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## **Guest Opinion: Montana's Election-Day registration successful Montana's Election-Day registration successful**

By MILES S. RAPOPORT and MIKE COONEY

his year, Montana's U.S. Senate race had one of the closest margins on record, and now we know that Jon Tester is the state's next junior senator - winning by about 3,000 votes. But there were other unrecognized winners on Nov. 7: the approximately 3,700 citizens of Montana who had the opportunity to both register and vote on Election Day.

This year, it was a close margin, and turnout was up.

As often happens with elections, Montanans became motivated and engaged in the closing days of the 2006 campaign. Constant news coverage, the barrage of campaign ads, and a boiling public debate on issues such as Iraq, ethics and the household economy, all intensified as election day approached. Unfortunately, in most states as Americans become more interested in the weeks just prior to the election, it is too late to register to vote.

Until this year, if you wanted to vote in Montana, you had to register 28 days in advance. However, in 2005, Montana adopted a new Election Day registration (EDR) law that allows voters to get on the rolls the day they cast their ballot. This eliminated arbitrary registration deadlines and opened the door for thousands of citizens to exercise their most basic democratic right. Montana now joins its neighbors, Idaho and Wyoming, and four other states offering EDR - states which consistently rank among the top 10 in voter turnout (on average, 12 percentage points higher than states without EDR).

When the Montana Legislature passed EDR, they did so because EDR is proven to work. Now, preliminary analysis of voter turnout for this midterm election clearly places Montana in the top 10. Clearly, EDR was an important factor; without it, nearly 4,000 people would have been disfranchised rather than casting a vote.

In EDR states, citizens really do count for more. And EDR solves problems as it helps voters - another benefit. As former secretaries of state, we have a special understanding of the election process and the potential for things to go wrong - sometimes very wrong.

The anecdotal reports we received from state officials, election observers, and from thousands of voter e-mails and phone calls to national assistance hotlines, made it clear that registration problems created serious obstacles at the polls. Longtime voters found that their names had disappeared from the registration databases; first and last names were sometimes misspelled on voter lists, causing problems as poll workers struggled to match names; and many people found that they were simply too late and thus unqualified

to cast their vote.

Election officials hate having to tell a citizen who has waited for hours on line that he or she is not on the list and cannot vote. On Nov. 7, this happened over and over again in non-EDR states, but rarely happened in Maine, New Hampshire, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Idaho and Montana. Sometimes, when voters were told they weren't on the rolls, they were offered a provisional ballot. This doesn't instill much confidence, as history documents that almost 700,000 of 2 million provisional ballots went uncounted in 2004. In pre-EDR Montana that year, only 55 percent of the provisional votes were counted. In Virginia, home to another very close Senate race this year, only 16 percent of the provisional ballots were counted last election. In EDR states, voters don't have to worry about casting a provisional ballot that might not be counted.

Montana still has some issues to work through with its EDR process. Currently, potential voters are not allowed to register at the polling place on Election Day. Instead, they have to go to the county seat. Even with this limitation, thousands of people took advantage of the new system. If Montana had adopted the same easy process allowing voters to register at their precinct, as in other EDR states, perhaps thousands more would have been able to vote.

Montanans win with EDR. Elections are about the people, after all, and the people deserve no less than to register and vote on Election Day - and have that vote count.

*Mike Cooney of Helena is a state senator and former Montana secretary of state. Miles S. Rapoport, a former secretary of state of Connecticut, is president of Demos: A Network for Ideas & Action. Yellowstone County reports that 149 of 159 provisional ballots cast Nov. 7 were counted.*

<http://www.billingsgazette.net/articles/2006/11/19/opinion/guest/50-registration.txt>