



HELLO HINGHAM
ELECTIONS: THEY'RE LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL



By Cathy Salisbury
Hingham League of Women Voters

After the 2000 national election and the debacle in Florida, the voting public became more interested in how elections are run. They focused on deficiencies in the technology used by some voting districts in Florida. Voter confidence in the fairness of the national election was shaken. Congress attempted to correct the problem of archaic voting systems by passing the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA).

HAVA's purpose is to provide funds to states so they can replace punch card voting systems, to help administer federal elections, and to set voluntary voting system guidelines, including technical standards for ensuring the security of electronic voting. Although it took several years for Congress to fund HAVA, states have now received moneys to upgrade their voting systems, and to educate voters on voting procedures, voting rights and voting technology.

Many states are buying Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) voting systems to replace their punch card systems. There is debate about the security of these systems if they can't be independently audited. An independent audit of a DRE voting system, known as a voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT), requires a printout of each voter's ballot that can be verified before the voter leaves the booth. After the voter checks the printout for accuracy, it goes into a locked ballot box. After the election, an independent audit of electronic tallies can be made by independently counting the voter-verified paper ballots, or by reconciling the electronically recorded and paper ballots. Although it's expensive and redundant, proponents say that VVPAT is the only way voters will have confidence in the integrity of elections.

In Massachusetts, the League of Women Voters, working with Secretary of State William Galvin, drafted a Voter's Bill of Rights, signed by Governor Romney. The 15 rights include the right to cast a provisional ballot if a person believes he or she is eligible to vote, but whose name is not listed on the list of registered voters. This is a new right created by HAVA.

The League recognizes that electronic voting systems are here to stay. They help people with disabilities, and those who require ballots in languages other than in English. The League believes that each voting system should be measured against clear criteria to ensure that it is secure, accurate, re-countable and accessible.

Besides safeguarding fair elections, the other bedrock mission of the League is to

encourage people to register and to vote. Voter registration picked up substantially with passage of the Massachusetts Motor Voter Act, which allows citizens to register to vote at the time that they apply for a driver's license or renewal. Recent good news regarding voter turn-out at the 2004 national election involves the 18 to 24 year old age group. About 47% of Americans aged 18-24 voted in 2004, up from 36% in 2000, according to the Census Bureau. No other age group increased its turnout by more than five percentage points. Percentages for other age groups voting in the 2004 election are as follows; 25-34 (56%), 35-44 (64%), 45-54 (69%), 55-64 (73%), 65-74 (73%) and 75 and over (69%).

The League is elated with the increase in voter turnout of the 18-24 year-olds because voters who start voting when they're young are more likely to vote the rest of their lives. The 2004 campaign was an immense mobilizing event by both parties, bringing out the largest percent of young voters in 32 years.

Hingham has its annual election on Saturday, April 29, 2006. There are three contested races: Selectman, Planning Board and Recreation Commission. To get on the ballot, each candidate had to collect the signatures of 50 registered voters on their nomination papers, which had to be into the Town Clerk office by a specific deadline. Candidates who raise money for their campaigns must complete and file a financial report.

Each polling place in Hingham has election officers that are appointed by the Selectmen. Voters are assisted by volunteer workers, and they can see a sample ballot, which is helpful when there are questions requiring a yes or a no. The ballots are counted immediately after polls are closed, and the results announced as soon as the counting is finished.

To ensure fairness in elections, people must have privacy when they vote, campaign workers are prohibited from standing closer than 150 feet from a polling place, and employees of a city or town are prohibited from soliciting gifts or payments directly or indirectly on behalf of any candidate for public office. Although elected officers are exempt from this prohibition, traditionally Hingham public officials don't raise money for candidates for local election.

The Hingham League of Women Voters annually sponsors Candidates Night at which all candidates for election to local office are invited to attend, and to make a brief opening statement. Candidates for contested races are additionally asked questions prepared by the League or collected from the audience. This year's Candidates Night was April 12' and will be shown on local cable television on: April 21, 22, and 23 at various times.

For information about membership in the League, please contact Christine Dietterich at coed@verizon.net or visit our web site at www.hingham.ma.lwvnet.org/.