

Politics and Economics

Locals agree on election: It's finally over

by David Reinbold

More than 75,000 people in Centre County cast their vote early last month in what has been called one of the most heated general elections in our country's history.

As the dust settled, the frenzy waned and several Centre County residents, representing various political views, agreed on one thing about the election: good thing it's over.

But, the relief of Election Day 2008 coming and going seems to be the only commonality in opinions of Centre County residents; a commonality that pales in comparison to the larger issues that prompted record voter turnout.

"It seemed to take too long to get to Nov. 4," said Bellefonte resident Kristy Severino.

"I wasn't happy with the results," said Severino, inside the Bellefonte YMCA. "But, I wasn't happy with John McCain either, although I would've preferred him to

win."

Severino said her vote was based upon which candidate supported the military more.

"I don't think Obama will pull the troops out," she said. "They need to come home; I just don't think they'll come home yet."

Severino has a personal stake in the outcome of the war in Iraq. She has a son-in-law who has served in Afghanistan and has since returned home, and a son who is hopeful he'll begin a tour in the spring.

Like Severino, State College resident J.A. Babay was happy when Election Day was over.

"I was just glad when it was all over," said Babay, who was still receiving election phone calls after she had returned home from the polls in the early evening.

"I was very moved on election night," said Babay, inside the Centre Hall library. "It was the first time in a long time to look good to be an American."

"It was the first time in a long time to look good to be an American. Obama was good, McCain was good; it was just very moving."

--J.A. Babay, State College resident

Babay said that both candidates delivered genuine speeches that night, possibly restoring some of our reputation in the world.

"Obama was good, McCain was good; it was just very moving," she said.

She is hopeful for Barack Obama's performance as president, and in his ability to pick an able cabinet.

"I would be optimistic to think that he has enough sense to get the best problem solvers," she said. "For me, I was so attracted to the movement. You're either attracted to change or you're attracted to traditional values."

Babay said she admires and respects

many things about Obama, but the thing she reveres most is that he is a self-made man. She credits the Internet for a large portion of Obama's success.

"The creative use of the Internet helped to build upon his campaign," she said. "This election was unique in so many ways."

Babay said a lot of things need to be improved in America and voted because of a variety of issues.

"The economy sucks no matter what, the war is happening, things just don't make sense," she said. "Just improvement in

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ACLU: Fed pressure on people of faith rises

by Suzan Erem

Hamad Algnis is a well-spoken, well-dressed man with close cropped hair and a short, carefully-groomed beard. "Careful" seems to be a good word to describe him, at least now. But in January 2001, when he moved from his native Yemen to the suburbs of Philadelphia to become a business student, he was wide-eyed and hopeful.

He sought out the local mosque so he could network with fellow Muslims. It was the normal thing to do in a new situation. His mosque, like most places of worship, provided a familiar conduit to an unfamiliar new home. As he pursued his studies and got married, he stayed in close contact with his parents, then living in Saudi Arabia, and filled them in on his progress in America.

Then the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 changed his life in America forever.

Algnis' phone was bugged. The F.B.I. interrogated him repeatedly about conversations with friends and family back home. When he asked how they knew the details of these conversations, the agent told him he had a warrant, because "it's very easy to get one for a person like you."

In August 2002, after months of F.B.I. surveillance, Algnis was arrested on charges

related to his immigration status. He waited three months in the York County Jail for his hearing. When he finally appeared before the judge, he announced he just wanted to go home. But before Algnis could get his affairs in order and buy a ticket home he was arrested in another raid. This time he sat in jail for four months and this time he decided to fight. The American Civil Liberties Union came to his defense.

Algnis was in the audience at Foxdale Retirement Village in mid-November when ACLU Legal Director Vic Walczak spoke on the provocative topic: "People of faith under attack by the government."

The talk drew 50 local residents who wanted know: Could George Bush, of all people, be waging war on people of faith?

But the people of faith are Muslims, the audience quickly learned, and the issue is fresh on the law books from recent battles the ACLU has engaged.

"I'm going to raise a question I'm not going to answer for you," Walczak began. "The question is, since Sept. 11, 2001, whether Islam has become a proxy for dangerousness."

