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—Allen H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982

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Today's debate: Antiquated voting machines

Will anyone fix this ridiculous voting system?

Our view:

The next president can. It should be his first priority.

No matter how bitterly this presidential election ends, all sides will readily agree on one point: The mechanics of the nation's voting system are intolerably antiquated.

In an age when a simple desktop computer can crunch massive amounts of numbers with absolute precision, Florida's voting machines are so imprecise that they've cast doubt on the presidency. And Florida's problem could have happened almost anywhere.

Despite technological advances in the rest of the economy, only a third of the nation's voters cast their ballots using anything like modern technology. Half use relatively ancient devices — punch cards, lever machines or paper ballots — to cast votes. As a result, voters can inadvertently disqualify their votes by double voting in an election, ballots get miscounted by machines or by hand, and recounts take days or weeks. Thousands of voters are effectively disenfranchised. That's particularly true with the punch ballots of the sort used in heavily populated southern Florida counties.

The largest impediment to improvement is cost, but a modest federal push could break the logjam. There are about 1,500 counties in the nation that still use antiquated systems. If it cost \$2 million each to upgrade them — a reasonable estimate given what it cost some counties to do so — that \$3 billion would still be a tiny fraction of next year's expected federal budget surplus.

If ever an issue had national political appeal, upgrading the country's voting system has it now. Moves in that direction already are afoot in several states and Congress.

As things stand today, problems with the nation's voting system are legion. Consider the problems posed by punch ballots alone:

- In Salt Lake County, Utah, officials in 1996 ordered a recount of roughly 300,000 ballots after they found that many chads, the part of the punch ballot that is supposed to be punched out, hadn't detached. The recount changed hundreds of votes.

- Four years ago, problems with punch ballots in a Massachusetts congressional primary reversed the outcome after a hand recount.

- Back in 1988, a federal report sharply criticized punch ballots, noting that improperly punched cards make the process of

Voting methods vary

Here are the six different ways that voters cast their votes:

- **Optical scan:** Voters fill in circles next to candidates' names on a paper ballot, and a scanner reads them at the polling place.

- **Punch card:** Voters use a stylus to punch out perforated holes next to candidates' names.

- **DataVote:** Voters use a machine to punch holes in ballots that haven't been perforated.

- **Lever machine:** Voters pull levers to make their choices and another one to record their votes.

- **Electronic:** Voters select choices by touching a computer screen.

- **Paper:** Voters mark their ballots, and the counting is done manually.

Source: Federal Election Commission

counting votes unreliable.

Palm Beach County, Fla., itself recognized the problem with chads long before Election Day. The county's voting instructions told voters in bold type to make sure the holes are completely punched through.

Solutions can be had, and some counties and states are putting them in place with a good deal of success. Brevard County, Fla., for instance, replaced its punch ballots with optical scanners last year. Voters fill in circles on a paper ballot, and the scanners tally votes instantly. This election, the county had complete results before 10 p.m. on election night, and its recount got the exact same result.

Oklahoma in 1992 switched all 77 counties to optically scanned ballots. The move by the legislature, which cost \$20 million, came after one county's election machinery experienced widespread jamming and misreading problems in 1986. Oklahoma had almost full results by midnight on election night this year. The results were transferred from the scanners to the Internet untouched by human hands.

Computerized and Internet voting also show promise where they are being tried.

But without federal involvement, these better voting systems won't reach most voters anytime soon. Even forward-looking county officials face uphill battles getting the money needed. Brevard County's election supervisor spent six years trying to convince county officials to spend the \$1 million needed to upgrade its system. New York City has been trying for 12 years to abandon its Kennedy-era lever voting machines in favor of a \$60 million electronic system, but a lawsuit and other delays have plagued the process. And few states have followed Oklahoma's lead to modernize statewide.

Either Al Gore or George W. Bush can change this dismal picture. A good first step would be to push Congress to remove the money obstacle through the use of federal grants to states willing to modernize well ahead of the next presidential election. Those grants could also be used as a lever to encourage voting uniformity at the state level and insist on top-notch election management practices.

If the nation's leaders seize this momentum for meaningful reform, election officials and the voting public will no longer have to pray for big victory margins to cover up dangerous weaknesses in how votes are counted.

Vietnam visit long overdue

I am most happy that President Clinton has begun a dialogue with Vietnam ("Clinton visit shows best, worst of U.S.-Vietnam ties," News, Monday).

The time is long overdue for our own self-interest if nothing else. We need a firm ally in Southeast Asia, and Vietnam is perfectly situated for that.

While we conducted a devastating war against Vietnam, there is no visceral hatred for America in Vietnam. The enthusiastic and very large crowds that greeted Clinton are positive proof of that.

There is visceral Vietnamese hatred for China. Historically, China occupied and oppressed Vietnam for more than 700 years. Not two years after the "American war," the Chinese were at war with Vietnam along Vietnam's northern border.

Therefore, a strong and prosperous Vietnam is in our vital national interest.

By building up Vietnam, we would create no military threat to us, and the country would be regarded as a natural ally against China — if it came to that. China is the belligerent one — and has said so many times.

We owe it to Vietnam and to ourselves to help Vietnam in any way.

As the adage has it, "your enemy's enemy is your friend."

Peter J. Riga
Houston, Texas

Boys' older fans

I enjoyed the review of the Backstreet Boys' new album, *Black & Blue*, but I feel that one thing must be said. Toward the end of the review, a reference was made of the appeal of this CD to their "core audience," which I assume means teenage girls ("Bubblegum Boys on road to manhood," Life, Tuesday).

