

## Extra Feature Story

### Nation Awaits History-making Election Day

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**Nov. 4, 2008 will change history not just because the United States will elect either the first African-American president or first female vice president, but because millions of people voted early, altering the way candidates campaign and, most likely, dramatically increasing the percentage of Americans who actually vote.**

In past decades, most people voted on Election Day and a few obtained "absentee ballots" if they were going to be out of town.

But in recent elections, states have set up early voting procedures in an attempt to alleviate problems caused by everyone heading to the polls on the same day.

#### Early voting in more than 30 states

More than 30 states have set up places where people can vote early or by mail. As a result, more than one third of voters will have cast ballots in person or by mail by the time Election Day comes around, predicts Paul Gronke of the Early Voting Information Center. That's up from 15 percent in 2000 and 20 percent in 2004.

Both candidates have urged their supporters to vote early as a way of ensuring that voters aren't discouraged by long lines or run into problems on Election Day.

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama recently urged supporters in Indiana to vote early: "If your car breaks down on Election Day ... if something happens ... you have already cast your ballot -- you'll feel good about yourself."

In closely contested Colorado, Nevada, Florida and New Mexico, about half the voters are expected to cast ballots before Election Day.

"It's a sea change," says Rosemary Rodriguez, head of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. "This is a little bit astounding."

#### Committed voters vote early

Voting early means that a critical event -- such as a scandal, a major misstep or so-called October surprise -- could occur after a large number of votes already have been cast.

But such a scenario probably wouldn't matter much, analysts say, because most early voters are committed supporters of a particular candidate.

"Probably regardless of what happens in the intervening time between when early voters cast their ballots and Election Day, they probably would vote the same way anyway," says Dan Seligson of electionline.org, a nonpartisan election reform Web site.

He added that early voting may simplify each campaign's "very complex and labor intensive end game." However, it also means that candidates have to keep up the energy for weeks before Nov. 4—because every day is Election Day.

### **Long lines and problems even in early voting**

Even though early voting is supposed to making voting easier, the record numbers flooding polling stations have caused long lines and confusion in some cases.

"Some of those lines have lasted between 4 hours and 6 hours, those are really unconscionable lines," said Ion Sancho, Supervisor of Elections in Leon County, Florida.

The complaints caused Republican Governor Charlie Crist to declare a state of emergency and extended polling hours from eight hours a day to twelve.

### **Preparing for law suits**

At the same time, there have been reports of malfunctioning machines in West Virginia, Tennessee and Texas, where voters said voting machines switched their votes.

Thousands of lawyers from both campaigns are amassing in some states and there are already lawsuits underway. The NAACP is suing Democratic Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, saying the state was unprepared to deal with a record-breaking turnout. Kaine defended his state, saying election officials have done everything they can to prepare.

In Colorado and Georgia, watchdog groups have raised concerns about efforts to remove names from voter registrations, and in Ohio, a community organization called ACORN is being investigated for submitting fake names and registering the same people several times.

### **Focus on battleground states**

If there are problems on Election Day, they will matter most in so-called political battle ground states where the vote is expected to be very close.

The focus on states is due to the uniquely American institution, the Electoral College.

Created in 1787 to increase the power of states and balance power between small and large states, the Electoral College forces candidates to focus on certain states instead of winning over the most total voters.

In total, there are 538 Electoral College members: states are allotted a vote for each of their two senators, each House representative (which depends on population), plus three votes for the District of Columbia. The electors never gather together – instead meeting in their respective state capitals on the "first Monday after the second Wednesday in December" to symbolically carry out the vote.

The most important number to watch for on Election Night is 270 -- the number of electoral votes needed to gain a majority and become president.

And if there is to be a clear winner, hope that voting goes smoothly in the hottest battleground states: Nevada, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, Missouri, Colorado and Florida.

**-- Compiled by Leah Clapman for NewsHour Extra**

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