Walczak outlined two major cases the ACLU has taken to court on behalf of American citizens who are Muslims. One, a



Photo by Suzan Erem
ACLU Legal Director Vic Walczak addresses about 50 local residents at the Foxdale Retirement Village in mid-November. Walczak spoke about the government's alleged crackdown on people of Muslim faith.

physicist from Egypt, lost his job in the U.S. defense industry as a result of constant F.B.I. questioning and is moving back to his homeland after almost three decades in

America. The other was an American-born

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Election advocates: System could use a few tweaks

by Suzan Erem

With record voter registration and new voting machines, many Centre County residents and election officials were nervous about how Election Day 2008 would go.

They breathed a collective sigh of relief when it was over. And with a wide margin of victory in almost every local and national race came a sense that it couldn't have gone better.

Voter advocates say that's not quite the case.

"I would recommend standardized training for the judges and poll workers," said Mary Vollero, chair of Concerned Voters of Centre County who has attended the training election volunteers now receive. "They should have a list they go over, and practice – have a practice where people come in and vote."

Alan Benjamin, election judge in Precinct 49 voting at Park Crest Terrace, said he attended a mandatory training and received three separate packets of instructions for his job, but nothing could prepare him for every contingency.

"There are a lot of things that there just aren't prepared instructions for," Benjamin said. "A lot of ambiguous situations."

"I've had comments from some of the judges about the training," said Centre County Director of Elections Joyce McKinley. "Some of our classes were so extremely large I know some didn't get the training....I had hands-on training for the system. I was extremely worn out! I geared on the new system – however we could not cover everything they could be faced with."

McKinley said she has been with the county since 1964 and has helped in some capacity with elections throughout her time there.

"No matter how big or small the election is, we'll always have issues and they're always the same," she said. "These are just more visible because of the high volume and the new system all at the same time."

So there were some real-life scenarios election boards weren't ready for. One judge at a busy precinct left at 6:30 to have dinner with the family. Others didn't anticipate the crowds. There was even a rumor that Precinct 34 had closed early because everyone had voted, causing late arrivals to express relief when they came to vote, realizing that the polls were still open.

The two most common complaints stemmed from the supplemental list of registered voters and multiple precincts voting

at the same location.

In one State College precinct, the election judge required all voters whose names appeared only on the supplemental list to fill out provisional ballots. The supplemental list was made up of registrations that came in close to the deadline, but those voters may vote with a normal ballot. The precinct ran out of provisional ballots, so voters on the supplemental list who came later in the day voted on a normal ballot.

"This is not in accordance with the law," Dickinson Law School professor and poll watcher Ellen Dannin wrote in a report to county commissioners after the election. "Those voters had the right to cast a regular ballot."

Jamison Colburn, also a professor at Dickinson Law School, watched voting at three precincts and said poll workers he saw were properly calling Bellefonte to confirm that voters on the supplemental list could vote. He too witnessed the anomalies in Dannin's precinct.

"Those people are getting credit and their ballots are counted," said McKinley, who was still counting military and provisional ballots weeks after the election.

Identification requirements caused confusion as well. In some cases, signs were posted declaring that identification would be required. Only first-time voters are required to show identification. Some veteran voters left the lines after reading that because they had not brought identification.

"It was so loud it made sense," said poll worker Brenda Black, Patton 67 South 2, who explained that looking at a driver's license was faster than having a voter repeat his or her name in the din. Still, she told the election judge that the sign could be construed as voter intimidation. In some locations the signs were changed or taken down.

"I'm disappointed that signs were not discouraged from being used," Vollero said. "The precinct where I was a watcher they had a sign up that said, 'Be prepared to show I.D.' and people in the line thought they needed it."

Vollero said she witnessed at least two people walking away from the polls because, they said, poll workers had demanded identification they didn't have with them. They eventually voted without their identification.

Finally, in locations with more than one precinct, voters were often confused about which line to stand in. While most voters were patient with the long lines, some were frustrated to reach the end of the line and

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--Joyce McKinley
Centre County
Director of Elections

learn they had been waiting in the wrong line.

"I'm surprised there wasn't violence," Colburn said. "People would wait 50 minutes or an hour and then oops, you're in the wrong line. Some of them were just very dejected."

McKinley said many election boards working precincts assigned someone to work the lines with a street list to confirm voters were in the right line. "And we authorized extra people for them," if necessary, she said.

