

...Ballots are safe in Oregon

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work for a Voter Protection operation in Oregon. Gacek came away confident that the state will be free of problems on Election Day. Still, the Oregon AFL-CIO, the group Our Oregon and a group called the Rural Organizing Project are helping recruit and train election observers. Local union members also are expected to step forward as volunteers.

“The New York Times” reported that votes in about half of the 45 most competitive congressional races — including contests in Florida, Georgia and Indiana — will be cast on electronic machines that provide no independent means of verification. Such machines have fanned concerns that they may be subject to computer hacking or fraud, and are creating doubt about election outcomes.

Oregon, on the other hand, uses a vote-by-mail system. Vote-by-mail allows for a paper trail, which makes a recount possible if questions or challenges arise. County elections departments in Oregon use an optical scanner machine to count ballots, and observers are allowed at each stage of the mailing and handling. In Multnomah County, a permanent staff of 15 (including 12 members of AFSCME Local 88) maintain the records of 395,000 registered

voters, and oversee a large staff of trained temps during each election. Some Republican campaigners in Oregon have alleged that illegal immigrants may be casting ballots, in violation of U.S. law.

“My response is, ‘Give us a name,’” says Multnomah County Elections Division Director John Kaufman. Kaufman says no evidence whatsoever has been presented to elections officials. Oregon doesn’t require voters to prove citizenship to register, but would-be voters risk five years in prison if they falsely swear they are eligible. As of Jan. 1, 2006, federal law requires that new registrants, in order to be able to vote for federal candidates, provide documentation — either a state-issued ID or drivers license, or a Social Security number.

Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain said there’s some concern that naturalized citizens may be intimidated from voting, along the lines of a case last month in Orange County, Calif. where voters with a Hispanic surname received a letter saying they could be jailed or deported for voting. To guard against that kind of misinformation, the Oregon AFL-CIO placed ads in small papers with high Latino readership with information about voter rights.

“The bottom line is, regardless of

what your last name is, if you’re a citizen, you have the right to vote,” Chamberlain said.

Another concern sometimes raised about the vote-by-mail system has been the possibility that unscrupulous individuals could fill out the ballots of others. But Kaufman says that would likely be deterred by elections workers’ practice of checking all signatures against those on the registration card.

Multnomah County has an elaborate system that enables workers to quickly verify signatures against a scanned image of the signature. Workers are trained by a signature expert who formerly worked in the Oregon State Police forensics lab. Voter rolls are kept up-to-date with information from death certificates and DMV records, while registrants who fail to vote in two consecutive federal elections are mailed a card they must return to remain on the rolls. Each ballot must be returned in a secrecy envelope inside another envelope that is printed with a unique bar code and the voter’s name and address. Once delivered by the post office, ballots are kept in a locked location in the elections office, which is guarded by security.

“No system is perfect,” said the AFL-CIO’s Gacek, “but my personal view is that Oregon’s is a good system.”

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