

GUEST OBSERVER

By Curtis Gans

Election Problems Could Be Solved With Biometric ID

In the words of that near immortal, Lawrence Peter Berra, it's déjà vu all over again — with respect to partisanship and election conduct.

Already, the FBI is investigating whether a liberal group has knowingly engaged in fraudulent registrations in three of the states in which it is conducting registration drives.

In Georgia and other states, liberal groups are filing lawsuits claiming that election officials are abusing identity requirements to disenfranchise citizens and particularly minorities.

If history is any guide, the following is a small list of what is also likely to happen between now and when the final votes are counted:

- Some residents in the Northeast with winter homes in Florida will vote in both places. Names such as Dick Tracy, Donald Duck and perhaps even Goofy will appear on registration rolls along with a number of real live human beings who are not citizens and are not qualified to vote. Some votes, not many, will be cast by those who are not citizens or who are using the identities of those on the registration lists who have either died or moved. Examinations of names removed from registration lists will find many who are alive and qualified to vote and, as a consequence, there will be claims of partisanship in the registration list-cleaning process.

- Some partisan organizations conducting registration drives will discard the completed registration forms of those who do not share the direction of their partisanship. Some citizens who should be able to vote will be turned away from the polls because they either did not have proper identification or were not on the list of registrants. Others will be given provisional ballots, but only some of those ballots will be counted. And there will be some eligible citizens who could not afford either the documentation for identification or the travel money to get IDs and thus will be

unable to vote.

- Anonymous calls will be made to qualified potential voters threatening them with prosecution if they show up at the polls without proper identification. There will be long lines at some polling places because of an inadequate number of voting machines, while other locations will have adequate numbers of machines and no such lines, prompting accusations of partisanship in the allocation of machines. An army of poll watchers will be located at selected polling places ready to pounce on any signs of irregularity or hindrance in the voting process. They will be augmented by a phalanx of lawyers ready to do battle in court at the slightest provocation.

Republicans will claim fraud. Democrats will claim suppression and intimidation. And what will suffer through all of this is public faith in the integrity of the election process.

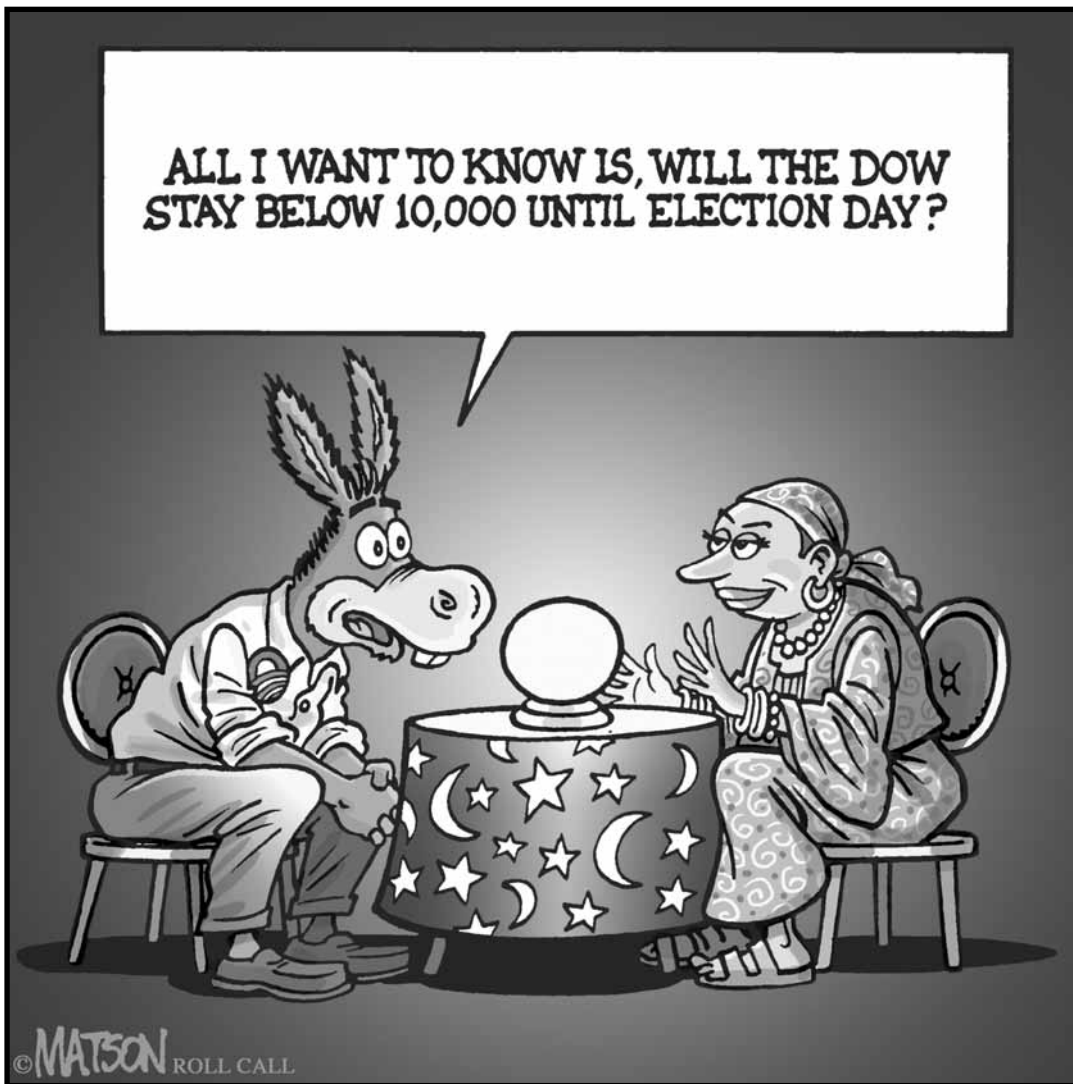
These things happen every biennium. They need never happen again.

