

Blazing a Freedom Path
Parallel Election in Travis County, Texas
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Last Tuesday, November 8th, voters in the Austin area got to see “Democracy in Action” as 25 or so volunteers for VoteRescue, our local election rights group, held a “Citizens’ Parallel Election” with paper ballots, hand-counted. Our effort was funded primarily through Black Box Voting and was a joint effort, sponsored by BBV and blessed also by the Coalition for Visible Ballots. We covered twelve precincts in six polling places (each where two precincts were voting) and the experience was both exhausting and exhilarating! Our county uses the Hart InterCivic E-Slate machines, which provide no paper ballots, so we knew going in that even if we got great data, we couldn’t force a recount. We chose to move forward anyway as an exercise in democracy and to educate the public about the perils of e-voting.

Karen Renick, my co-producer of the event who formed VoteRescue this past summer, is a dedicated activist whose number one passion is restoring voting rights to our citizenry: namely, through paper ballots, hand-counted in public view. We met in the summer of 2004 when she e-mailed the Coalition for Visible Ballots and her message was forwarded to me, as the National Chair of that organization. Realizing we were both in Austin, I invited her to a press conference we were about to hold at the Capitol while Bev was in town, demanding of our Secretary of State (at that time) paper “receipts” on our electronic voting machines. (BTW, this effort, which drew an overflow crowd and lots of press, was met with an instant rebuff by our S of S, who called us “special interest groups” who were discouraging voters from voting!)

Since that time Karen and I have kept in touch regularly and shared a hotel room in Nashville this past March during the first National Election Reform conference hosted by Bernie Ellis and his fine group. It was on the trip back that Karen and I first discussed the possibility of holding a parallel election with paper ballots, an idea first formulated by paper ballot advocate and journalist Lynn Landes and described on her website, www.ecotalk.com.

Our organizational efforts began in October and thanks to our local “Radio Free Austin” station, which got behind our effort totally, we had regular PSAs airing for weeks which were promoting our meetings. Richard Reeves taped the PSAs; Wes, the program director, played them every hour; Alex Jones and Jack Blood, who both have syndicated shows on this station, had interviewed me about our parallel election. This fantastic radio promotion became the main source of our volunteer election workers, who quickly formed a cooperative, high-spirited and dedicated commitment to our task-at-hand.

Each time we met to plan, we realized how many more details there were yet to cover. Initially we thought we could put it together in two meetings; we ended up having five and felt like that was not enough, as toward the end of our planning period we still had so many loose ends to tie up. Many thanks to Judy Alter and her California parallel election workers; Judy and Ed Spencer shared their procedures, forms, and supply lists with us, as well as a lot of great tips, and gave us a great foundation from which to build and plan.

We created “Volunteer Pledges” which we handed out at our first meeting, setting forth our expectations of our helpers and requiring their signatures on the commitment to conduct themselves honorably, honestly, professionally, and with integrity, and especially to honor the sanctity of the ballots and the election process. I think this helped lend formality and significance to the act of volunteering.

We identified volunteers who were willing and able to work all day and into the evening on election day and to be in charge of their polling place location and team; these people we called “Precinct Captains”, and they were charged also with making sure that some of the necessary basic supplies were obtained and delivered to their site (such as tables, orange tablecloths in honor of the Ukraine, chairs, umbrellas for inclement weather; ice chests; clipboards and pens).

We provided all the necessary paperwork, including a short handout to give to the voters as they approached the polling place; hundreds of copies of the ballot; handouts with more information on the problems on e-voting to give our voters; the black and white “composition” notebook we used as our “sign-in” book for all of our voters and the “Voter’s Pledge” for each sign-in page (Judy Alter’s), stating that all people voting with us pledged to vote exactly as they had in the official election ; a plastic ballot box with an orange top (again for the Ukraine;) tally sheets for the final vote total compilation at the end of the day (model provided by Judy) ; and to each location we provided a “VotePad”—a non-electronic voting system for the blind and physically impaired designed by Ellen Theisen (and associates) of VotersUnite. Each VotePad required a tape recorder and a foot pedal, and a pre-recorded tape of instructions for blind voters on how to use the voting system. (Many thanks to Ellen and her team for all their work to produce the VotePads and get them delivered to us on time! And to Allen Davisson, one of our volunteers, who recorded the instructions for us and made all the extra copies of the tape for each of our locations.)

