

Looking for Luke Skywalker: Reflections of the First Citizens' Parallel Election (CPE) in Texas November 8, 2005 Travis County, TX

By Karen Renick, Director, VoteRescue, Austin, TX

By 7 a.m. on Election Day, Nov. 8, 2005, the Texas Citizens' Parallel Election Project, had Parallel Election Voting Centers set up outside six polling sites scattered throughout Travis County. Each CPE Team consisted of 3-5 VoteRescue volunteers and would cover two precincts since we had purposely selected combined precincts for maximum contact with the public. Having attended weekly organizing and training meetings for a month preparing for the CPE, all of our volunteers were psyched and ready to greet the first voters of the day when the polls officially opened.

By 8 a.m., I received a call from my co-organizer and longtime voting integrity activist friend, Vickie Karp of Black Box Voting, telling me that one team had already been visited by the police and another had been berated by the irate principal of the school where they were stationed. Not expecting quite so much excitement so early in the day, I was definitely caught off guard for a moment. Vickie reported that the teams had moved their tables to appease either the police or the principal. It must be stated, however, that all of our teams' locations were totally legal where they had all originally settled. You know, you pick your battles and these certainly weren't the ones to pick.

Thankfully, the rest of the day went very smoothly. Vickie and I tag-teamed reporters' calls throughout the day from several radio stations, two newspapers and one TV station here in Austin. Ultimately, a photographer from the Austin-American Statesman took some pictures and the local CBS affiliate shot some footage of voters participating in the Parallel Election at our Voting Centers. Despite all this wonderful attention, the Statesman chose not to run our story and I believe we were bumped from both the five o'clock and 6 o'clock TV news. Somehow, my 20-minute pre-recorded radio interview - - reduced to a mere 20 seconds - made it on the air. After hearing it, my son asked, "Mom, was that really you? Boy, you didn't sound like you at all!" So much for impressing the younger generation. Towards the end of the day, one or two of the sites ran out of their handouts about electronic voting irregularities and another site didn't receive their tally sheets because of rush hour traffic, but that was about the extent of misjudgements.

When the polls shut their doors at 7 pm, our Voting Centers followed suit and our teams began their closing and counting procedures. We had previously decided that it was important to publicly count the ballots and post the results at *each* CPE site on Election Night so that voters would have the opportunity to return to witness the last two key steps of a transparent election. A few voters actually did return.

By the time the counting started at each location, it was dark as anticipated, so our volunteers performed their tasks by the light of a battery-operated camping lantern. Given that our Citizens' Parallel Election was primarily intended to "shed some light" on the darkness that shrouds our elections, the lanterns added a poetic touch. Working under

those conditions did make an already intensive job even more difficult. Big kudos to all of the volunteers for taking it all in stride.

Around 9 pm Election Night, the six teams of volunteers began to arrive at the all night restaurant in Northwest Austin where we chose to gather to collect the ballot boxes and the other election paraphernalia. Exhausted, they arrived in clumps of twos and threes, all with sunburns as proof of their participation in the day-long demonstration of “Here’s what Democracy *really* looks like”. Their efforts had certainly reminded many of the older voters that day of a time when voting was handled by the People, not private corporations.

The six ballot boxes were made of translucent plastic with bright orange tops (thanks to Halloween leftovers) and were proudly carried in from the parking lot. Reminding me of treasure chests, they brimmed with election booty: cast ballots, spoiled ballots, unused ballots, results of the CPE hand counts, results of the County’s electronic machine counts, orange plastic table cloths, clipboards, pens, markers, tape recorder, headphones, foot switches, Vote-PADS, petitions, flyers, and sign-up lists. Each box contained the historical evidence of a day when six slices of Travis County citizens once again saw and touched that fading and elusive concept of governance we know as democracy.

