

Tompkins County Board of Elections

2010 Annual Report

INTRODUCTION

2010 marked the final stages of our complete switchover to optical scan voting machines. This was the biggest change in the election process in New York State in well over fifty years. Our “Pilot Project” in 2009, a limited roll out of new machines (City of Ithaca, only) was extremely helpful in preparing us for the countywide roll out in 2010, but it was only a start.

Thus in 2010, besides all the normal administrative tasks, the staff spent many, many hours understanding, designing and implementing new forms, policies and procedures. Since every county in New York State was in the same new boat, there weren't too many places to turn to for experienced help. (Though we actively sought and shared information with other county boards, the State Board of Elections, and our suppliers.)

Despite the daunting nature of the task, we're proud to say we had a very successful implementation. Most voters had no problem at all adjusting to the new process, and we're confident each and every vote was correctly counted.

VOTER OUTREACH

One of the most important aspects of the switchover to new voting machines was education, both for poll workers and the voting public. Numerous hands-on demonstrations for voters were held throughout the county. These were especially well attended at locations like McGraw House and Lifelong. We also produced our own large “How to Vote” posters to put up at each poll site. (See below for more details.)

In the fall we mailed each household outside the City of Ithaca a brochure with instructions on optical scan voting. (We had already mailed City residents a brochure in 2009, since they were part of the Pilot Project.)

POLL WORKER TRAINING

We trained over 400 inspectors to man the polls in 2010. A lot of thought went in to the best way to help them adapt to the new voting system. Many inspectors had previously expressed concern about adapting to new technology. We tried to reassure them that the new system was not that difficult, and in some ways their jobs would be easier.

Because of the new system, we decided that each poll site would now have two Poll Site Managers. They received the normal poll worker training, but also got extra training for working with the new machines and overall management of the poll site. This allowed the other poll workers to concentrate on the more administrative details, such as getting voters signed in, passing out the ballots, and keeping the ballot log.

POLL SITE MANAGER TRAINING VIDEO

Though some training materials about the new machines were available from NY State, we decided early in 2010 that a training video for our Poll Site Managers that specifically addressed the way we wanted them to work on Election Day would be a valuable resource. It would allow us to more easily and dependably train managers with the procedures and forms unique to our Board.

To outsource such a video would have been extremely costly. Instead, we used HAVA funds to purchase an inexpensive camera and editing software, and used our staff and to write, film, and edit the video.

We then showed the video in each training class, and also provided the poll site managers with a DVD copy they could take home and review on their own.

ELECTIONS

On March 16 we ran Village Elections in Cayuga Heights, Dryden, and Groton and Trumansburg. On April 27 we ran the Village of Lansing election.

On September 14 there was a Primary election for nine offices. The Primary marked the biggest roll out to date of the new optical scan voting machines. And because 3 parties were involved, we needed 3 different ballots for each machine. This meant extra time and effort programming the ballots and test decking. This Primary also was the start of our complying with MOVE Act regulations. (see below)

The General Election, held November 2, featured State and Federal offices, along with Town positions and propositions. Approximately 30,000 voters participated in this election.

Throughout the year we also provided support (voter lists, poll books, etc.) to many school and fire district elections.

Despite the challenges inherent in using a brand new voting system, we experienced very few major problems. One of the nice features of the new way of voting is that even if a machine is temporarily down, the voters can continue to vote. They fill out their

ballot as usual, then deposit it in an emergency slot on the machine. Later the ballots can either be scanned, or hand counted.

The new laws mandate a 3% audit after every election, and we were pleased to confirm 100% accuracy at each of our audits.

We solicited feedback from voters, and most were very pleased with the new system. A few expressed concern over their feeling of privacy. We had tried to address this early on, by doing things like resurveying poll sites and then issuing detailed drawings on how to set up check in tables, ballot marking booths, and voting machines for each poll site. We aimed to have a clear path for voter flow, and also ensure voting privacy.

We also tried to make sure election workers understood the sometimes fine line between being helpful and being intrusive. We are still reviewing procedures for 2011 to make sure voters feel they have complete privacy for filling out and casting their ballot.

Problems with ballot design were mentioned by a few voters, too, specifically small fonts and having propositions on the back. While we are constrained by law and our Election Management System over what we can do design-wise with ballots, we will do what we can, and lobby Albany for additional changes.

