

Media Backgrounder

Voter Education: Multi-Tiered Campaign Critical to Success of Georgia's New Electronic Voting System Deployment

Georgia is the only state in the nation to adopt a single, statewide solution for the upgrade of election equipment and to deploy it simultaneously in every county. A key benefit of Georgia's election reform model is the ability, for the first time in history, to speak with one voice to every Georgia citizen about how to properly cast an accurate ballot.

Experience in other jurisdictions and in Georgia as well has shown that once voters become familiar with the new electronic touch screen terminals they embrace this system as far preferable to other balloting methods. In 13 municipal pilot elections held in November 2001, nearly 2200 voters were polled after casting their ballots on electronic, or "DRE" equipment. The survey, fielded and compiled by University of Georgia researchers, found that 94.5% of respondents agreed that Georgia should upgrade to a new voting system like the one they had just used. Importantly, these findings were consistent across all ethnic and age groups, with older voters even more enthusiastic about the benefits of the new electronic technology than their younger counterparts.

Key to the success of the municipal pilot election project was an aggressive voter education program designed to acquaint citizens with the new equipment before they arrived at their precinct to vote. As Georgia prepared to embark on the acquisition and deployment of a new voting system for every county before the November 5th 2002 General Election, Secretary of State Cathy Cox made clear to policymakers that the changeover could only succeed if coupled with an extensive, and multi-tiered, voter education campaign. In the supplemental FY 2002 and FY 2003 budgets approved by the General Assembly, and in addition to the bond money for equipment acquisition, approximately \$4.5 million in funding was provided to support the statewide deployment. A substantial portion of those dollars were dedicated to voter education and outreach efforts.

Launched soon after Georgia selected its equipment vendor in May 2002, the voter education campaign, entitled ***Georgia Counts***, gained momentum throughout the summer. The program will escalate further in the weeks remaining before the Nov. 5th General Election. Involving both state and county resources, the public outreach program includes several major components:

- **Public equipment demonstrations and educational sessions:** To kick-start the campaign, the Secretary of State's office created 12 new voter education coordinator (VEC) positions (supervised by a new statewide manager of voter education). The VECs are assigned to the 12 service delivery regions of the state and are responsible for initiating outreach programs in their area and assisting county election officials in developing their own educational initiatives. Since early summer the VECs have conducted literally hundreds of equipment demonstration events – including appearances at civic clubs, shopping malls, fairs, senior citizen centers, transit stations, banks, grocery

stores, large employers, colleges and universities, hospitals, sports stadiums and other community gathering points. These sessions are giving thousands of Georgians a hands-on opportunity to experience electronic voting by casting a sample ballot.

In addition to the VEC program, every Georgia county has been awarded a grant of either \$4,000, \$7,000 or \$10,000 (based on size) earmarked to hire their own part-time voter educators to conduct community based programs. To enhance that effort, many counties have supplemented those state funds with their own resources to hire additional staff and enlarge still further the footprint of voter outreach.

The August 20th General Primary also presented an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the new voting terminals to Georgia voters. Many of Georgia's nearly 3,000 precincts in the 157 counties that used their legacy voting systems for the Primary set up demonstration touch screen units, and voters were invited to try out the new equipment before leaving the polls. (Two Georgia counties – Hall and Marion – utilized the new touch screen units in their Primary elections and reported excellent system performance.) Thousands of Primary voters took advantage of that opportunity.

- **Print materials and direct mail program:** To help carry the message to Georgians about the features of the new voting system, the Secretary of State's office has printed and distributed several million pieces of educational material. A four-color tri-fold brochure (printed in English, Spanish and several Asian languages) provides photographs and clear, step-by-step instructions for voting on the touch screen units, and a smaller Voting Instruction Card provides a condensed version of these same instructions. In their precinct on Election Day voters will encounter still more information. Large color posters with voting instructions will be displayed at the polling place, and a smaller version will be affixed to the privacy booth of each voting unit. In addition, when they arrive at the polls every voter will be offered an instructional card with directions on how to cast their ballot electronically. Poll workers will also wear special stickers encouraging voters to ask them for help if they have concerns about the voting process.

To assure that everyone is reached by the **Georgia Counts** educational message, beginning in mid-October every one of the state's approximately 3.8 million active registered voters will receive in the mail an instructional brochure with simple, step-by-step instructions for casting their ballot.

- **Television Campaign:** Beginning Wed. October 16th and continuing through Monday, Nov. 4th a paid schedule of 30-second spots will air in all six major Georgia television markets and Chattanooga. The spot, *Touch the Future*, acquaints voters with the security, simplicity and convenience of the new equipment and directs them to the **Georgia Counts** website or toll-free telephone line for more information. In the Atlanta TV market the spots are expected to reach some 98 % of the target audience. Many Georgia television

stations and cable operators plan to air the spot as an unpaid public service announcement as well.

- **Educational Video Projects:** Short of an in person, hands-on demonstration there's no better way for voters to learn about the features of the new system than through video – which can depict the screens and prompts voters will encounter on election day. The Secretary of State's office contracted with Georgia Public Broadcasting to develop a number of video productions to help tell this story. A six-minute voter orientation video (with close captioning) was produced, along with a Spanish language version, a condensed, three-minute "looped" version which can be used for repeat showings, a 12 ½-minute training video for poll managers and poll workers, and the 30-second PSA. Thousands of duplicates of these videos are being distributed by VECs, county election offices and community service organizations.
- **Website:** The Georgia Counts website, located at www.georgiacounts.com, is an important resource for voter education. Web visitors can try an online demo of electronic voting, access a schedule of voter education events in their area, view streaming educational videos and get answers to many of the most commonly asked questions about the new system.
- **Voter Information Line:** For voters who do not have web access or who prefer to obtain answers to questions by phone, a toll-free Georgia Counts information line is available. By calling **1-888-265-1115** citizens can learn about voting system procedures, security, secrecy, features that benefit visually impaired and disabled voters, and other topics. The answer line also includes information about the 2002 constitutional amendments and referendum questions and Georgia's voter ID requirement.
- **Partnership With Community Service Organizations:** To insure that every segment of the voting population is reached, the Office of Secretary of State has entered into partnerships with a number of community service organizations. These groups receive resources, demonstration units, printed and video materials and logistical support. Participants in this program include AARP, League of Women Voters, Coalition for the People's Agenda, Georgia Federation for the Blind, NAACP and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.