
Opinion

10-A THE DOMINION POST SATURDAY, NOV. 18, 2000

GUEST COMMENTARY

Ballots were absent

System of absentee voting is flawed and should be fixed

BY ZACH KAUFMAN

If we have learned anything from this election, it is that the old cliché is true: every vote counts. Perhaps more importantly, we have also learned that we must take great care to ensure that every citizen is provided with the opportunity to vote and that each of those submitted votes is then counted fairly, accurately, and in a timely fashion.

The latest news from Florida is that the number of absentee ballots will likely decide which candidate will receive the state's 25 electoral votes, and thus will become our next president of the United States. However, the system of absentee voting, such as in our state of West Virginia, greatly concerns me, as I think it should concern us all. I believe that our system is flawed and must be reformed, but has possibly already caused great damage to our democracy in general and this presidential election in particular.

Although it is not a right protected by the Constitution and is often criticized as being susceptible to fraud, all states provide some form of absentee voting. Absentee voting originated during the Civil War, when several states passed laws allowing soldiers serving away from home to vote. After 1896, with Vermont taking the lead, several states passed new absentee voting laws that extended the privilege of voting by absentee ballot to nonmilitary members of the community who were away from their voting precinct. More recently, the privilege has included citizens who, though present in their voting district, are unable or unwilling to go to the polls. Today absentee balloting allows members of the elderly and disabled communities, students studying or people working away from home, military service men and women stationed abroad, and others to vote in their home precincts.

Several weeks ago, a few of my family members requested absentee ballots from Monongalia County. The ballots were not sent in time for us to submit them by Election Day, so, on Nov. 7, my mother and I left Washington, D.C., at 4:30 a.m. to make the eight-hour round-trip drive to Morgantown to vote. What bothers me more than the inconvenience and expense of having to take time off from work and driving eight hours to vote is the realization that others who did not receive their absentee ballots in time did not vote because it was either prohibitively expensive, too inconvenient, or physically impossible.

This presidential election is going to be one of the — if not the — closest in history. West Virginia's election was especially close. The state chose Gov. George W. Bush over Vice President Al Gore by a mere 38,620 votes, and my home county of Monongalia chose Bush over Gore by 991 votes and Rep. Bob Wise over Gov. Cecil Underwood by 413 votes. Such small margins can easily be swayed by the tiniest number of votes, such as the number of absentee ballots not received in time and, thus, not cast. Was that the case in this election? I urge all citizens in West Virginia who did not receive their absentee ballots in time to contact their precinct election administrators and local media. Even if the election outcome is not affected, we should at least know the truth.

One suggestion for improving the system of absentee balloting would be to have the registrar of voters include "return request notifications" from the U.S. postal service on the envelopes containing the absentee ballots. Then, election officials would know if the packages were received in time, and, if not, those people who requested absentee ballots could be contacted in time to try to make other provisions to vote. Another option would be to upgrade the class of mail service (for example, from first class to express mail) currently used to send the absentee ballots so that voters would be more likely to receive their ballots in a timely fashion. The cost of one of these proposals or another is a small price to pay to ensure a more fully participatory democracy. Furthermore, it should be required that absentee ballots be submitted by Election Day. That way, the possible delays in waiting for all of the absentee ballots to be submitted, such as we have seen in Florida, will be averted.

One positive thing that will emerge as a result of this close election is that people will be reminded that every vote counts — including those submitted by absentee ballot. Hopefully, this realization will motivate people to become more involved in local, state and national politics, as they will recognize that their individual votes and voices can and do have an astonishingly large impact.

In the future, election administrators must do everything they can to ensure that citizens who request absentee ballots should receive them in a timely fashion and that their returned ballots are included in the vote tallies. Nothing less than our democracy is at stake.

ZACH KAUFMAN, of Morgantown, is a Class of 2000 graduate of Yale University, where he was the student body president. In 1999, Kaufman was awarded West Virginia's nomination for the Rhodes Scholarship, for which he was a finalist. Kaufman works for the U.S. Department of Justice. This commentary should be considered another point of view and not necessarily the opinion or editorial policy of *The Dominion Post*.