



# A Short History of Voting in the United States

Compiled by Kids Voting Central Ohio

## Evolution of Voting Systems

American elections have been evolving since the nation was founded. Voting rights have been revised and extended by four constitutional amendments and several judicial and legislative actions. The voting process itself has changed continuously over the last two hundred years.

Early American elections were conducted by such methods as a show of hands and the depositing of beans and/or grain into a box to indicate voter preference. Since that time, numerous other revisions to the voting process have taken place, the most recent of which include the adoption of postcard mail-in voter registration, vote-by-mail absentee ballots, optical-scan ballots and computerized touch-screen voting systems.



## Paper Ballots

The earliest elections were conducted by voice vote or with paper ballots put into ballot boxes. These paper ballots, called party tickets, listed names from just one party. The voter was essentially just a conduit for the straight ticket voting demands of the party. As the United States grew and the electorate expanded in the decades following the Civil War, improvements appeared in the form of the Australian or blanket ballot (which listed the names of all candidates), and ballot boxes with new security features.

In 1888, the first "Australian Secret Ballot" was adopted in Massachusetts. The "Australian Ballot" is an official ballot printed at public expense on which the names of all nominated candidates appear. It is distributed only at the polling place and voted in secret.

Paper ballots use uniform official ballots on which the names of all candidates and issues are printed. Voters record their choices, in private, by marking the boxes next to the candidate or issue choice they select and drop the voted ballot in a sealed ballot box.



Innovations in ballot box design were intended to ensure an honest vote. The Acme, an improvement upon the open-slot box, has a tabulator activated by a lever mechanism that releases the ballot into the box. It was made in 1880.

As of the 2004 presidential election, paper ballots were still used by only .6% of the registered voters in the United States, most often in small communities and rural areas.

## Mechanical Lever Machines

The invention of a practical voting machine was the preoccupation of reformers in the late 19th century. This voting machine was patented by inventor Alfred J. Gillespie and manufactured by the Standard Voting Machine Company of Rochester, New York, in the late 1890s. It was the first to use a voter-activated mechanism that drew a privacy curtain around the voter and simultaneously unlocked the machine's levers for voting. In 1898, Gillespie and inventor Jacob Myers, whose patents informed Gillespie's work, organized a company that became Automatic Voting Machine Company. Myers gave the first demonstration of a voting machine in an 1892 Lockport, New York, town election.

On mechanical lever voting machines, the name of each candidate or ballot issue choice is assigned a particular lever in a rectangular array of levers on the front of the machine. A set of printed strips visible to the voters identifies the lever assignment for each candidate and issue choice.



The voter enables the machine with a lever that also closes a privacy curtain. The voter pulls down selected levers to indicate choices. When the voter exits the booth by opening the privacy curtain with the handle, the voted levers are automatically returned to their original horizontal position. As each lever returns, it causes a connected counter wheel within the machine to turn and record the voter's choice. Interlocks in the machine prevent the voter from voting for more choices than permitted.

By 1930, lever machines had been installed in virtually every major city in the United States, and by the 1960's well over half of the Nation's votes were being cast on these machines. Mechanical lever machines were used by 12.8% of registered voters in the United States as of the 2004 Presidential election. These machines are no longer made and are being replaced with newer electronic systems.

## From Mechanical to Electronic Systems

### Punchcards

In the early 1960s new computer-read ballot systems entered the market for voting equipment and eventually triumphed over mechanical machines. Voters used either a stylus or punch to perforate a computer punch card ballot or mark a standardized form.

Punchcards were used first in the 1964 Presidential election. By 1982, approximately half of the American electorate was voting by punch-card system. In the 2004 Presidential election, some variation of the punchcard system was used by 18.6% of registered voters in the United States.



### Voting Machines

Electromechanical machines bridge the recent past of the lever machine and the future of fully electronic touch-screen voting. The Shouptronic machine resembles a traditional lever voting machine, right down to its privacy curtain. The candidate slate is printed over a backlit grid of illuminated buttons. A green VOTE button locks in and records the choices.

Votes are recorded to a hard-drive memory. Recording features include a memory cartridge, a backup battery, and the means of printing a paper tally. These machines have been used extensively in Franklin County.



### Optical Scan



Optical scan voting systems use a ballot card on which candidates and issue choices are preprinted next to an empty rectangle, circle, oval, or an incomplete arrow. Voters record their choices by filling in the rectangle, circle or oval, or by completing the arrow.

After voting, the voters either place the ballot in a sealed box or feed it into a computer tabulating device at the precinct. The tabulating device reads the votes using "dark mark logic," whereby the computer selects the darkest mark within a given set as the correct choice or vote. This technology has existed for decades and been used extensively in such areas as standardized testing and statewide lotteries, it was not developed for balloting until 1968.

In the early 1970s, these systems became popular in rural and lightly populated districts that previously counted paper ballots by hand.

These paper ballots are read by a machine that scans the ballots and deposits them into one of the three compartments in the sorting box: one for ballots that cannot be read, another for ballots that have been read and counted, and a third for ballots needing the attention of elections officials. These may have stray marks that need interpretation, or may carry the name of a write-in candidate.

Optical scan technology was used by 32.2% of registered voters in the United States for the 2004 Presidential election, and their use is on the rise.