Still, with such a high turnout and few hitches, most Election Day volunteers con-

sidered the day a great success.

"I think the people who sat at that table and checked voters and recorded names for 14 hours then counting and set up, and these are not young people either, it's very impressive," said Benjamin, echoing the sentiments of Election Day volunteers interviewed for this story. "I think they are heroes."

In the interest of improving the process, though, elections advocates made the following recommendations:

1. Have Internet access at the polls so voters can punch in their address and date of birth and make sure they are in the right place and line.

2. Post signs that read, "Photo I.D. required of all first-time voters" or "Identification may be required if you are a first-time or lapsed voter."

3. Provide better training for judges and poll workers, including problem-solving scenarios.

4. Have Penn State assist the county in its estimation of voter turnout, especially of students, so the county may properly staff the polls.

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Centre County not immune to gerrymandering

by Art Goldschmidt

COMMENTARY

The Pennsylvania Legislature flouts again and again the very article of the 1968 Constitution that legitimates its existence and prescribes its form and its powers. The gerrymandering process, which takes place every 10 years in spite of constitutional safeguards against it, ensures that senatorial and representative districts are safely controlled by one or the other of the two major political parties.

The 1968 Constitution lays out the procedure for redistricting, which must occur during the year after each federal census. It calls for a redistricting commission consisting of five members. They include the majority and minority leaders of the Pennsylvania Senate and House of Representatives or their appointed representatives. The four choose a fifth member, usually not a legislator, to chair the commission. If they do not agree, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court appoints the chair.

The commission, once duly certified, must present a preliminary redistricting plan within 90 days. There follows a 30-day period in which aggrieved parties—in practice, their lawyers—may file objections to the plan.

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court hears the objections and may—if it agrees that it violates the state's constitution or laws—send back the reapportionment plan to the commission, which must then revise its plan. If the reapportionment commission fails to present a plan, the Supreme Court has the final authority to reapportion election districts.

Some portions of Pennsylvania, such as the suburbs of Philadelphia, are growing in population. Rust Belt cities like Pittsburgh and Erie are losing people. The redistricting commission must rely on the latest census data in deciding whether to increase or

decrease the number of representatives or, conversely, the size of the districts for each portion of the state. The Constitution stipulates that there must always be 50 Senators and 203 Representatives.

All this sounds fair, but what really happens?

The Republican and Democratic legislators try to draw the lines in such a way as to ensure the reelection of the incumbents. When some districts must be collapsed and others added, the legislators seek to ensure that they eliminate those of their number whose voting record is least satisfactory to their party or who are most likely to retire or to be defeated in the next election.

This practice is called gerrymandering, a term taken from a Massachusetts governor, Elbridge Gerry, who allegedly engaged in this practice in 1810 to ensure the reelection of his allies. One of the oddly-shaped districts looked to a political cartoonist like a salamander, and the term, originally jocular, has remained in common usage.

The party that has the most House and Senate seats pressures the redistricting commission to draw the lines to concentrate, or stack, voters of the opposing party in as few districts and its own party's voters to predominate in as many as possible.

The resulting districts are not compact or contiguous. They may well divide counties or cities in violation of the Constitution.

The 2001 redistricting plan divided State College Borough, most of whose voters are registered Democrats, between two then Republican districts, the 77th and the 171st. The division confuses partisan workers and voters alike.

"If you stand on the corner of College and Allen, in front of Moyer Jewelers, you're in the 77th," said Democratic County Chair Dianne Gregg, "but across Allen Street the Corner Room is in the 171st."

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pilot who served in Desert Storm, who converted to Islam after he returned from the Gulf War and post-9/11 was put on a no-fly list with no explanation. He was a commercial pilot by then, so being on the no-fly list also meant losing his job.

"These two cases deal with U.S. citizens who never committed a crime, have given to the national defense, yet one had his career destroyed and the other was on the verge..." Walczak said. "This happened because they were Muslim."

There is little chance the ACLU will win the first case, Walczak said, and the second was won when the pilot's company mysteriously gave him his job back after the ACLU demanded the government justify its secre-

cy around the now-infamous no-fly lists.

Algnis knew these stories as his own, nodding as he listened to Walczak. He is among the seven million Muslims in America documented in the report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations of a three-fold increase in complaints of harassment and intimidation in 2002.

