

Florida needs election reform to protect disenfranchised

BY FREDERICA S. WILSON

As a child of the Civil Rights Movement I have firsthand knowledge of the struggle that my parents' generation endured to ensure that future generations could participate in the political process.

Those of us who fought those battles in the 1960's and '70's understood that with a vote we had a voice, and with that voice we could affect change.

The fiasco surrounding the long lines at polling places before and during Election Day was unnecessary. Another voting debacle in Florida was unnecessary; and though voters in Miami-Dade County demonstrated resolve, standing in lines for hours, it was unnecessary.

To avoid another scenario like the one we saw on Election Day 2012, there are several ideas that I believe can be implemented to avoid the long lines and wait times.

- First, open up all precincts for early voting. If this is logistically impossible then open up the polling places where it is logistically possible. During early voting, ballots have to be customized for each voter according to their residence or municipality. The process of delivering those ballots prolongs the wait for voters standing in line.

In 2008 when early voting expanded to 14 days, the lines were even longer than in 2012, and in my opinion customized ballots were the reason for the delay. The gridlock at many precincts during early voting occurred at the check-in point where voters were receiving their ballots. Many voting booths remained empty as more and more people stood in line. Hiring more staff to customize each ballot would help.

- Likewise, we are a nation of immigrants and Miami-Dade County is immigrant rich so let's be sensitive as we encourage immigrants to vote. When a ballot question is presented in three languages naturally the ballot is longer and confusing, making the wait for other voters longer.

Voters should have the option to select a single-language ballot at their precinct that they are comfortable with, either in English, Creole, or Spanish. Multiple language ballots combined in one document confuse and intimidate the very voters that they are intended to assist.

- Finally, we should encourage the use of absentee ballots. Offer voters the option to request an absentee ballot when they register to vote. These ballots, returned in pre-paid postage envelopes, would make the absentee ballot process more accessible.

In this era of electronic mail, 75 percent of the people reading this may not know the cost of a first-class stamp, and would not stand in line to buy a stamp. Pre-paid absentee ballots would also eliminate the need for ballot brokers or boleteros, and reduce absentee ballot fraud.

Obviously the more people who vote absentee limits the number of people who utilize polling places during the early voting period and on Election Day.

Blood was spilled on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, children lost their lives in the Birmingham bombing, and countless other men and women of all races were murdered fighting for the right to ensure that all citizens could vote.

As Americans, we should do everything in our power to make sure that the voices of the people are heard at the ballot box. In my opinion, voting should be as accessible as shopping in the mall.

U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson represents Florida District 24 in Congress.