maryland, and other states, judges had to order polling places to stay open later to accommodate voters who were stuck in line for hours. An estimated 2 million poll workers—twice the number who worked in 2004—will be needed to handle what could be a record turnout in November. While states have been scrambling to hire and train more poll workers, it's far from clear they'll have enough to handle the influx of voters. Workers who are hired, moreover, will find the job more difficult than ever.

What's changed?

All states are now required to maintain a database of eligible voters, which is aimed at keeping polling-place challenges to a minimum. But states have varying standards on what should be considered a match when it comes to nicknames, hyphenated names, and married names. If the information doesn't match, voters can cast provisional ballots, but whether those will ultimately count depends on local rules, which vary from state to state and even county to county. Registration rules have already prompted bitter complaints and lawsuits in several states, and Democrats and Republicans have lined up teams of lawyers to challenge any perceived irregularities. None of these problems may matter much if either Barack Obama or John McCain wins by a comfortable margin. But if the election is another squeaker, experts say, it could get very ugly. That's why, says Doug Chapin of the watchdog group Electionline.org, the silent prayer of election officials everywhere is: "Dear Lord, let it be a landslide."

Disenfranchised soldiers

If anyone has earned the right to vote, it is members of the U.S. military, especially those putting their lives on the line in Iraq and Afghanistan. But according to the Pew Center, while nearly 40 percent of the general population cast votes in the 2006 elections, only 20.4 percent of the military population did so. About 30 percent of the nonvoters in the military said their ballots either never arrived or arrived too late to their duty stations, while 28 percent did not know how to get an absentee ballot or found the process too complicated. In an effort to reach more soldiers, about a dozen states are now sending ballots to soldiers via e-mail, although because of security and privacy concerns, they don't allow the soldiers to actually vote by e-mail. Some voting advocates fault the federal and state governments for not taking better advantage of Internet technology to create secure online voting for soldiers abroad. "The people who are most affected by the decisions on the use of the military," says Bob Carey of the Overseas Vote Foundation, "are being systematically denied the right to vote."

THE WEEK October 17, 2008

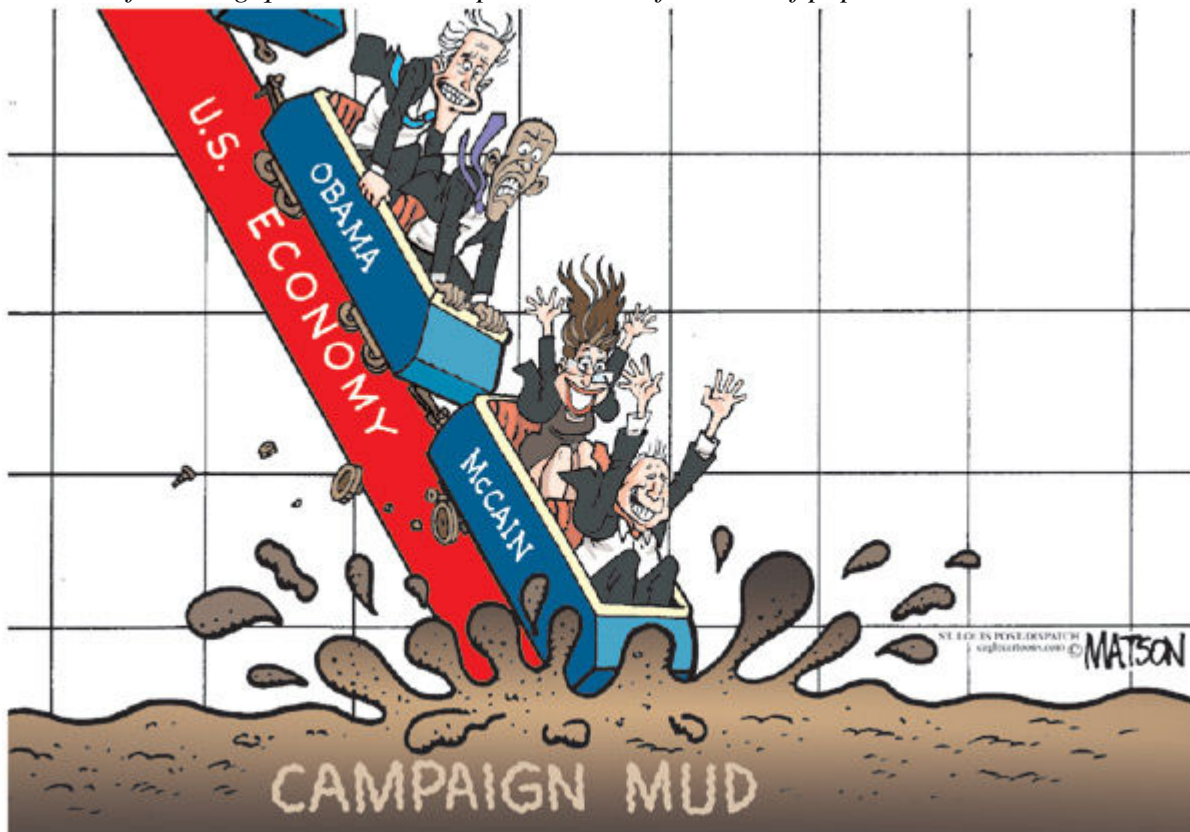
II. Article Questions

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of loose-leaf paper.

1. What are three battleground states mentioned in the first paragraph?
2. What law did congress pass to address the problems with elections that arose in the 2000 election? What did it do?
3. What are the problems with electronic voting systems?
4. What is the biggest problem with voting that the experts predict?
5. How many poll workers will be needed this year? How does this number compare to 2004? Why is such a change expected?
6. What would make these problems not matter so much?
7. What group of people will be getting ballots from some states by email? Why?
8. Do you think that it is a good solution?

III. Political Cartoon

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of loose-leaf paper.



1. Who are the characters in this cartoon and how are they seated?
2. What is sending these people downwards?
3. What are they approaching in their fall?
4. Who seems to be happy about this and who seems to be stressed?
5. What do you think this cartoonist is saying about the individuals shown?
6. What is this cartoonist suggesting about the current presidential campaign?