There is a solution to every one of these potential and real problems: The United States could adopt, as its neighbor to the south already has, a mandatory, government-provided, distributed and paid-for biometric identification card. This card would automatically enfranchise every American citizen, it would fully solve the issue of identity at the polls, and it would eliminate all potential forms of fraud — except election official manipulation and vote buying. In Mexico, where such a card has been used in all recent elections, there is almost universal support for it.

The obstacles to the implementation of such a card are money and perceptions of invasion of privacy.

An estimate of the up-front cost of implementing such a card and the equipment needed to read it is \$14 billion. In the best of all possible worlds, the integrity of the American electoral system should be sufficient reason for paying that bill. In the real world, only the claims of national defense would make such an outlay politically possible.

On the other hand, a major requisite for effective national defense and homeland security is



knowing who is in this country and who is coming to it. Such a card would provide that information. If adopted, it also could eliminate identity theft; provide for an accurate census; help with criminal prosecution and exoneration of those wrongfully imprisoned; make possible the sorting out of immigrants as to who should be allowed to stay in the United States, be given work permits or be on a citizenship track; be a repository for medical records and as a durable substitute for Social Security and Medicare cards; and make uniform the current crazy

quilt of identity regimes that are in place or have been mandated, among other potential uses.

Privacy in America was largely lost when an individual's Social Security number became an identifier for purposes beyond Social Security; because of the Internet and easy access to information about practically everything about an individual or group; and in the aftermath of 9/11, when government arrogated unto itself the right to eavesdrop on practically everyone. A biometric ID would not make potential invasions of privacy any more likely and could, along

with all else that has happened, lead to legislation that would clarify the uses of citizens' personal data and create serious penalties for its abuse.

Instituting a biometric ID system will be both difficult and costly, but its benefits to national security, the integrity and openness of the political process and a variety of other constructive uses are well worth the price and effort. To paraphrase one candidate's motto, yes, we should.

Curtis Gans is director of American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate.

QUOTABLE

'Shakespeare once said, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." That's why Shakespeare could never run for Congress.'

Mark Russell
(1932-)

American political humorist
PBS, "Mark Russell's Washington," Feb. 22, 1989

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