

The key to smooth voting? 'Panic'

Overplanning for any possible glitches helped avert trouble, election experts say

By Deborah Hastings

Associated Press

After all that fuss, the system worked. There was no meltdown, no flurry of lawsuits, no statewide demands for a presidential recount.

So does that mean America's voting machinery is finally fixed? And why did it work so well under record-setting turnout?

"Panic," said Doug Lewis, who heads Election Center, a non-profit that works with voting officials across the country. "Everyone involved in conducting elections was just on pins and needles the entire year. Over-planning really helped."

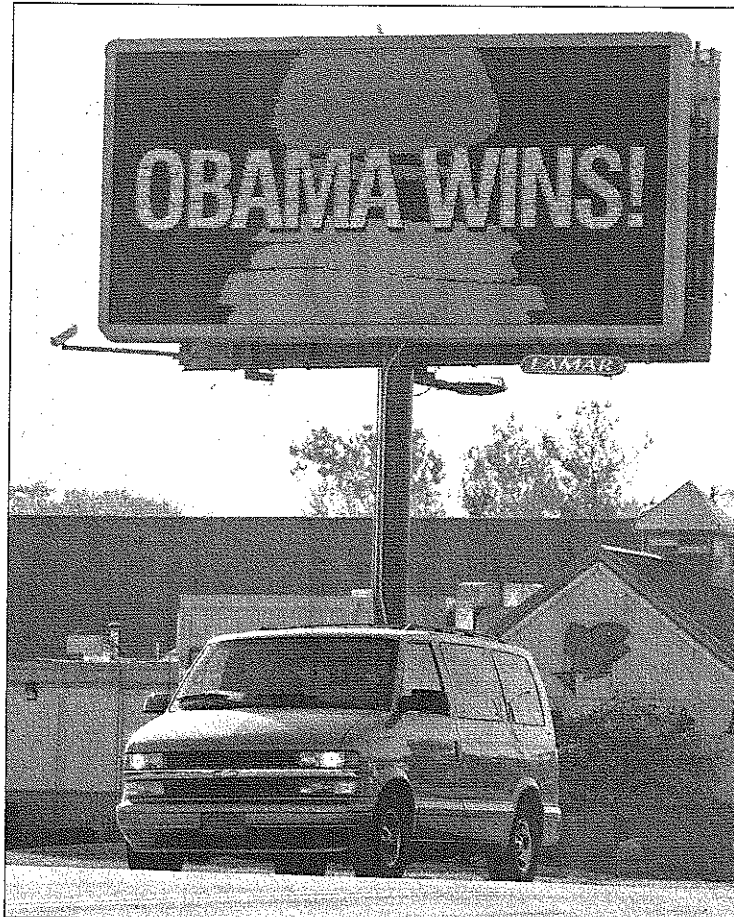
Extra precautions were taken in nearly every precinct. In some areas, helicopters stood by to deliver touch-screen machines if extras were needed. Ballot orders were also increased.

The Election Assistance Commission, the federal agency that oversees voting systems and distributes money to improve them, recommended that local jurisdictions recruit twice as many poll workers as in previous elections.

"Election officials went to extraordinary lengths to have not only a Plan A, but a Plan B and a Plan C," Lewis said.

In the end, there were a few hiccups: Some machines were slow to start up, and voter rolls were missing some names. But for the most part, the system functioned well.

It worked even under the onslaught of more than 133 million voters, the largest number in at least 40 years. Many of them waited for hours to choose between John McCain and Barack Obama, the first African-Ameri-



MICHAEL CONROY / Associated Press

FAST OUTCOME: A Crown Point, Ind., billboard Wednesday noted Obama's victory. Experts say preparation led to a quick, accurate vote count.

can elected president.

"The voters were enthusiastic and just glad to be in the process," Lewis said. "That attitude really helps. The day goes by much better."

All of which is good news, but no reason to get complacent, voting activists said.

"America had its game face on," said Doug Chapin, director of electionline.org at the Pew Center for the States. "Election officials and poll workers and voters were laser-focused on what they needed to do. They were willing to stand in line. They knew about early voting.

They were vigilant about hiring extra poll workers."

Yet, Chapin said, "we need to do more. We didn't have a close election, and that took some of the pressure off."

Also alleviating pressure Tuesday was newly popular early voting, which allowed people to mail in ballots or vote in person days before the election. At least one-third of the nation's general-election ballots were cast that way, according to early estimates.

But the process had its downside. Because so many voters wanted to cast early ballots,

many people stood or sat or played cards in lines that lasted hours. In Florida, the governor ordered early polling places to stay open 12 hours a day instead of eight.

But Ion Sancho, elections director for Florida's Leon County, said early voting is the answer to overhauling the nation's varied, and sometimes confounding, voting system.

"When you can remove one out of three people from the lines on Election Day, that means there won't be two-hour waits at the polls. Fewer voters are going to be inconvenienced."

In 2000, confusing ballots and mismatched ballots enraged Florida voters. And in 2004, touch-screen machines refused to boot up, and Ohioans seethed while standing in line for as long as 14 hours.

Things have changed since then. Electronic machines are no longer the darling of voting officials. In big electoral states such as California, Florida and Ohio, many precincts have junked them in favor of old-fashioned paper ballots read by optical scanners.

Statewide voter registration databases, which are now required by law to help prevent a repeat of 2000, provide what are supposed to be comprehensive lists of eligible voters.

The lists are not without problems, either. On Tuesday, in states including New York, Georgia, California and Pennsylvania, people at the polls complained they were dropped from the rolls. Their only option was to cast a provisional ballot, which is not recorded if poll workers cannot find a voter-registration record for each ballot.

Voting advocates said Wednesday those omissions still constitute a serious failure in the voting system.

Sancho said such problems take years to correct.

"We are inching our way toward a better electoral system," he said. "A lot of work remains. But we handled more than 130 million voters in this country yesterday. We were able to accommodate more people than ever before and do it more smoothly. So we have to be doing something better."

Ed Martin