

orlandosentinel.com/news/opinion/orl-ed07108dec07,0,3750366.story

OrlandoSentinel.com

EDITORIAL

We think: This election showed why legislators need to change early voting rules

December 7, 2008

State Rep. Pat Patterson is taking a cautious approach. Before agreeing to any changes to Florida's early-voting law, the recent chairman of the House Ethics and Elections Committee wants to make sure it's just a "pop fad."

Heads up: 2.6 million voters constitute more than a "pop fad."

That's how many Floridians voted early in this year's general election -- nearly one-third of the total turnout. In 2004, the inaugural year for early voting in Florida, the number was nearly 800,000.

Early voting's not a fad. People like it. They want more of it. It accommodates voters' complicated work and family schedules and it means a shorter wait for those who choose to vote on Election Day.

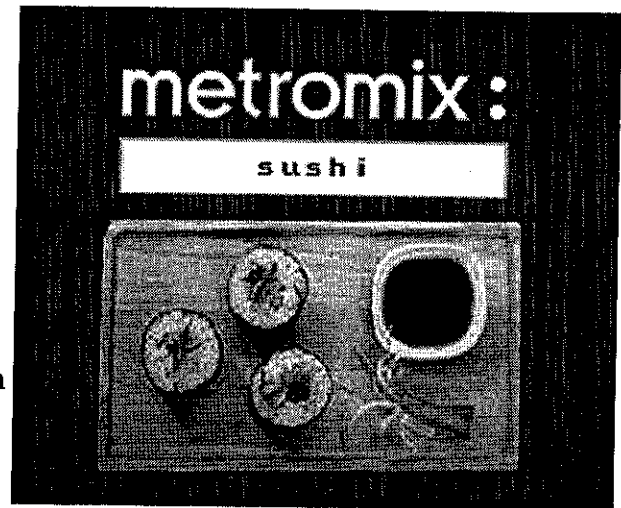
And yet, the Florida Legislature has made it harder to vote early. The changes that lawmakers approved in 2005 -- strangely enough, in response to the impressive early voting turnout in 2004 -- require local elections supervisors to conduct early voting only at their offices, at city halls or at public libraries.

But what if there isn't a city hall or a library near enough or big enough? In east Orange County this past October, University of Central Florida students massed at a small branch library -- the only suitable nearby location under current law -- to vote early. But many of them got discouraged by the lines and left, possibly assuming the wait on Election Day couldn't possibly be as long.

Wrong. When Election Day rolled around, voters who might otherwise have been able to cast ballots early were still in line at the UCF polling place when John McCain conceded the election.

Orange County Supervisor of Elections Bill Cowles, like many of his colleagues, wants more flexibility so he can, say, conduct early voting right on UCF's campus. Or at civic centers. Or churches. Or lodges.

He'd also prefer more malleable operating hours instead of the unreasonable restrictions imposed by the 2005 state law. It restricted early voting to eight hours on weekdays and a total of eight hours over the weekend. Mr. Cowles points out that his office hours are 8-5 -- a nine-hour day -- which means he has to shut down early voting at the supervisor's office for at least one hour a day to comply with state law.



So why would Mr. Patterson, a Deland Republican, worry about giving local supervisors more authority to expand early voting hours?

He said he wants to make sure the rules are uniform, and that the state doesn't impose rules that local supervisors can't afford to implement.

His caution might also have something to do with the "R" next to his name.

The political arithmetic is simple: Democrats are more likely than Republicans to vote early. Florida's Legislature is dominated by Republicans. In this case, 1+1 equals an unfair state law that works against people of any political stripe who want to vote early.

Three cheers to Republican Gov. Charlie Crist for rising above partisan self-interest. As the two-week early voting period drew to a close in October, Mr. Crist got wind of the ridiculously long lines and ordered elections supervisors to extend the hours.

Now the governor needs to follow through this spring and advocate meaningful changes to the law that will make early voting less of a burden on Republicans, Democrats and other voters who want to participate.

Early voting's here to stay, and Florida's legislators have a responsibility to provide local elections officials with the flexibility to make it work better for the sake of all voters.

Copyright © 2008, Orlando Sentinel