

County higher-ups endorse change in elections

By TOM LONERGAN

The post-election news has focused on President-elect Reagan's cabinet and Michigan's continuing budget cuts. But what about election reform? Wayne County's clerk and Oakland County's election director are all for it, and they favor making election day a national holiday.

However, they don't make the laws. Congress does.

CHANGING THE 2-century-old national election day is "not a high priority item of the Congress," says Wayne County Clerk James Killen. "The problem is not critical."

Nonetheless, Killen, a Democrat, is convinced that "we hold elections at the wrong time of year." He favors having the national election in September, the weekend following Labor Day.

"I think our system can stand some upgrading and overhaul," says Howard Altman, Oakland County's elections director. But Altman, an appointee of Republican Clerk Lynn Allen, stops short of endorsing an earlier election day.

"I don't know what it would accomplish," he said. "We always think about these things after the storm."

Altman agrees with Killen that election day should be made a national

holiday. "I don't think it would be a bad idea," he said.

THE FIRST U.S. Congress set the national election in November "to accommodate a largely agricultural population," Killen said. "That is no longer a factor."

But election reform has traditionally been a thorny political issue. Southern states in Congress are "not too worried about whether people vote in Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland and other places," according to Killen. There's little pressure for a change from the western states as well, he adds.

One impetus for change may be declining voter participation and size of the national electorate. Two weeks ago, 52 percent of eligible voters either didn't vote for president or chose a third-party candidate.

There's also been a registration decline in the cities. In Detroit, there were 127,800 fewer registered voters this fall than in 1976. A 34,500-voter increase in the suburbs left Wayne County with a net 93,200 fewer eligible voters.

IN OAKLAND County, the opposite occurred. There were 88,600 more eligible voters this fall than four years ago. Oakland is predominantly Republican, while Wayne has been a long-

time Democratic stronghold.

Killen, who was active in President Jimmy Carter's re-election bid, is bothered by those numbers.

"There's a general feeling that the lower we go in the number of participants, the more critical the situation gets," he said.

"The facts are we're getting a reduced number of people in the metropolitan areas. Fewer are voting."

"We have the loudest voting record in the free world."

Oakland County turnout was 70 percent of 644,000 registered. Wayne County's was about 64 percent of 1.35 million registered.

EXCEPT FOR long lines, Nov. 4 voting went smoothly, according to the two election officials.

At some polls in Oakland County, including the Farmington area and Brandon Township, there were people voting as late as 10 p.m., two hours after the polls closed.

With each voter taking at least four to five minutes to read a variety of ballot referendums, lines were inevitable.

"We didn't receive any complaints that the wait was so long that people didn't vote," Killen said.

Altman said a 10 to 15 percent increase in voting by absentee ballot in Oakland County delayed release of fi-

nal election returns. The county election office didn't have final returns on all races available until 4 p.m. the day after the election.

"Good Lord, we had some (local) clerks reporting at 5 and 6 in the morning," Altman said. In past presidential elections, the usual reporting time was midnight, he added.

Altman has been Oakland's elections director for nine years.

VOTING ABSENTEE is more convenient, and Altman notes that voter use of the procedure is "being encouraged by some of the clerks and a great

deal by the candidates today."

In Southfield, between 7,000 and 8,000 voted by absentee, Altman said. The county was delayed in reporting final election returns by absentee ballots in Pontiac. Several thousand in that city's 50 precincts voted absentee. Counting them is "something you don't do in five minutes," Altman said.

Most absentee ballots are mailed to the voter. But in Bloomfield Township, absentee votes for this past election and the August primary were cast on one of six machines in the township hall.

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