

What could go wrong at a polling place?

Everything, says an experienced poll worker.

By Cary Tennis

November 11, 2000 | My wife and I were standing in our garage in the Sunset District of San Francisco three years ago when a man wearing a tweed jacket with elbow patches walked in, looked around and said, "This garage would make a good polling place." He worked for the San Francisco Department of Elections. The people who had hosted elections for years in our neighborhood had decided they didn't want to do it anymore. (In San Francisco, voting is often done in the garages of private homes.) So our garage became the neighborhood's new polling place. I became an elections inspector and my wife became a clerk.

The first thing you do to become a poll worker is attend a class that lasts about an hour and a half. The thing is, it's like sitting through an hour-and-a-half explanation of how to play tennis and then going out and playing. All that instruction doesn't really cover what happens when a ball comes hurtling at you. You only learn by doing.

What does it take to be an election worker? I think you have to be a citizen and you have to be alive, and I'm not really sure about the alive part. When you go to these classes you look around and you realize: We poll workers are the dregs of society! We're old, we're addled, we're eccentric, we're society's overflow! This is not some well-oiled machine of government.

Plus, each election is different depending on whether it's general, special, local, a runoff, whatever. Each year, elections departments "make things better" by thinking up new ways to handle the balloting or introducing new machines and new ballot types. I'm sure that elections supervisor in Palm Beach County thought she was solving a problem by using that now-famous "butterfly" ballot. By using that design, she could use bigger type so old folks could read the ballot more easily.

Since the elections department is always "improving" the process, we've learned to figure it out on our own, our guiding principle being: Get as accurate a vote as we can, whatever it takes. We don't always follow the rules. We don't always even know what the rules are. We're not professionals. We just do the best we can. And I'm sure that's what most of the poll workers throughout America did on Tuesday. They did the best they could.

Here's how the balloting worked in San Francisco this election. For years results have come in too slowly in San Francisco, and the newspapers and the public have decried the inefficiency. So this year we got the Optech Eagle. It's a machine about 3 feet high, 2 feet wide and 4 feet long that reads ballots marked with a pen and feeds them into bins below. If you mark a ballot twice, it rejects your ballot and prints out a message: "Overvote."

You can then override the error message and put the ballot through, or, if the voter has made a genuine error and wants to revote, you take the one ballot card -- did I mention there were three ballot cards to constitute one "ballot" this time? -- write "spoiled" on it, pull three new ballot cards to keep the numbers in sequence, hand the voter the fresh ballot to replace the one that was spoiled, write spoiled on the other two and put them in a special box of spoiled ballots.

But if the voter then spoils a second ballot, you think, we could have used one of those other two fresh ballots. So you think, Why don't we hold onto these two unspoiled ballots in case the person spoils another one? Especially after the guy next in line makes a comment about all the trees it's taking to do this election. So then you're holding three ballots in your lap, one of which is spoiled and the other two of which may be spoiled or may not be spoiled, and the next person in line speaks only Mandarin and isn't on the roster of voters. He's a man who comes every year and every year you give him a register card and every year he comes back and he's still not on the roster. And he speaks only Chinese.

But this year you have Tre Wan from Taiwan who speaks Mandarin, so she gets up from the table and starts talking in Mandarin with this man and the younger woman, probably his daughter, who has come to assist him. And he takes his three ballots and goes into the booth. And he comes out and votes and his ballot is rejected, because he's seen the number 4 where you vote for supervisors because we're District 4, so he's voted for four supervisors instead of one.

So now you've got the three spoiled ballots from the one guy plus the man whose ballots are being rejected and you're trying to explain that you need to get a new set of three ballots, one of which will be spoiled, to keep the number sequences correct, and he's saying "No, no, no," and Tre Wan is talking to him in Mandarin and he's shaking his head and then four more people show up in line, one of whom is in the wrong precinct. So while you wait for the guy with the one spoiled ballot to finish and try to find the person's address on a map and then find their precinct address on a list, a guy with a walker shows up, and all the booths are full, so you get him a chair to sit down on.

And then the Muni union operatives from the Democratic Party show up to check the roster of who's voted, and it isn't updated yet, so they want to see the active roster (you keep two copies) and you want to oblige because this is a free and open election and all citizens have the right to observe. Speaking of observing, then a representative of the Leland Yee for Supervisor campaign shows up and you think he's from the department of elections but he's simply a campaign worker but he tells you your provisional voting box isn't set up and it's illegal to just be keeping those pink provisional envelopes in that clear plastic bag that says "provisional envelopes," they have to go in the blue plastic box for which you have no seal and about which you can remember no instructions.

So you say to the man who only speaks Mandarin, "Wait." But he keeps talking. You say, "Let's slow down. We'll take these things one at a time. You, sir: Wait. You in line, hold

on. Campaign guy: Wait. Democratic guys: Wait. Man with walker: Wait. We're going to do these things one at a time."

And then the little lady in the booth who hasn't said a word for half an hour comes out and instead of connecting the two arrows with a black line the way you're supposed to, she's made check marks by all the choices. They're not going to get read. She's got to do it all over. We've got to pull three new ballots for her and spoil the others. But she wants to use her spoiled ballots as a guide for marking the new one, so we can't spoil them, we have to give them to her and then wait.

Quick: How many spoiled, or to-be spoiled, ballots am I holding in my hand? How many people are in the voting booths? Are we following all the rules? Is it legal for the man's daughter to accompany him into the booth? Are we earning our money? Are we serving democracy?

And then the guy who's not on the roster has to vote provisionally. So you get out the provisional envelope and have him fill it out. And have him sign the provisional roster. But: Oh, here he is, in the green section! He just hasn't voted for a while! So, oh, let's put the provisional ballot away. But can we just throw it away? And then somebody comes in with an absentee ballot but they don't want to vote absentee because they want their vote to count right away. They want to feed their vote right into the machine. But the only way an absentee voter can vote in the precinct is to do it provisionally. And that wouldn't be any faster. So forget it, vote absentee.

Then a man shows up with absentee ballots for himself and his wife. But his wife hasn't signed the part where she gives him the authority to deliver it for him. She signed the part where she is supposed to sign it for herself if she drops it off. But not the part for her husband to drop it off. And he's saying, "Look, she signed it here." But that's not the right place. So he has to go back to his wife and have her sign in the other place. But she's at work. So why should he have to come all the way back? He doesn't. He can drop it off anywhere, at any voting place in the city. Really? Yes, really.

Meanwhile, this guy who's voted wants to put his things through the machine, so you take them from him and turn to put them through the machine and one of them gets spit out. But you turn and he's already in his truck driving off. So you push the override button but the machine won't take the ballot. So here's a ballot that has been voted and deserves to be counted but the machine won't take it. It's not a provisional ballot. He was on the roster. It's not voted twice. It's just weirdly hinky in the way things in the electronic world are sometimes just weirdly hinky. So let's put it in the provisional box and make a note to have it counted manually.

This goes on from 6:30 a.m. till 8 p.m. Then you close the doors and stare at all this mess and try to remember what you did and why, and count it up and make some sense of it. At the end of the day you have this bunch of ballots and you have to count them up and make everything match up and it never does. You're always off a little. And the elections

supervisor comes along and she doesn't know, either. It's all new. We're all figuring it out. There's no script. You have to pay attention and do your best.

If you are outraged at how elections are held in America, if you're incredulous at the stupidity and the ineptness of the election process, if you can't believe how incompetent these people could be, do us a favor: Volunteer. Take a paid day off from work and do your part to improve democracy. America needs you.

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About the writer

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