We identified four major roles to be played by the volunteers: the *greeter*, who approached voters arriving at the polling place, hand them our short flyer, and invite them to come vote with us on a paper ballot after they voted inside; the *person in charge of the registration book*, to make sure everyone signed in properly and wrote in their precinct number, since each polling place we selected had two precincts voting; *the person handing out clipboards with ballots* (designed to NOT look like the official ballot, but to duplicate all the voting issues on the official ballot); and last but not least, *the “runner”*, whose job it was to go to the official “Substation” after 7 pm, which is the middle school or high school where the official election workers turn in the memory cards, voting machines, and paperwork and where computers calculate the final vote totals and post them for the public. The runner’s job was to find the totals for the two precincts covered by his or her polling place and record the vote totals on each voting issue, as well as the number of total voters who came into that polling place and voted *that day*. With those numbers, we could first of all calculate the percentage of participation we got from the voters at each location; and whether each amendment or proposition passed according to our election results, versus according to the official election results.

Feeling 99% ready after our last meeting with the Precinct Captains the night before the election, Karen and I each stayed up late making final preparations. Like many of our crew, I got up at 5:30 to go help one of our teams who was lacking the essential third member for the morning shift. (We

divided the day into three major time shifts: 6 til 11am; 11 til 4pm; and 4 til 9pm. The Precinct Captains had to commit to working until 10, as did the runners).

I arrived at Kiker Elementary School in southwest Austin at 6 am sharp and soon after arrived the Precinct Captain, Kim Rihn, and her mother Joan. We got our table completely set up and then watched as voters began arriving from other directions not near us; so we picked everything up and moved it over closer to the path of most election foot traffic, careful to stay outside the 100' "No electioneering" line from the polling place entrance. We were very excited to get our first Parallel election voter around 7:30 or so. I wanted to take his picture, but he said he'd rather not, so I respected his wishes and didn't do it.

Gail Fischer from the County Election office came over to say hello next. She was going around to all our six locations to advise the election workers about us and that we were there legally and with the County's knowledge. Our County election officials, headed by Dana Debeauvoir, and supported by Michael Winn, Gail Fischer, and Mary Fero, have been very cooperative in our election monitoring efforts, which began last November with the Presidential election.

As we had advised all our teams, I went inside to meet the election workers to personally introduce myself and explain what we were doing so as not to appear adversarial or threatening. This proved helpful. I got a call by about 8:30 or so from one of our other Precinct Captains; the police had been called at this other school location because the school principal didn't know what our team was doing there (and Gail from the County had not been there yet). Peace was reached after they moved their table a certain distance from the sidewalk. We realized that we should've all made a point to do introductions and explanations to the principals of all the school location also, in addition to the election judges. (Note to self for next time.)

Adrenaline pumped as more voters agreed to vote with us. We kept our discussions about electronic voting simple and to the point, not wishing to "data dump" on people but giving them a few salient points to think about, along with our handout with VoterUnite's map of the US, the "What Went Wrong in 2004" graphic that has such great examples of e-voting snafus all over the country. Many people thanked us for what we were doing and expressed distrust of the machines, including some voters who were "computer people" and claimed to know how easy it is to either manipulate software, or for it to be hacked. We told them their instincts were quite on target. Of course everyone a few of the naysayers and negative respondents. One voter during my morning shift simply said, "I write software and I trust it". The shocking naiivete of that statement almost made me dumbstruck; but I rallied for a little debate, and in the end succeeded in at least giving her our handout.

At about 10:30 I packed up my stuff and left for Barton Creek Elementary, for I still didn't know at that time what had happened with the police since no one had called me back to update me and I couldn't reach them by phone either. I was hoping that was not because they were all in jail. When I arrived there all was well and they had extra crew; they had two or three people acting as "greeters" which really helped bring up the participation numbers. I visited with them and heard some of their stories of the morning, and gradually made my way across town to visit each of our six locations, stopping to meet with Karen to pick up the tally sheets which she had just finished putting together at about 3:30 that afternoon! (talk about cutting it close!) We split them up to each deliver to three of our six locations, and I headed north.

