

Spoiled Voters or a Spoiled Election?

By Aaron Zisser

Philadelphia voters are not willing to stand hour after hour in line to vote because they are “spoiled,” according to Margaret Tartaglione, the person in charge of conducting the City’s election. At a recent public meeting, Ms. Tartaglione, the elected Chairwoman of the City Commissioners, accused her constituents of complaining about lines even though voters in Europe wait as long as 24 hours to mark their ballots. So when Ms. Tartaglione was then asked to take steps to shorten voting lines when machines don’t work, it was no surprise that she dismissed the suggestions outright.

Experience at this Spring’s primary election suggests that large numbers of citizens are losing their right to vote because of long lines when voting machines don’t work. Citizen hotlines that day learned that at least 35 polling places in Philadelphia had machines down for substantial periods of time before they could be fixed, and an observer from the Committee of Seventy reported seeing hundreds of people leaving without having the chance to vote.

The voters who left had jobs they had to get to, children to pick up from school and feed, and other obligations. To call these would-be voters spoiled because they have other responsibilities is to try to divert attention from the common sense solutions available. Surprisingly, the three City Commissioners in charge of Philadelphia’s elections last week seemed unaware of or complacent about the long lines resulting from machine breakdowns. They were also inconsistent: On the one hand they claimed there were no long lines. On the other they said they were inevitable.

The simple solution is to give voters the option of using paper ballots while waiting for machines to get fixed. Poll workers are already trained to handle paper ballots, called provisional ballots, for voters not found in the registration book. The process with emergency paper ballots would be very similar but simpler, since these ballots are for those who are in the registration book.

Since April, dozens of civic and civil rights organizations called for the State to require the use of paper ballots where voting machines become inoperable. The State’s subsequent directive required poll workers to immediately distribute emergency paper ballots when *all* voting machines at a particular precinct break down. The directive says nothing about what poll workers should do if only *some*, but not all, of the machines break down. Most polling stations have only two or three machines, so the breakdown of even one machine can pose a significant problem.

So what do the City Commissioners intend to do? The bare minimum. They have instructed poll workers to distribute emergency paper ballots only if *all* machines break down.

A proposal by the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia at last week’s hearing that Philadelphia direct its poll officials to use paper ballots if any machine is down and there is a significant line led to another outburst and dismissive shouting by Commissioner Tartaglione. No one was suggesting that if

the machine can be promptly fixed and voters are not being turned away that paper ballots have to be used. While even Ms. Tartaglione appears to agree 24 hours is too long, the Commissioners can – and should – set a standard which will allow people to cast their ballot with a reasonable but not excessive wait.

The Commissioners still have time to make this important change. No additional training is involved and the operators receiving calls for repairpersons can remind the polling officials of this procedure. The City Commissioners have a big job – hundreds of thousands of registration applications to process, a litany of procedures to implement, and inadequate technology and guidance from the state. But this is an important election year and record turn-out is expected. Whatever burden imposed on the City Commissioners pales in comparison to the benefits from implementing these simple measures.

The simple fact is that at some point lines become too long. People become upset about long lines precisely because they value the right to vote. The City Commissioners didn't hesitate to lambast "outsider" voter protection organizations for all the work they are causing election officials, but Ms. Tartaglione and the other commissioners should not ignore popular sentiment from unspoiled voters demanding an unspoiled election.

Commissioner Tartaglione can be reached at 686-3460 or 686-3461. Weekly public meetings of the City Commissioners are held on Wednesdays at 11 a.m., City Hall Room 130.

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