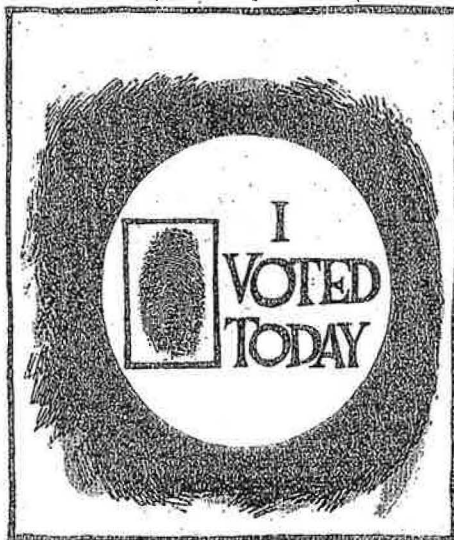


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PAPER-BALLOT ERA



TOUCH-SCREEN ERA

WAXMAN CALIFORNIA INVESTIGATION

## Upgrade the technology

We use methods and equipment that undermine national commitment to equality in our election process

BY HENRY WAXMAN

The 2000 election revealed that millions of ballots were not counted in the presidential election. Many people assume that most of this problem occurred in Florida. But the failure to make every vote count was a serious nationwide problem.

A recent investigation by my staff examined income and racial differences in how votes were counted in the 2000 election. What our report found should concern every American: There is pervasive unfairness in our election system. Voters from low-income communities with high minority populations had their votes discarded at much higher rates last November than voters from affluent communities.

Our report looked at election results from 40 congressional districts in 20 states. Half of the districts were low-income districts with large minority populations; the other half were affluent districts with small minority populations. The report found that the voters from low-income, high-minority districts were over three times more likely to have their votes for president discarded than voters in high-income, low-minority districts.

Voters in some low-income, high-minority districts, such as Rep. Carrie Meek's district in southeastern Florida, were 20 times more likely to have their votes discarded than voters in some other districts.

This amounts to disenfranchisement of low-income, minority voters.

Our nation is built on the democratic principle that every person's vote should count. Yet we use voting methods and equipment that undermine our national commitment to equality.

Many forms of disparate treatment of minorities and the poor seem intractable. But discrimination in the voting booth can be addressed. Our report shows that newer technology significantly reduces the high rates of uncounted ballots in low-income, high-minority districts.

Punch-card machines, which are used in

almost one-third of the jurisdictions around the country, produce the highest undercount rates. In low-income, high-minority districts using punch-card machines, one out of every thirteen ballots cast in the 2000 election was not counted in the presidential race. But when comparable districts used modern optical machines that let voters check their ballots, the undercount rate dropped by nearly 90 percent.

Consider the experience of the nation's poorest city, Detroit, which my staff examined in a congressional report released in April. In the 1996 presidential election, Detroit relied on punch-card machines and had an undercount rate that was 50 percent higher than the national average. But in the 2000 presidential election, Detroit switched to modern optical machines and reduced the undercount by two-thirds, achieving an undercount rate that was 50 percent below the national average.

Improving technology will not address every election concern. Problems related to legal voters being removed from the rolls, inadequate voter education and poll worker training, and lack of access for the disabled, as well as a host of other problems uncovered last November, need to be addressed. But our investigation demonstrates that we can substantially eliminate income and racial disparities in the undercount through better voting machines.

Now is the time for Congress to act. Sen. Chris Dodd and Rep. John Conyers have introduced legislation that would mandate the use of modern machines that allow voters to check their ballots, as well as authorize \$700 million to help localities pay for updating technology. We must enact these reforms to restore America's confidence in our electoral process.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., along with others in the U.S. House, asked for the study.