MOVE ACT

The Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (MOVE), signed by President Obama on October 28, 2009, took effect in 2010. This legislation was designed to make it easier for overseas voters to register and vote, and help ensure their vote is received and counted.

Among other things, the Act required States to set up a way for Military and Federal Absentee voters to obtain their ballots online. This is NOT internet voting; the voter downloads and prints out his or her ballot, then must complete it and mail it in. Voters can check online later to see if we received their ballot. Even overseas voters who received and returned ballots by the normal mail process can now check online to make sure we received their ballot.

The ability to instantly access their ballot is especially important to our overseas Military voters, who move around a lot and who are often stationed where mail service is limited.

A company called Scytl provided the architecture for this system in 2010. Deputy Commissioner Tom Paolangeli attended online trainings and worked with Scytl to implement and manage our part of the system. There is a fair amount of work that now needs to be done on our end for each election affected by the MOVE Act: uploading voter records, ballots, daily maintenance tasks, and assisting users.

For the General Election we had 526 Federal Voters and 75 Military voters. Less than a dozen used the internet option in 2010, but we expect it will be more popular in the years to come as overseas voters become more aware of it.

Ramifications of the MOVE Act must still be dealt with by the NY State Legislature. The Act requires we mail overseas ballots 45 days before a Federal election. Currently New York State has Primary Elections in early September. But that does not give Boards of Elections enough time to get certified results and a General Election ballot designed, printed and mailed 45 days prior. NY asked for and received a waiver for 2010, but is unlikely to be granted for future Federal elections. So our State Legislature will have to change the Primary Election to August or earlier.

HOW TO VOTE POSTERS (and more)

We were required to provide posters at each poll site instructing voters on how to use the new system. We came up with a design we liked, but were shocked at how much it would cost to print and laminate. Staff research showed that for less money, we could purchase a used printer/plotter from another department and a new large format laminator. We applied for and received HAVA funds to purchase the equipment.

In addition to making the “How To Vote” posters, we could now also do in-house the large sample ballots that go to each poll site. It also meant we could print and laminate all the smaller signs that are needed at poll sites. We’ll continue to save a lot of money in the coming years from these investments.

WEB SITE

Our web site had a major facelift in 2010. Susan Moore, a Systems Analyst with the Tompkins County Department of Probation, met with us and designed a sleeker, more modern look for our web site. This was also the perfect time to clean up the unwieldy file structure underpinning the site, a remnant of very primitive web design tools. We’ve long been proud of the functionality of our site, but we now have a leaner, cleaner, more accessible interface.

The use of the web site pays off in many ways: fewer phone calls to process in our office, less expense for mailing forms and information, and better customer service for voters and candidates. Being able to instantly download a form, especially near cut-off dates, can make the difference between being able to vote or not.

FACEBOOK

In 2010 we joined a few other county departments and created a Facebook Fan page for the Board. At this point we're still figuring out how to best use such a presence, so there is not much activity to report. But the cost is extremely minor – literally just a few minutes of staff time a month. As time goes by we hope to learn how best to use such social networking sites for voter outreach.

PAST ELECTION RESULTS PROJECT

In late 2010 we completed a major project to compile, digitize, and make available online Tompkins County Election Results dating back to 1915. Most of the data entry was done by interns placed with us from Tompkins Workforce New York. Decades of results handwritten in ledger books had to be entered into an Excel database, proofed, turned into .pdfs, and uploaded. As far as we know, we're one of the few, or perhaps only county in the US to have such detailed and extensive information online.

Another benefit is that anyone interested in researching our past results from can now obtain a copy of the actual Excel file from us for a minimal cost. Because we tried to standardize our data entry, a researcher should be able to easily set up filters or search functions.

NEW EQUIPMENT

Besides our large format printer and laminator, in June we also took delivery of 10 scanner-only voting machines. These will be used to supplement our 45 Ballot Marking Device (BMD) equipped voting machines. This also means we can now begin each election with a few spare machines to handle emergency situations. We purchased the machines with HAVA (Help America Vote) funds.

NEW YORK STATE ELECTION LAW CHANGES

The State continues to modify Election Law to better reflect the new reality of Optical Scan voting and Federal mandates. See Addendum A for a list of changes made in 2010.

