

Posted on Wed, Apr. 23, 2008

Primary election proves relatively trouble-free

By Anthony R. Wood

Inquirer Staff Writer

Despite unprecedented numbers of new registrants, a potential record voter turnout, and fears of the very worst, Pennsylvania's election system evidently withstood the challenge yesterday.

Not that the day was trouble-free. Voter advocates logged about 1,000 election complaints from across Pennsylvania, including about 150 concerning malfunctioning machines.

"These really large turnouts are putting a strain on the election-administration system," said Jonah Goldman of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, in Washington. "Unfortunately, we expect problems because we know the infrastructure of the elections isn't up to the weight of the problem."

Goldman said the complaint volume in Pennsylvania was comparable to that of Ohio's primary in March.

But given that the state now has more than 8 million registered voters - 215,000 of them new - yesterday's problems were "nothing unusual," said Zack Stalberg, chief executive officer of the Philadelphia voter-watchdog group Committee of Seventy.

"It was just the garden-variety stuff," said Bonita Hoke, head of the Pennsylvania League of Women Voters.

Commonwealth Secretary Pedro A. Cortes suggested last night that the numbers of complaints might have been bumped up by the heightened scrutiny drawn by a pivotal contest that was the first significant primary in six weeks.

He said he knew of only one primary-day court challenge, and that it was unsuccessful. In Philadelphia, a voters group had asked a judge to order polls to stay open two hours later because of machine problems.

Cortes described the turnout as "phenomenal."

He said it might reach 50 percent, perhaps eclipsing that of the 1980 primary, when President Jimmy Carter was challenged by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D., Mass.) for the nomination. Turnout numbers in that era generally were higher because registration requirements were stricter.

Cortes said the turnout in Allegheny County was 60 percent.

He added that some polling places in a handful of counties he did not identify opened late but that he had no indications that the late openings kept down vote totals.

Scattered machine malfunctions were reported throughout the Philadelphia region.

One in Philadelphia set off the court challenge. When Richard Brown, of the 5700 block of North 12th Street, showed up at his polling place at 6:55 a.m., it took nearly two hours for the machines to be repaired or replaced, he said. In his court affidavit, Brown said he waited more than an hour for election officials to produce paper provisional ballots.

Voters at a polling place in the 49th Ward near the Fern Rock train station had to wait two hours because of machine malfunctions, said Kathryn Bookvar, a lawyer with the Advancement Project based in Washington who was in Philadelphia to monitor the election. Machine problems also were reported in West Oak Lane; Upper Darby, Delaware County; and Elkins Park, Montgomery County.

In Elkins Park, the problem was a machine that a poll worker accidentally powered down, county spokesman John Corcoran said.

Contact staff writer Anthony R. Wood at 610-313-8210 or twood@phillynews.com.

Inquirer staff writers Ed Colimore, Carolyn Davis and Jennifer Lin contributed to this article.