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MAKING VOTES COUNT

When the Umpires Take Sides

When Katherine Harris had to decide which candidate won Florida in 2000, many people were disturbed to learn she was both the state's top elections official and co-chairwoman of the Florida Bush-Cheney campaign. This year, that kind of unhealthy injection of partisanship into the administration of a presidential election could happen again.

Ms. Harris's successor is staying out of partisan politics this year, but other secretaries of state are diving right in. In Missouri, as important a swing state as Florida, the secretary of state has a top position in the Missouri Bush-Cheney campaign. In Michigan, another battleground state, the secretary of state has signed on as co-chairwoman of the Bush-Cheney campaign, and has been supporting an openly Republican voter registration drive.

When international observers monitor voting in new democracies, a key factor they look for is nonpartisan election administration. (A guidebook monitors use instructs that this can be done by the use of either "mainly professional" or "politically balanced" administrators.) This advice is rarely followed here at home. Decisions about voting machines and voter eligibility, and about who has won a close election, are often in the hands of partisan officials. The private companies that are rapidly moving into the elections field have political ties as well. To remove the appearance, and perhaps the reality, of bias, this culture of partisanship in election operations should be dismantled.

In most states, the top election arbiter is a secretary of state who ran for office as a Republican or Democrat. While some try to carve out a more independent identity once in the job, many are actively involved in electioneering for their party, or in their own campaigns for higher office. West Virginia's secretary of state, who has installed a new statewide voter database and made important decisions about what voting machines the state will use, is running in his state's Democratic primary for governor. Ohio's secretary of state, who has been overseeing the purchase of new machines in his state, is also running for governor.

Many of the decisions secretaries of state make have the potential to change an election's results. Purging voting rolls too aggressively, as Ms. Harris did in 2000, can change the party breakdown of the electorate. Not purging voters who are ineligible can, too. Decisions about whether and where to install more reliable voting machines can change the outcome. So can rules about processing new registrations

and the location of polling places.

Private companies are playing a large, and growing, role in election administration. This trend has the potential to "professionalize" the system, but unfortunately, most of these companies have hurt their own credibility by getting involved in partisan politics. The chief executive of Diebold, one of the leading electronic voting-machine manufacturers, made headlines when he wrote a fund-raising letter saying he was committed to seeing President Bush re-elected. Other leading companies have, more quietly, abandoned their own neutrality. Accenture, which put together a voter database for Florida and is preparing one for Pennsylvania, is a generous donor to both parties, although it gives about twice as much money to Republicans as Democrats.

The idea of getting the secretary of state out of partisan politics is a foreign one to many states, where the job has always been an elective one. But at the very least, no state official who helps run elections should continue to be involved in political campaigns or other partisan activity. Companies that do this work should not make campaign contributions, and states should not hire them if they do. This country should start holding its election system to the same standards of impartiality that its election monitors routinely apply to others.

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