

Haiti's election problems can happen here!

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The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) is usually thought of as a response to problems in the 2000 presidential election. While some of the provisions were a direct response, many other issues were addressed in a bi-partisan attempt to streamline the voting process and make sure that the United States was an exemplar of "one man, one vote."

One of these structural problems in our ability to vote is staffing our polling places. The recent election in Haiti went from bad to worse because many of the polling stations opened hours after the legally designated time, if at all. People died as eager voters trampled over others in a rush to cast a ballot. The problem in the United States is simple: people are not motivated to run elections.

In 2004, for example, two million election inspectors, judges and clerks were needed to people the polling places, check names of voters on the rolls and turn in each precinct's vote to county authorities. Of the two million people needed to help us vote and maintain the integrity of our democracy, only one million poll-worker slots were filled.

Moreover, the average age of these poll workers in Indiana is 72. If we take Marion County out of the mix, the average age skyrockets to 80. While the poll workers who do this job do it well, by 2020 many of our current dedicated crew will no longer be with us, literally losing centuries of experience. The shortage of people willing to contribute and the age of those who do mean that the United States is a few years from having Haitian style problems as we struggle to open our own polls. Gambier, Ohio, with its 12-hour waits, could become the norm for U. S. elections.

Could this problem serious stunt elections in the United states and in Indiana, yes, but a solution is being developed. Why does this concern college campuses? College students—intelligent, energetic and with flexible schedules—could be encouraged to participate in this important service. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission sponsored several programs to couple college students with poll work in 2004 (yes, they pay a nominal stipend).

In an effort to better staff our polling locations and involve students in the political system, the American Democracy Project at IU has teamed up with Indiana Campus Compact, the Indiana Election Division and the Indiana Secretary of State's office to change this situation. This collaboration is forging ahead with an initiative that will recruit and engage college students across the state and train them as poll workers. The training will happen during the academic year on participating college and university campuses across the state. The goal is to train college students to work as poll workers in their home counties.

This is the only statewide program of its kind in the nation. Indiana Campus

Compact will use its network of faculty and staff to recruit trainers and advocates in an ambitious plan of civic service across the state. With only a few weeks before the roll-out of the program for this May's primary election, we hope to bring a message of civic engagement to campuses, and to help solve one threat to our tradition of well ordered and fair elections in Indiana.

(Editor's note: For more information, contact Koponen at E-mail: tkoponen@iupui.edu .)