Casting my (provisional) ballot

By Steve Thorngate
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I got up before dawn today. (My farmer wife does this every day; I try, with mixed results, to keep her hours.) We got to the polls just as they were opening.

For the first time in the eight or nine times I've voted in Chicago, my name wasn't on the list. I had my voter registration card with me, so nobody challenged my eligibility. But I did have to cast a provisional ballot, which might or might not eventually be counted.

Not a big deal in my case. Where I live, voting in a general election is largely an exercise of duty, not influence. Illinois is in the bag for the Democratic nominee for president, whether or not this happens to be our former senator. By November, Chicago's legislative candidates and local executive-branch ones fall into three categories: third-party folks, moderate Republicans who won't do much better than the third-party folks, and machine Democrats who will win by a landslide. Unless the governor's office is on the ballot, the only real variables are the judiciary—voters in Illinois have to approve all judges, and many of us bring recommendations from various bar associations into the voting booth with us—and any referenda.

But if I lived 175 miles east of here, being made to cast a provisional ballot—and thus potentially disenfranchised on a technicality—could be a very big deal. The presidential race may well be decided by a relative handful of votes in Ohio, and some congressional races there are very close as well. And in Ohio and elsewhere, uncounted provisional ballots are just the relatively innocent tip of the voter-disenfranchisement iceberg.

Victoria Collier details the troubling history of electronic voting machines in his country, their less-than-democratic management and their poor resistance to behind-the-scenes tampering. And Adam Serwer rounds up a list of the various dirty tricks out there, some time-honored and some more recently innovated. Most

recently notorious is the growth of voter ID laws, which address what's of late a largely theoretical issue while exacerbating the very real problem of voter disenfranchisement.

To be sure, Republicans are not the only ones who have ever suppressed or manipulated votes. The Democrats have done this too, in Chicago and elsewhere. But Republicans have largely been the ones to push voter ID laws, and at least one GOP leader has been pretty open about the idea's partisan aims. It’s tempting to write this controversy off as each party’s loyalists supporting the position that favors its chances, but that’s too easy. Voting is a basic, essential right. Even if voter fraud were common—which, again, it isn’t—you don’t fight one person’s crime by curtailing another person’s rights.

The U.S.—ostensibly the world’s leading democracy—has from the beginning had some bizarre ways of approaching representative government. (Those big-swing-state voters may be getting all the presidential attention, but they still have a far smaller voice in the Senate than Vermonters do.) We also have a deep history of extremely creative voter suppression. The former will likely never change, but the latter could if we took it seriously and saw it through a lens of something other than partisan advantage. Whoever wins, an election with high participation and few reports of voter suppression would be a victory of its own.