

Indiana's Voting Reforms

Improving the Process is Focus of Changes

By Tom Schuman

The 2000 presidential election is best remembered for keeping the nation in suspense about who the country's next leader would be. Its lasting impact, however, is still being played out and will be felt during this year's general election.

Changes in voter registration procedures, identification requirements and machines used at the polls are a few of the election reforms resulting from the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) passed by Congress in 2002. One of the missions of Indiana's secretary of state is to serve as the chief election official, placing Todd Rokita in the middle of the reform process the last four years.

"The role of the secretary of state has obviously dramatically changed. I believe that focus will continue," he offers during a recent interview. "While we've certainly had an election industry, now we're seeing that industry get a lot bigger."

The industry includes the federal Election Assistance Commission, which, among other initiatives, is developing a series of voting machine standards to be implemented in coming years. Rokita says other players in the mix include the lawyers who descended on Florida in the 2000 controversy and Ohio four years later to challenge individual voters prior to the election.

"Because the electorate is so divided, and there is so much power to be gained or retained, the politicians will do anything," he summarizes.

Picture perfect

The goal of the reforms, according to Rokita, is to balance the accessibility measures of the past 40 years with higher integrity. While voter ID laws have been criticized by some for potentially reducing access, he believes the tighter restrictions will actually increase voter turnout.

He gives the past example of the voter with a picture ID who gets to the registration table at the polling place and is told to 'put that away, we don't need to see it.' "You can see it in their face.

That person has to be thinking, 'How do they know who I am?' In addition, he says fraud is a reality – in Indiana and elsewhere.

"It's all about voter confidence. If people think something is amiss, something irregular, the fact is they're not going to participate." The voter ID law, he says, is a uniform, no-cost way to help increase that voter confidence.

Some states ask voters to show only a utility bill (which Rokita says simply proves residency) and others require an identification (but without a photo). Indiana's law, passed in 2005, calls for photo identification. A driver's license is the most common document used, but a U.S. passport or military identification will be acceptable in most cases. If a voter does not have any of these forms

Indiana Voter Turnout

(mid-term elections)

Year	Registered Voters	Voter Turnout	Percentage Turnout
2002	4,008,636	1,521,353	38%
1998	3,703,978	1,637,090	44%
1994	2,976,255	1,610,082	54%
1990	2,764,768	1,566,301	57%
1986	2,878,498	1,600,230	56%
1982	2,936,978	1,834,225	63%
1978	2,850,684	1,405,399	50%
1974	2,937,114	1,753,000	60%
1970	2,716,367	1,737,700	64%
1966	2,653,219	1,678,100	63%
1962	2,551,303	1,800,100	71%



of ID, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles is required to issue an Indiana ID card at no cost.

Rokita contends that “in five to 10 years, every state in the nation will have a law similar to Indiana’s voter ID law.”

Checking the list

While the voter ID was debated in 2005, much of the public attention this year has focused on the process of the statewide voter registration system (SVRS) – another HAVA requirement – that replaced the individual county voter databases. Initial estimates of Indiana’s more than 4.3 million registered voters found 290,522 potential duplicates, 28,845 potential deceased voters and 5,645 incarcerated voters.

A postcard mailing to all 4.3 million registered voters resulted in more than 1 million being returned to the state as undeliverable. A second mailing will attempt to verify whether the registered voter lives at that address. Voters deemed inactive after that process can renew their status by voting in any of the elections between 2006 and 2008.

Rokita explains that about 18 months of study went into the SVRS before a request for proposal with 500 specifications was developed. Monthly steering committee meetings have taken place over the last three and a half years. Rokita notes that the first step was overcoming resistance from county clerks, who were used to their local way of doing business.

Indiana, however, completed its SVRS before the federal deadline and is ahead of other states in its implementation.

