

From the Durango Herald March 5, 2008

Voters' problems are few in 4 states with primaries

By Deborah Hastings

AP National Writer

Except for bad weather and scattered precincts that ran out of ballots, voting appeared to run smoothly Tuesday in four state primaries that drew record voter turnout.

Heavy rain, sleet and ice forced at least 10 counties in Ohio to request permission to move, and a few polling spots were running on generators because of power outages. A federal judge ordered some precincts to remain open an extra 90 minutes after ballots ran out in Cuyahoga County, home to Cleveland.

Northern Sandusky County also stayed open to allow voters more time to get to the polls under freezing rain. Election workers had to turn away 300 to 400 people, after precincts handed out every ballot available. And a reprinting glitch delayed delivery of new ballots.

Election advocates worried that final counts from primaries held Tuesday – also in Texas, Vermont and Rhode Island – could be delayed for hours or days, especially in Ohio, where tallying delays have become all too common, as have long waits to vote.

In Texas, huge voter turnout created long lines and delayed the start of the state's precinct caucuses. The hybrid system of precinct caucuses and private ballots could delay tallies. Under an arcane set of rules, precinct caucuses, which decide one-third of delegates, cannot be held until the polls close at 7 p.m. Anyone in line at that point must be allowed to cast a ballot, however.

People trying to attend the Democratic caucus in the North Texas town of Little Elm waited in the cold for about two hours before being allowed inside. "It was extremely unorganized," said Dan Perez, 30, a home-builder.

In San Antonio, an attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund said it took an hour to sign up 126 Democrats who showed up to participate in the precinct caucus. Across the hall sat five Republicans "sitting in a circle just looking at each other," said Nina Perales.

Unexpectedly high Democratic turnout created overcrowded caucus meetings throughout the state.

"The turnout is extraordinary," said Perales, who was at a grade school. "They had to put us in the gymnasium." A fellow lawyer reported 300 Democrats at a nearby precinct, Perales said.

In Ohio, tally results were slow in coming from Cuyahoga County. Delays in that state have ranged from more than a month in the 2004 general election to five days in the 2006 primary, when absentee ballots had to be counted by hand. Especially worrisome to some advocates is Cuyahoga, the state's most populous county, where election officials abruptly ordered the abandonment of electronic voting machines in favor of paper ballots for Tuesday's primary.

"One of the things that is inescapable, is when you've got a paper system, it takes longer to count," Chapin said. A recordsetting 4 million voters were expected in Ohio, more than 50 percent of the state's registration roll.

Polls across all four states reported heavy turnout Tuesday, with lines forming in some places before dawn. Things appeared calm, except for sporadic glitches in Ohio.

Earlier Tuesday, volunteer election monitors in Cuyahoga County reported shortages of poll workers in some precincts and nonfunctioning touchscreen machines set aside for disabled voters.