

How to shorten voting lines

By TIM RICHARD
(Second of two articles)

An expectant mother standing in line on election day in Troy began to have labor pains.

"She, along with others who are physically infirm, could have voted by absentee ballot."

"I'd rather that people who have any doubts about getting to the polls vote by absentee than not vote," said Troy Clerk Ken Courtney.

Most city and township clerks and political observers believe the elderly, the disabled and those out of town on election day should have the right to use an absentee voter (AV) ballot.

But a survey by Observer & Eccentric Newspapers reporters and editors shows clearly that use of the easily AV ballot soars during presidential elections. It has nothing to do with the weather, vacations, the number of persons age 60 or over or anything else increasing.

It's simply that the lines at the polls are so long.

City and township clerks in Oakland County have a number of ideas about how to shorten the lines. Their ideas range from voters informing themselves better, to a shorter ballot, to technical improvements in the conduct of elections.

"PEOPLE DON'T DO their homework," said Southfield Township Clerk Eleanor McCee in a comment that was echoed repeatedly by clerks who saw voters take a long time in the booths.

West Bloomfield Clerk Betty Sue Dupree noted that state law allows a voter two minutes in the booth. Almost everyone who clocked it knows many voters took four to six minutes, but there was no reported instance of an election worker enforcing the two-minute rule.

Some clerks complained that sample ballots weren't received in time for voters to study them adequately. But even when samples are

available, it's common for many voters to wait until they get into the booth, then hunt for familiar or ethnic names.

NEARLY EVERY clerk felt the ballot was too long. People refer to the November balloting as the "presidential" election, but there are many other offices and proposals.

There are the U.S. senator, the U.S. representative, the state representative, the county commissioner, seven Oakland County administrators (executive, sheriff, prosecutor, etc.), local officials (in townships), State Board of Education and the governing boards of three universities—and that's just the partisan ballot.

On the nonpartisan ballot are justices of the Michigan Supreme Court, judges of the Court of Appeals, Oakland circuit judges (full term), Oakland circuit judges (partial terms) and district judges. Detroiters have it even worse: Besides a long list of circuit and probate judges, they also elect recorder's judges and common pleas judges.

Statewide, there were four ballot proposals on such matters as non-returnable bottles and graduated income taxes. Local units may also have ballot proposals. Again, Detroiters had it rough with several city charter amendments and a school millage.

IDEAS FOR shortening the ballot are many.

Elect nonpartisan and township offices in odd-numbered years, suggested Avon Clerk Thelma Spencer and Bloomfield Township Clerk Deloris Little.

Practical proposals in the presidential election, suggested Southfield City Clerk Patrick Flannery. That idea has little chance of success, however, because it would leave only primaries and the once-in-four-years gubernatorial elections available for ballot proposals.

"Some should be made appointive, like the education offices—the ones where people don't know whom they

are voting for anyway," said Troy's Ken Courtney. He referred to the University of Michigan Board of Regents, the Michigan State University trustees and the Wayne State University Board of Governors as well as the State Board of Education.

That idea is far from new. The universities, however, have strong lobbies and alumni associations in the legislature and would resist such a constitutional amendment.

MICHIGAN USED to have a spring election under the state constitution that was in effect from 1908 to 1964. Township offices, the supreme court, educational posts and the state highway commissioner were elected then.

One reason it was eliminated was that turnouts were so low. Democrats, in particular, disliked that election because Democratic voters tend to have a higher "fall-off" than Republican voters after the presidency is decided.

The recent tiff over the Democratic Party's denying Chief Justice Thomas G. Kavanagh renomination started talk of some system of appointing judges. But under the present system, it's the supreme court which decides how to apportion the legislature whenever the apportionment commission deadlines (which it always does). Majority Democrats, then, can be expected to resist any thought of appointing judges.

WEEKEND VOTING, adopted in several European and Latin American countries, is frowned on by local clerks.

Mrs. Little in Bloomfield Township said it's difficult enough to find election voters to work one day, let alone two.

And Mrs. Dupree in West Bloomfield would like the authority to summon election workers the same way jurors are summoned—by random draw from the voter lists.

Many suggestions revolve around voting technology.

Troy's Courtney would like to use punchcards for AV ballots "because then you'd have computer cards, and you'd just have to put them in the computer. With absentees, you have to put the paper ballot into the machine by pulling levers for each vote."

Other clerks would like to allow absentee ballots to be casted directly onto machines instead of onto paper. But Oakland County Clerk Lynn Allen objects that it would present great security problems because machines would have to be operable for some days or weeks prior to the election.

Many clerks think the amount of paperwork involved in issuing and casting an AV ballot can be simplified, and others suggest that not all the available technology is being employed.

As one clerk in Wayne County put it: "If we can put a man on the room, we should have easier and better means of casting ballots on election day."

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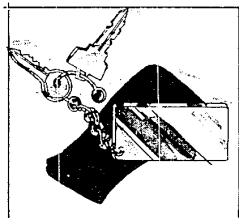
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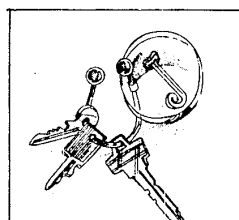
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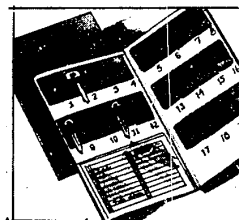
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