At our next location at Brown Elementary I ran into the only journalist who cared enough to write up our story; unfortunately it was not the mainstream media, but still, an excellent journalist for the Austin Community College newspaper named Amy Czigan. She had already come to one of our meetings, followed up with a phone interview with me, and on that election day handed me her FIRST story about our effort which was on the first page of their new edition. She was there to volunteer and to take notes for a second, follow-up story.

I must interject here that I have learned a few things about media from my mentor Abbe Delozier, who helped put together our July 13th True Majority Day of Action press conference last year, and produced two world-class press conferences in D.C. last Fall where Bev and her team of computer experts demonstrated six different ways to hack an election on e-voting software. For our parallel election, I had written a sharp press release, tweaked by both Abbe and Karen, and with Abbe's help, we got it out three times to literally hundreds of mainstream media: N.Y. Times reporters, Washington Post, major newspapers *all across the country*; all cable news networks; the AP; UPI; Reuters; all major papers in all major Texas cities; all local TV news stations; three local papers; several radio stations; we faxed the thing all over the place as well.

The sum total of our press, (besides Radio Free Austin which promo'd us at every opportunity) was Amy's article in the ACC paper; a short blurb in an Austin weekly newspaper; and three radio interviews. A local news station sent a reporter out to one of our locations, but they didn't air the piece. The lack of coverage of this historical event is a sad and disturbing commentary on the state of our media. I can only take it as a compliment that they chose not to cover what we were doing. Someone must have thought it was too important, and didn't want other citizens to know about it.

The day zoomed by and soon I was at our sixth location, as they "closed shop" after 7pm and began counting ballots by hand by the light of little lanterns and car headlights. I left them to that task and went to reserve tables for us at a local restaurant, our meeting place where all results were to be turned in to me and Karen. (I made sure there was a bar!)

Soon our teams started arriving and turning over their ballot boxes, ballots, tally sheets, and registration books. I couldn't believe how excited and enthusiastic they all were, especially those who'd been up since before dawn. They were absolutely fired up about the whole experience and there was a definite air of celebration in the air. A few margaritas and beers were consumed as volunteers shared their stories of democracy in action at their various locations.

Of course there were details to clean up; three of our six teams didn't succeed in getting the official totals from the substations; and the teams had each realized during the day that they each had a certain number of ballots on which no precinct number was noted. I knew we'd get the official totals from the County officials later (which we did). We decided, due to the large percentage of ballots with no precinct numbers on them, to combine the totals for the two precincts at each location and compare them to the combined official totals, to get the most accurate read on our data. (Our volunteers came up with the solution to this one: next time, the volunteer in charge of the ballots hands the ballot to the voter only after *personally writing their precinct number on it.*)

Our plan is to meet with a local high school statistics teacher (tomorrow, the 17th, to hand over our data for statistical analysis. He is using our parallel election results as a class project! We don't know yet when we'll get their response, but we will post whatever they find as soon as we get it.

Though we are still organizing our data, we have realized that the absolute greatest value in the experience was in forming a synergistic group of dedicated volunteers who want to continue to work together on more and bigger voting projects; and in helping educate the public on the critical issue of electronic voting vulnerabilities. In all, about 600 people voted with us last Tuesday. It's not a huge number, but as Karen said, 600 more people now know a little bit more about the problems about electronic voting, and have had the experience of a "transparent" election with hand-counted paper ballots!

We had our first follow-up meeting last night, and everyone was bursting with ideas. We are definitely going to do this again during the Spring primaries. Also our very exciting plan: to put together an instructional video and prepare it as part of a systemized "package" of step-by step guidelines and downloadable forms and handouts for other election activists across the country who want to hold parallel elections in their areas. When it's ready, we'll announce it on the BBV and Coalition for Visible Ballots websites, and we'll set it up to be ordered through the VoteRescue.org website for the cost of the video and shipping. We plan on having it ready by early spring in time for parallel elections to be executed for the primaries **ALL OVER THE COUNTRY!**

With all the public speaking I've done to promote Bev's work and get the word out on vote fraud and the need for citizens to take back the election process from the corporations, this parallel voting project was the most rewarding work I've done so far. I know it's because: It's all about the **PEOPLE** getting involved in **TAKING OUR COUNTRY BACK!** More to come!