In 2011, as mentioned above, the State election calendar will need to be modified so we can comply with the MOVE Act. Also, there may be changes to ballot design aimed at increasing readability of the ballots.

LOOKING AHEAD

2011 features over 50 local offices up for election, so we'll be very busy helping many candidates navigate the often complicated road to election. We will also continue to make changes and adjustments to our policies, procedures and training based on what we learn from each election.

For example, before the first Village Election comes along in March of 2011, Senior Clerk Laura Norman, working closely with Senior Tech Catherine McGrath, will have completed an Access database that will significantly streamline the process of printing many of the forms, checklists, and documents that are needed for each election.

We had literally decades to get the lever machine voting systems down to a science. We have only a few elections under our belts with the much more complicated and time consuming optical scan system. But our goal is "continual improvement," whether it is a time or money saving, behind-the-scenes initiative, easier web access to resources for candidates, or a better experience for the voter.

BY THE NUMBERS

Voter Database:

Active Voters	48,830
Inactive Voters	7,194
New Registrations Processed	2,843
In County Address Changes	3,463
Enrollment Changes	476
Name Changes	235
Registrations Cancelled	965

Inspectors:

Inspectors Appointed & Trained	365
Classes Held	22

Mailcheck:

(Used to verify voter's residence and mailing address, notify them of election dates and their polling site, and recruit inspectors.)

Mailed out	46,498
Returned	4,611

Absentee Ballots Out:

Sept. Primary	1,029
Nov. General	2,342

Petitions Received:

Designating	15
Independent	5

Addendum A

2010 Election Law CHAPTER LIST

Chapter	Bill No.	Title	Date of Letter
5	A1308	Wright (MS) -- Authorizes the board of elections to employ election inspectors to work half-day shifts with adjusted compensation	4/7/2010
28	S4242	ADDABBO -- Relates to the deadline for the publication of enrollment lists	4/7/2010
38	A3910A	Gabryszak (MS) -- Relates to the rights of a victim of domestic violence to cast special ballots if they leave their residence because of such violence	4/29/2010
62	A4015A	Kavanagh -- Provides that an affidavit ballot shall also constitute an application to register to vote	5/4/2010
63	A5276B	Galef (MS) -- Simplifies the absentee ballot process by removing requirement of certain information that is to be provided	5/4/2010
73	S5945A	FOLEY -- Authorizes a court to order the confidentiality of election registration records of a victim of domestic violence	5/10/2010
76	A4467A	Brotsky (MS) -- Permits certain students enrolled in school to serve as election inspectors or poll clerks at elections under the election or education law	5/18/2010
97	A7347B	KRUEGER -- Relates to applications for absentee ballots	6/1/2010
104	A10681B	Silver-- MOVE Act Compliance	6/8/2010
116	A8525	Russell -Appointment of Election commissioner in counties where the party has no representative on legislative body	6/21/2010
129	S7221	Addabbo Court order for full manual count in Special Proceeding	6/21/2010
156	A8698	Campaign Finance Address change and Despositary Information	7/8/2010
163	A11352	Canvassing, counting and inspecting votes	7/8/2010
164	A11353	Opening of Polls and duties of inspectors	7/8/2010
165	A11354	Form of Election Day and Absentee Ballots	7/8/2010
155	A11354	NYC Purchasing Practices	
323		buildings accessible to voters in state assisted buidlings	8/18/2010
359	A10507	Nolan authorizes the use of lever voting machines for school elections	
424	A3563	Perry-Authorizes withdrawal from a primary election run-off. Provides a process for withdrawal from a primary election run-off by a qualifying candidate within three days after the initial primary.	10/15/2010

432	A7850	Paulin (MS)-provides that polling places, whenever practicable, shall be designated directly on a public transportation route. To ensure, whenever feasible, that polling places be designated on a line of public transportation to enable individuals, particularly those with physical disabilities, who do not have their own transportation to get to and from their polling places.	10/12/2010
505	A10946	PROVIDE FOR ACCESSIBLE POLLING PLACES ADA STANDARDS	9/30/2010
512	S5447C	GIVES COUNTY BOARDS POWER TO CREATE AND CHANGE ELECTION DISTRICTS	9/30/2010