No One Should Have to Stand in Line for 10 Hours to Vote

By ADAM COHEN

Everyone complains that young people don’t vote, but consider the experience of students at Kenyon College in Ohio in the 2004 election. Officials in Knox County, Ohio, provided just two voting machines for the school’s 1,300 voters. Some students waited in line for 10 hours, and the last bleary-eyed voter did not cast a ballot until nearly 4 a.m.

That same day in Columbus, voters in black neighborhoods waited as long as four hours, often in the rain. Many voters there and in other urban areas — including Toledo and Youngstown — left their overcrowded polling places in disgust, or because they could not wait any longer, without casting a ballot. In many of Ohio’s white-majority suburbs, the lines were far shorter.

Troubles in Ohio drew the greatest attention in 2004, but that state was hardly alone. There were complaints of long lines in other states, including Colorado, Michigan and Florida, where elderly voters endured waits in blistering heat.

I was in Ohio on Election Day 2004. The night before the voting, rumors spread that there would be a major effort by Republican operatives to challenge the registrations of voters in majority-black precincts. Those large-scale challenges did not materialize. But tens of thousands of votes were suppressed by something so mundane that no one thought to focus on it: long lines.

In Columbus, as many as 15,000 people left the polls without voting, many because of long lines. At a postelection hearing, a Youngstown pastor estimated that 8,000 black voters there did not cast ballots because of a machine shortage.

(President Bush carried Ohio by fewer than 120,000 votes.)

Most of the logistical questions about voting are generally left up to local officials. Too often they don’t want to spend the money to provide enough machines, and fail to hire or properly train enough poll workers for a smooth process.

There is also a lot of poor planning. In 2004, Ohio officials used old registration numbers to estimate their need for voting machines — failing to anticipate the large number of new voters added by registration drives that blanketed the state. It is hard, however, to rule out various forms of bias.

There have long been reports of elections administrators in college towns trying to suppress the “out of town” student vote. There is a long, painful history of obstacles to black voting. In Ohio in 2004, it seems clear that the majority of people trapped on long lines were trying to vote Democratic.
The Washington Post reported that six of the seven wards with the fewest voting machines per registered voter backed John Kerry, while 27 of the 30 wards with the most machines per registered voter went for President Bush.

Long lines are likely to be an even bigger problem this year, with the Obama campaign and various nonpartisan groups working all over the country to register millions of new voters. Without proper planning, these new voters may overwhelm polling sites.

For the sake of the legitimacy of our elections, more voting disasters — long lines, confusing ballots or unreliable electronic voting machines — must be avoided. Congress should take the lead, but it has failed even to set standards for numbers of voting machines. This year, it failed to pass a good bill that would have made funds available to states to buy backup paper ballots.

That puts more of a burden on state election officials, usually the secretaries of state, to promote fair elections.

Ohio’s dynamic new secretary of state, Jennifer Brunner — who says she is “hyperfocused on long lines” — is taking laudable steps to avoid a rerun of 2004. She has been pushing reluctant local election officials to have at least one voting machine for every 175 voters — nearly four times as many as there were at Kenyon College in 2004. She is also directing counties that use electronic voting machines to have backup paper ballots on hand equal to 25 percent of the 2004 turnout — which can also be used if lines get out of control.

In Missouri, Secretary of State Robin Carnahan has also been pushing local election officials to have backup paper ballots available, and she is providing funds for the hiring of more, and better trained, poll workers.

In the majority of states, however, too little is being done to make sure that polling places can accommodate all of the voters who show up. That is a mistake. An election in which people have to wait 10 hours to vote, or in which black voters wait in the rain for hours, while white voters zip through polling places, is unworthy of the world’s leading democracy.