Sites and tools

In 2006, the political process will be compliant with Americans with Disabilities Act regulations. At least one machine per voting site must be accessible to people with disabilities, as well as the polling places themselves. The latter, Rokita points out, has caused some rural counties to change polling places.

An equipment upgrade is also in place. When HAVA passed, 37 Indiana counties were using lever machines and punch cards. In 2006, 65% of Indiana’s counties will use touch screen machines (electronic push buttons) and 35% optical scan equipment (filling in an oval, similar to a school test, with the paper inserted through a reader to record the vote).

The secretary of state would like to see uniform equipment usage, but that remains an individual county decision. Lower purchase costs, streamlined training for polling workers and ease of one system for voters would be among the advantages. With the new and emerging federal standards, counties are likely to be purchasing machines more frequently in the future, so that uniformity may still come.

Rokita reports that 95% of the funding for Indiana’s election reforms has come from the federal government (slated to spend \$3.86 billion nationally). The state, similar to many others, has spent about 69% of its funds on new voting equipment.

Practice run

Indiana conducted a mock election this spring, with 80 of the 92 counties participating in at least some phase. Rokita wasn’t expecting the intense media scrutiny in the effort to document any problems, but says, “It was the right thing to do from an IT (information technology) perspective. If we had to do it all over again, I would. You saw our primary. It did go smoothly. There were no systemic problems.”

A reform that Rokita and others have been studying and that some voters will likely see in 2007 is voting centers. An Indiana delegation traveled to Larimer County, Colorado, where the concept was developed and implemented. Instead of 143 precinct polling places in that county, between 20 and 30 vote centers have been utilized.

Voters can go to the center most convenient to their schedule that day. Temporary T-1 lines provide effective communications between the vote centers and the county courthouse.

“We vote how we live,” declares Rokita, offering examples of schools, large shopping centers and government buildings as more convenient for people than rushing back to precincts near their

2002 Voter Turnout

By Indiana County

Top 5		Bottom 6	
Pike	56%	Jefferson	23%
Warren	54%	Dearborn	28%
Gibson	53%	Lake	28%
Ohio	53%	Monroe	29%
Pulaski	53%	Jasper	32%
		Allen	32%

Source: Indiana Secretary of State

2002 Voter Turnout

By State

Top 5		Bottom 5	
Minnesota	79.1%	Mississippi	37.4%
Wyoming	77.9%	Indiana	38.0%
Colorado	71.6%	Virginia	38.8%
South Dakota	71.6%	West Virginia	41.1%
Hawaii	70.0%	Michigan	43.5%

Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission



Election reforms have been a major focus for Indiana Secretary of State Todd Rokita.

Continued on page 26

Voting Reforms

Continued from page 23

home. “The only reason we have precincts is because it was easier to count votes 100 years ago. It’s been tried in Colorado, and it worked. There were no long lines of voters, no hysterical poll workers.”

In two election cycles, the median age of the poll workers in the Colorado county decreased from 72 to 45. With a median age of 70 for its poll workers, Indiana shares the problem of infusing young people into the process. Money is saved on fewer workers and less equipment.

“I look at it as a government consolidation issue,” Rokita states.

There was an August 1 deadline for counties to apply for a pilot program. Rokita has the option to select up to three counties for a test run in 2007.

Getting the word out

Communication about the changes was widespread before the primary and will return prior to the general election. Advertisements,

public service announcements, comprehensive web site information that includes the ID requirements and demonstrations of how to use the different voting machines, a toll-free hotline and more are part of the outreach. Indiana Voter’s Bill of Rights’ posters are prominently displayed at each polling location. There were more than 400,000 primary Election Day hits on the state’s polling place locator, dramatically reducing the calls to county officials.

All the communication and reforms are necessary, Rokita concludes, especially when one considers the sacrifices so many people make to allow all Americans to have the opportunity to democratically elect their leaders.

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Todd Rokita, Indiana secretary of state, at (317) 232-651. Web sites include www.in.gov/sos and www.indianavoters.com