Patricia Brigham: Some easy, necessary steps to fix Florida’s elections problems

Voters need to know that when they cast their ballots, their votes are going to count. State officials should be doing everything possible to make that happen.

Florida, we have a problem: our elections system. The 2018 elections debacle showed the world that when it comes to elections, Florida still can’t seem to get it right. 
We saw confirmation of this when the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled that a state law requiring signature matches between mail-in ballots and those on file with elections officials disenfranchised Florida’s voters. In the 2-1 opinion, Judge Robin Rosenbaum wrote, “Florida’s signature-match scheme subjects vote-by-mail and provisional electors to the risk of disenfranchisement.”

Judge Rosenbaum’s use of the word “scheme” is noteworthy in a state where, until recently, students wishing to vote early on their college and university campuses were unable to do so. When U.S. District Judge Mark Walker overturned that prohibition, he wrote that the ban revealed a “stark pattern of discrimination.”

Disenfranchisement and discrimination. Strong words that certainly hint at “schemes.” So do tossed and uncounted ballots, which were prominent features of the 2018 election and its resulting three simultaneous recounts.

It’s past time that Florida gets its elections right. Seriously, it’s not rocket science.

Setting realistic deadlines to “cure” signatures that have an issue would be a good first step. Elections officials aren’t robots. In instances like a massive recount, deadlines should match the needs of elections staff members to make sure all eligible ballots are counted. In fact, an extension of the time lines for recounts in close elections makes good sense and is the responsible, democratic thing to do.

Deadlines are also an issue when it comes to registering to vote. Is there any good reason to prevent an eligible voter from registering on election day? More voters would likely vote and the need for those sticky-widget provisional ballots would significantly decrease.

In a state with a history of elections issues, ensuring that all voting machines, including those for persons with disabilities, have a readable paper trail is essential. This is particularly important in light of the recent legislative push to equip polling places with Express Vote machines. The argument is that these machines will better help the disabled vote. That is indeed a good thing. The problem is that these machines pose a security risk as the voting machine’s optical scanner reads a barcode instead of a
“human-readable” ballot marking; in other words, readable words. Unless the voter verifies who and what he or she has voted for, the only way to truly verify this would be for an auditor to match the bar code with the vote.

Wait a minute. That does sound like rocket science.

In an important swing state as Florida, stakes are high. Voters need to know that when they cast their ballots, their votes are going to count. Our state officials should be doing everything they can to make that happen. And that includes being true to the will of approximately 64 percent of the voters who pushed Amendment 4 over the finish line. Our state will now (finally) enfranchise some 1.4 million “returning citizens” — those with felony convictions (barring murder or sexual assault) — who were unable to vote after serving their time and paying their debt to society. Our Legislature, now debating the definition of “murder,” needs to make sure these returning citizens, many of whom are already registering, have their ballots counted when the 2020 elections roll around. They should expect nothing less.

Meanwhile, Floridians should expect more of our state when it comes to improving our elections systems. When Judge Walker stated in court during the 2018 recount that Florida’s elections have “been the laughingstock of the world,” he also pointed out that, “election after election, we chose not to fix this.”

To borrow a phrase, time’s up.

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