

Florida memo to Bennet

Wednesday, September 8, 2004

I called Bobbie Brinegar, who is the board president of the League of Women Voters in Miami-Dade County. Her interest is non-partisan. (She calls herself an independent, and comes from a Republican family, she says. "We at the league strive for free and fair elections, and in Florida we don't have elections that are free and fair.")

She says "there is a laundry list of things the Republicans have been up to that aren't ethical." I caught her on her cellphone while she was driving home, and off the top of her head she reeled off the following:

The state elections supervisor, Glenda Hood (a Republican) tried to purge thousands of voters from the rolls as felons, much as her predecessor, Katherine Harris, did in 2000. This time, though, CNN sued the state for the rolls, and in one day the Miami Herald identified a thousand people who shouldn't have been purged. Though the state cannot now purge the rolls, individual counties can, and are. "They (the GOP) don't play by the rules unless you sue them," Brinegar said, "and we can't sue every county."

The Florida State Police has been sending uniformed troopers to the homes of black voters to "verify registration." They aren't sending troopers to white homes, apparently, and the League thinks it is a campaign of intimidation.

Glenda Hood eliminated the need for witness signatures on absentee ballots, "which really opens things up to more fraud."

In most states, a person who shows up at a polling place but is found not to be on the rolls can cast a provisional ballot,

and if it's later determined that they should have been permitted to vote, the vote would count. Under new rules in Florida, if it turns out that the person cast their provisional ballot at the wrong polling place, their vote won't count even if they're legally registered. South Florida has a lot of immigrants and other low-income renters who move frequently; ballot-place confusion is not uncommon.

The electronic voting machines remain a huge issue, and have been controversial since their purchase. The secretary of state who bought the electronic voting machines from ES&S – a company that Sen. Chuck Hagel (R.-Nebraska) used to run and still retains a million-dollar stake in – immediately left public service after the purchase of the machines and became a lobbyist for ES&S. The machines themselves, which will be used in Florida's five biggest counties and several small ones -- produce no voter-verified paper ballots. They do contain an internal device that can be used to do a manual recount. Glenda Hood and Gov. Bush tried to get the state legislature to make such manual recounts illegal. The legislature refused, so Glenda Hood banned manual recounts by executive order. The League and the ACLU may sue to reverse the order.

Gov. Bush refused to order audits of the electronic voting system statewide, and when Miami-Dade tried to run what's called a "parallel test" of the machines during the August primary, to determine if the machines were operating properly, Bush intervened and disallowed it.

I asked Brinegar if the Republicans could point to similar machinations by the Democrats, and she flatly said no. "The Dems are scrambling to play defense," she said. "There isn't much they can do. They don't hold either the legislature or the governor's mansion."

She said she can connect me with the people I'd need to report the story, and has many documents to share. She

said the stories of the various Republican schemes have come out piecemeal, but nobody has put them all together in one story.

I am familiar with this terrain and cast of characters, having written a piece for the September issue of Playboy about the electronic voting machines in Miami-Dade. If I dropped the Aging story and left for Florida at once, I imagine I could have this story to you by the first week of October.