## Touch Screen Voting



Introduced in the 1990s, computer touch screen and direct recording electronic (DRE) voting systems use familiar graphic layouts and capture votes digitally.

The most recent development in the evolution of voting systems is direct recording electronic, or DRE's. They are an electronic implementation of the old mechanical lever systems. As with the lever machines, there is no ballot; the possible choices are visible to the voter on the front of the machine. The voter directly enters choices into electronic storage with the use of a touch-screen, push-buttons, or similar device. An alphabetic keyboard is often provided with the entry device to allow for the possibility of write-in votes. The voter's choices are stored in these machines via a memory cartridge, diskette or smart-card and added to the choices of all other voters.



In 2004, 28.9% of the registered voters in the United States used some type of direct recording electronic voting system.

## Voting By Mail

Voting-by-mail is relatively new. This method was first tried in Monterey, California in 1977. Since that time, hundreds of elections have been held by mail - from local ballot initiatives to some contests for federal office.

Advocates for mail balloting argue that because of its strong democratic tradition, the United States should continue to eradicate barriers to the franchise, and make voting easier through mail-in elections. Ballots are mailed in or dropped off at collection booths. States using mail-in voting include Colorado, Florida, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, and Washington State. Some allow mail-in voting only for races at a certain level or may use mail ballots only for ballot questions, non-partisan races, etc.



Supporters argue that voting by mail is more convenient for voters and minimizes costs of administering an election. They also say that it increases voter turnout. In Washington state average turnout increased from 38 percent to 53 percent in counties that used mail. One county saw its turnout increase to 68 percent, another county's turnout - in a primary - increased to nearly 72 percent.

# Online Voting

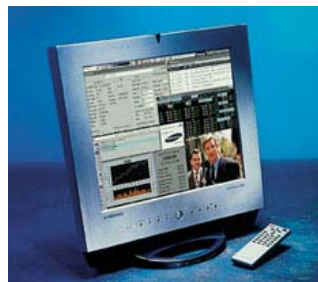
As the Internet becomes a greater part of ever day life and commerce, more and more people are supporting the idea of voting online. In fact, many believe that voting online in some manner is merely a matter of time.



Internet voting systems fall into one of three categories: poll site, kiosk, and remote. Each defines the location where the ballot is cast and relates directly to the technical challenges inherent in that system. **Poll Site Internet Voting** is seen by many as the most likely first step, increasing the efficiency of voting and avoiding the problem of lack of universal access to the Internet from voters' homes. Still, security and other technological issues have not been resolved to the satisfaction of most experts.

**Kiosk Voting Machines** could be located in convenient locations such as malls, libraries and schools. They also could increase Internet access, but pose specific security and privacy concerns. **Remote Voting** would allow individuals to vote from virtually any location with an Internet connection. While this has substantial benefits it also posses substantial security risks that are likely to take much research and debate to adequately resolve.

Some advocates of Internet voting argue that Internet voting might encourage greater political participation among young adults, a group that stays away from the polling place in droves. It would hold special appeal for military personnel overseas, whose ability to vote is a growing concern.



There are serious concerns, however, regarding computer security and voter fraud, unequal access across socioeconomic lines (the "digital divide"), and the civic consequences of moving elections away from schools and other polling places and into private homes and offices.

Experiments in online voting took place among thousands of voters in Arizona and Alaska in the 2000 presidential election. A small scale Internet vote experiment was done with military personnel in several states. Voters in Michigan's Democratic caucus in 2004 also voted online.

The White House, the National Science Foundation, technology experts and elections officials are supporting detailed research and testing of these systems. A balance between security, accessibility and ease of use must be struck before Internet voting will be used on a broad scale.

## Sources:

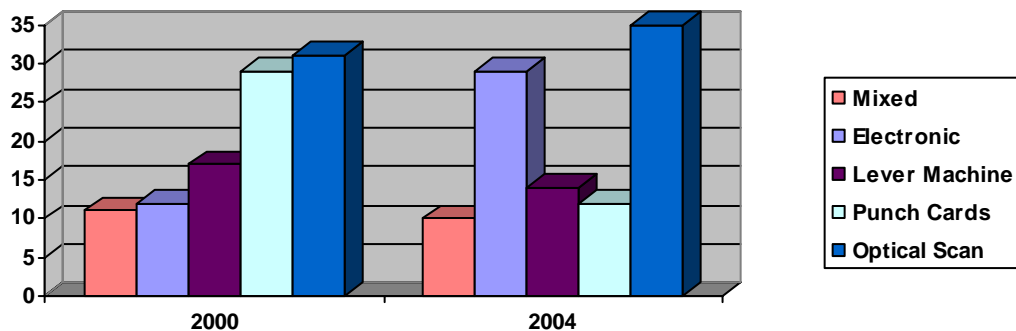
The U.S. Election Assistance Commission <http://www.eac.gov>

The Smithsonian Institute <http://americanhistory.si.edu/vote/>

The California Secretary of State's Task Force on Internet Voting <http://www.ss.ca.gov>

CBSNews.com <http://www.cbsnews.com>

## Changes in Voting Methods



Source: *Christian Science Monitor* October 2004