We learned that about 600 ballots overall had been cast in our Citizens’ Parallel Election. Admittedly, at first that total seemed rather paltry, but in fact it meant that there were 600 more people in Travis County, Texas who were newly aware of the serious problems with electronic voting. In addition, thousands more had heard our “Get-Out-The-Vote-and Vote-in-the-Parallel-Election-While-You’re-At-It” message before Election Day from radio announcements and interviews Vickie had pre-recorded with the help of one of our volunteers. Nevertheless, it was a fact that many of the voters who exited the polling place and saw our CPE Voting Center chose not to vote in our election, perhaps deciding that we were playing a useless game of pretend about days gone by.

Now that the day was over and we had collected all of the ballot boxes, Vickie and I would take the results of our “pretend” election and compare them proportionally to the results of the “official” election, precinct by precinct, amendment by amendment, and proposition by proposition. If any unusually large discrepancies were discovered, we would present them to our county election officials. It should be noted that our officials have expressed an interest in our CPE and have actually *encouraged* us to bring any differences to their attention. At this point, however, we are not looking to create opportunities for others to discredit our efforts, so we will handle our findings with care.

As I left the restaurant, it was clear to me that holding a Citizens’ Parallel Election using hand-counted paper ballots was an exhilarating experience for absolutely everyone involved despite the exhaustion. In my mind, I contrasted this pure excitement with the pure joylessness I have always heard from election judges, poll workers and election officials when asked to describe their experiences with hand-counted paper ballots in years past. Their common aversion to paper ballots has always greatly disturbed me.

Now, after the CPE, I better understand their feelings because I know firsthand that counting votes by hand IS difficult and draining. *But, who ever said that protecting democracy is easy?* (Well, I do know a few voting machine manufacturers who have

been saying just that for many years, over and over and over, so that now most voters believe this is the whole truth and nothing but.)

Should we allow ourselves to remain “convinced” that elections can be both effortless *and* flawless by using computer technology *simply because* so many other facets of our lives are run by technology and therefore, why not just use it for voting, too? Or, perhaps is it time that we re-examine our Faustian deal with technology because we, the People, no longer vote; the machines vote.

We now use machines that can lose ballots, can add more ballots, can count backwards, can provide incorrect ballots, can miscount the votes, can break down, can fail to start up, can fail to transmit registration data, can provide a default candidate, can dip into the negative numbers, can cast non-existent ballots, can require voters to scroll through the ballot backwards and can show 300 voters in every precinct in one county, to list some of the documented failures. Add to all these failures the fact that voting machines are susceptible to malevolent electronic commands sent wirelessly, embedded in the secret software and/or instigated by direct manipulation of the equipment. And, to top it all off, the certification testing is a very sick joke. Below is a quote by Joseph Holder, an activist in the election integrity movement, that clearly summarizes the catastrophe:

“What we do know is the national testing is not supervised by any governmental agency, is conducted in secret, is paid for by the very vendors seeking to pass the testing, and, judging from the amount of poor quality[of voting machines] that passed, has been woefully inadequate. More importantly, there has been little to no testing of the voting systems for susceptibility to fraud or manipulation. Yet the number of Americans who will be voting on these unreliable, error-prone voting systems is growing by the day in this rush to purchase with HAVA funds and deadlines.”

How could we have let this happen? Remember, we were looking for Easy Street to get us off the tiring and boring treadmill of hand counting paper ballots. Over the course of many years, the key to our democracy – choosing our leaders by voting – slowly slipped out of our hand and now is in the tight grip of a handful of well-connected corporations. And, what did we also hand over? We had handed over the quiet, uncelebrated duty called citizen vigilance.

We were blinded – blinded by the bright glare from the slick new voting machines and we were awestruck by a myth because we love a good story. We wanted to believe that the Knight from the Kingdom of Computers would ride in and run our elections with honor and preciseness, while keeping a watchful eye for any intruders or foul play. It really seemed like a dream come true until we finally saw past the glare and learned that our wonderful Knight was not the White Knight of Voting Vigilance, but was *really* the Black Knight of Voting Viciousness, or, using a more modern myth, the Darth Vader of the Darkened Democracy.

And Luke Skywalker is where? Need him we really do! Perhaps, discover in each of us the power of the force must we not?