Let me say that as a 43-year-old fan of the Backstreet Boys and a member of the Mature Fan Club for Backstreet Boys, there are many older fans out there who love the guys just as much as the younger fans. And we also respect them for the growth they have shown not only musically, but in their personal lives as well.

I think this CD shows they are no longer a "boy band," which I've never thought they were to begin with. I have so much admiration, respect and love for them for all of the happiness they bring me and others and the way they treat their fans.

I can't wait to see the *Black & Blue* tour when it comes my way.

Becky Coyle
Zanesville, Ohio

Really faster trains?

It is good news that faster trains will soon be running in the Northeast corridor from Boston to Washington, D.C. ("Acela gets rolling in high style," News, Nov. 17).

The Washington-to-New York schedule will be 2 hours, 25 minutes, which is half an hour off the current time. But 30 years ago, the Metroliners made a non-stop trip in 2 hours, 30 minutes.

Henry Korman
Longview, Wash.

Share with needy

A recent article in USA TODAY noted that pop star Elton John is said to have spent an average of about \$2.8 million per month on himself ("Elton: Every night's all right for spending," Life, Nov. 16).

It's true he has no family and no other person for whom to save money. It's also true that he has the right to live in whatever manner he cares to.

My friendly advice to him is the following, however:

Imagine if you cut your spending to only \$1.5 million per month and with that extra \$1.3 million you helped care for some of the people in Great Britain, or anywhere else in this small world. Many of those people are among the ones who have helped you become such a rich person in the first place.

Could you imagine how good you would feel, and how much your friend, the late Princess Diana, would approve and appreciate such a bold move?

Letters



Recount votes: Craig Waters, left, public relations director of Florida's Supreme Court, with official Thomas Hall, announces the decision Tuesday to allow hand recounting of ballots.

Post-election concerns prompt checklist for improving system

When all the post-election concerns are over, Americans will need to take a closer look at the election process. When that happens, let's consider the following:

- Require universal ballots across the country. There is no reason to have so many different types of ballots across the USA.

- Get rid of outdated voting machines. In some parts of the country, people are still voting with the same voting machines used more than 100 years ago. This is the 21st century and there is no reason we cannot opt for enhanced change.

- Vote-tallying systems need to be more accurate and fair. There shouldn't be any question or confusion over how a vote was cast or whom the voter intended to vote for.

- Do away with the Electoral College system. If the Electoral College is not abolished, the electoral votes awarded to each candidate should reflect the way people voted in that state.

In the situation in Florida, I've heard people say that everyone will now see that every vote counts. However, what people are really witnessing is how every vote counts in a close race in the state of Florida.

Agathe Katsaros
Anderson, S.C.

Consider ATM-style voting

I have a simple, fair, apolitical and inexpensive solution to our voting discrepancies, inconsistencies and embarrassments. Why not vote through the ATM network?

ATMs are everywhere, from malls to bowling alleys to convenience stores. They are mobile and can be deployed anywhere as long as there is a phone connection. They are also international, so no absentee votes would be needed. ATMs are also present aboard U.S. military bases and aircraft carriers.

One vote per person per PIN. Just as you now have a maximum daily money-withdrawal amount that you can't exceed, you would set the voting amount to one.

Voting could be a fixed 24-hour window, worldwide, with all polls closing simultaneously. The media's discretionary reporting could no longer influence the outcome of an election. Instant results, no errors and an indisputable electronic audit trail.

The technology is already here. We have four years to implement a better election process; let's start now.

J. Jay Lewis
Cincinnati Ohio

Current process works well

can. Far from being in crisis, America is experiencing one of its finest moments, demonstrating to the world how well the current system works.

Some of the greatest minds in American jurisprudence have thought long and hard about some of the important election issues under debate and have argued them eloquently.

Predictions of doom are wrong. There are no riots in the streets; there is no falling of government; and more Americans understand the Electoral College than ever before. Regardless of the election outcome, America has never been stronger.

Scott Miller
St. Louis, Mo.

A teen's perspective

In light of the recent election news, I am writing to express my thoughts on this 2000 election. I'm not saying that our system has been fair in the past, but being Americans, we choose to address flaws when they threaten us in some way.

Elections have been inconsistent in the past, but have we truly acted on these imperfections? We need to stop all of this pathetic pointing of the fingers and complaining. I'm only 16 and have not been granted the privilege to vote. But I truly believe that this election is a joke.

Why do we criticize the politics of other countries when we have not even begun to address ours?

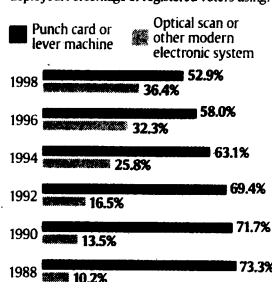
Al Gore, George W. Bush and all of the officeholders, judges and campaign workers involved in this election are about three times my age, yet I can see the logic in this whole mess. It seems that the office of the president is now being decided based on who can manipulate the most ballots, have the most lawyers and get more judges from their party to make decisions to benefit them in the election. I cannot see how the two parties can become more hypocritical.

One side complains about recounting ballots and then it asks for recounts; then it asks for certain ballots to be thrown out and turns around to say others cannot be thrown out. It is like a game that is played and played and played until the desired outcome is produced.

Now the president is being elected by the candidates, their lawyers and their party-friendly judges. Some serious reforms need to be made on both sides and in all aspects of the election — from voting times and ballot approval to hand counts and absentee ballots. We need to realize that this election can damage our reputation with other countries, among ourselves and in the

How every vote is counted

Only slowly is new voting technology being deployed. Percentage of registered voters using:



Source: Federal Election Commission; Election Data Services

By Elizabeth Wing, USA TODAY

Online voting beats chads