It is a trend that has begun to reverse itself in recent years, with the group reporting a drop in hate crime and due process complaints in 2007, but still a significant increase in passenger profiling. The ACLU, like many groups, is looking to the new administration to repair the damage.

Walczak told the audience about the full page ad the ACLU ran in the New York Times that day, Nov. 10, 2008, calling on President-elect Barack Obama to close the detention center at Guantanamo on his first

day in office.

"On Day One, with a stroke of a pen, you can restore America's moral leadership in the world," the ad read.

Walczak listed disappeared people, extraordinary rendition, detention without due process and torture as some of the illegal behavior the United States has engaged under the Bush administration.

"A lot of that the Obama administration can overturn by repealing an executive order or issuing a new one, and signaling to the rest of the world that we're back," he said.

How to do that without opening Obama up to charges of being soft on terror?

"We're in very interesting times, if you haven't lost your home or your job, that is," Walczak said. "It'll be interesting to see how he navigates this national security

issue."

For Hamad Algnis, the times have indeed been interesting. After a grueling five-year fight with the government, he was finally granted permanent residency. He received his green card in October.

His wife is going to school while he works as a courier for a pharmaceutical company. It was his trips between the Philly suburbs and central Pennsylvania where he met ACLU member and Centre County resident Diane Mills, who signs for his deliveries six times a week on the night shift.

As he pointed across the Foxdale auditorium to Mills, who was packing up the cookies and tea from the reception, he smiled at the familiar face, for a brief moment as comfortable in a Quaker-run retirement home as he has been his whole life in a mosque.

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Professor Terry Madonna, Director of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs at Franklin and Marshall, suggested that the commission may have sought to dilute Penn State's influence on the legislature.

In 2001 various officials and private citizens voiced objections to the redistricting plan while it was being considered by the Legislature.

The only Centre County voter actually to testify before the Redistricting Committee was Virginia Brickwedde of State College. She also addressed an appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. Articles and letters appeared in the Centre Daily Times but not in Voices.

Pressured by such public interest groups as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters, some legislators introduced bills into both houses that would have amended the Constitution to make the redistricting commission nonpartisan. These bills remained bottled up in committees and did not reach the floor for a vote by either house.

If the Legislature had passed these bills in its 2008 session, to take effect the bills would have had to be reintroduced in the next session after the election, be passed again, and then be referred to the voters in 2010.

The 2008 election has returned a House that is narrowly Democratic and a Senate having a Republican majority.

If the next election yields the same result, as seems likely, it will be very difficult for the 2011 Redistricting Commission to agree

on a Legislative redistricting plan and the Supreme Court will make the final decisions.

Harris Township Supervisor Christopher Lee argues that the legislators will never vote for an amendment providing for a non-partisan commission because the existing system ensures that nearly all will be reelected. He adds that gerrymandering tends to produce extremist legislators who can and will not compromise on their positions.

"We learn in high school civics class that the voters choose their representatives," Lee said, "but in reality the legislators choose their voters."

Joanne Tosti-Vasey, the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for the 171st District, advocates a new constitutional convention to reexamine all articles except the Bill of Rights, but especially the redistricting process. Rep. Kerry Benninghoff did not return calls.

Several groups have called for a constitutional convention. Tim Potts, president of Democracy Rising, spoke recently to the League of Women Voters in State College about how he hoped that a new convention would raise standards for legislative behavior and reform redistricting.

Kerry Moyer, addressing the same meeting, said that past conventions have made only minor constitutional changes and that the process of organizing a new one will be long, arduous and costly.

U.S. Congressional redistricting is done by statute passed by both houses of the Legislature and approved by the Governor. Because Pennsylvania's population grows slowly relative to Sun Belt states like

California, Florida and Texas, it is likely to lose two members in the US House of Representatives in 2011.

Under the present system, the Legislature's dominant party will gerrymander the state to create as many safe

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anything would be great at this point."

Marcela Torres, a graduate student studying child psychology at Penn State University, said the economy weighted her decision for Obama.

"I'm still young and finishing grad school; I've got to build savings," said Torres, sitting in an armchair at Cool Beans Coffee and Tea in Bellefonte.

Torres said people were looking for something different when they voted in this election.

"People were probably tired about what was going on," she said. "Obama has this ability to inspire and motivate people. It's something I haven't seen other politicians do."

She said the excitement over Obama helped reclaim the Democratic Party, something John Kerry couldn't accomplish four years ago.

"For John Kerry, it was more or less 'anybody but Bush' for me," she said.

Despite excitement over President-elect Obama, Torres isn't expecting too much.

"Realistically, I think we'll be in a little bit of a better place. Maybe we'll have more troops home," she said. "I'm happy with the outcome, but I don't think too much is going to change."

She said she does hope people will continue grassroots efforts to come together to solve problems.

"I think people will be working together, getting things done in a more efficient way," she said.

Congressional seats for its side as it can. If the Senate and House are controlled by different parties, then the governor to be elected in 2010 will determine how much Pennsylvania's Congressional delegation will reflect the will of the voters.

Brian Gerhart, unemployed, of Centre Hall, also said worries about the economy brought him out to the polls.

"Gas prices have been up and down; the [stock] market has been up and down," he said. "Things are just so unpredictable at this point. We need stability and I think we voted for the wrong person."

He said he's not yet decided whether Obama will be an effective leader.

"The biggest thing we need in this country is job creation," he said, standing outside of the Centre Hall Dollar General store. "Time will tell if this country made a mistake."

Gerhart tried to have a sense of humor about his situation.

"I wouldn't be spending so much time here if this economy were better," he said with a laugh, pointing toward the store behind him.

Coburn resident Karen Kline still thinks John McCain would have been a better choice for America. She said the war is having an impact on everyone and that we're wasting too much time there.

"I think we should've gone over, got bin Laden and got out," she said, standing on the streets of Millheim. "We're still there and losing too many people."

Kline said Obama was built up because of his race and background.

"I think the media just hyped it up because of him being the first black candidate," she said.

"All candidates make promises and say what they're going to do," she said. "But whether they actually do it or not; well, you can't say that about a lot of politicians."

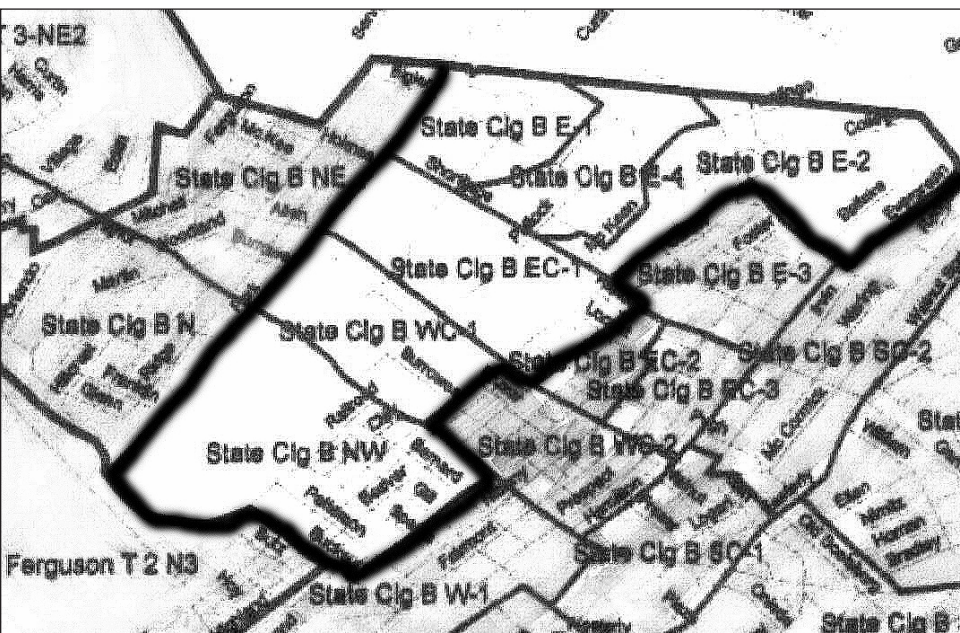


Illustration provided by Art Goldsmidt

Gerrymandering divides largely Democratic State College between two traditionally Republican House districts but carving out what would be the middle of one district and assigning it to another.



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Elizabeth Goreham
State College Borough Council Member

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