

2008 Levitt Summer Fellowship Research
Blake Hulnick, Class of 2009

Advisor: Professor Frank Anechiarico
Department of Government

Proposal: Assessing Federal Election Administration at the State and Local Level

Signed into law in October of 2002, the Help America Vote Act was intended to provide a first-ever federal overhaul of the full sweep of election administration across the states. The Act allocated an enormous amount of money—\$3.9 billion—to modernize voting equipment and voting procedures. To implement the changes, a new federal agency called the Election Assistance Commission was created in 2003. This agency took on a number of the administrative responsibilities previously handled by the Federal Election Commission, now more specialized in the handling of campaign finance issues. The EAC would disburse the funds and serve as a resource for states implementing the mandates and suggested practices of the new legislation.

With this broad attempt to modernize and standardize the nation's election administration procedures has come a host of complexities and controversies. Some of the problems most saliently arising in the transition period that commenced in 2002 include the dispute over whether paper trails are a necessary safety check on electronic voting machines, whether provisional balloting has helped or hurt the enfranchisement of certain populations, which voting machines are tamper-proof and how to prove it, how the required statewide voter registration database has progressed, and the arguments for and against expanding vote-by-mail. In November of 2008, New York state, along with the rest of the nation, will go to the polls to select the next President of the United States. The requirements of HAVA will impact the experience all New Yorkers have on Election Day, and the state's progress in addressing the problems outlined above will have just as much of an impact.

In a 2008 Levitt Summer Fellowship, with Professor Frank Anechiarico's supervision, I propose to study the implementation of HAVA in New York State. My project will have two chief components: the first will involve a literature review, researching the status from the federal level of the government's attempts to administer HAVA and address the problems I describe above. During the Fall of 2007 on Hamilton's Washington Program, I studied these problems in some detail during my employment at the American

Enterprise Institute, where I also worked on the AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project. My Washington thesis dealt broadly with federal intervention in election administration throughout American history, and I hope to expand upon the HAVA section I originally presented as a single case study over the coming summer, eventually grappling with this and related issues in a senior Government thesis. The second component will include empirical research on how New York, specifically, has handled the HAVA mandates and their accompanying travails. I plan to contact and meet with state election officials in Albany, as well as local election administrators in Utica and the surrounding area to discuss how election administration has changed since the law passed. I also hope to elicit what local officials view to be the greatest strengths and shortcomings of the law, since, as I conclude in my Washington thesis, even in a climate of federal involvement in election administration, how the voting system runs is ultimately a decision left to local officials.

The unfolding of these controversies federally and at the local level will unquestionably play a major role in the experience citizens have in selecting their leaders this year and well into the future. Recent elections across the country have been colored by problems associated with the law I plan to research. Students, faculty and staff of Hamilton College are all particularly stakeholders in how the law and its associated administration play out in New York State and the local community, which I plan to make a specific focus of my summer research.

References

- Fortier, John (2004). *After the People Vote* (John Fortier, Ed.). Third Edition. AEI Press: Washington.
- “From Registration to Recounts” (2007), AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project conference, December 4, 2007. Conference report prepared by Blake Hulnick.
<<http://www.aei.org/events/filter.all,eventID.1608/summary.asp>>.
- “Help America Vote Act Information” (2008), New York State Board of Elections. Accessed 2 Feb. 2008.
<http://www.elections.state.ny.us/portal/page?_pageid=35,1,35_26319:35_26323&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL>.
- Hulnick, Blake and Daniel O’Brien (2007). Viewpoint: Using Technology to Improve UOCAVA. *AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project*, 7 Nov. 2007.
<<http://www.electionreformproject.org/Resources/d81a0296-4a3e-4f42-9c14-14ed80c361a5/r1/Detail.aspx>>.
- “Justice Department Sues New York State Over Voting Rights,” U.S. Department of Justice Press Release, March 3, 2006. <http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2006/March/06_crt_108.html>.
- Kimball, David C. and Martha Kropf (2006). The Street-Level Bureaucrats of Elections: Selection Methods for Local Election Officials. *Review of Policy Research*, 23(6)1257-1268.
- “Research, Resources, and Reports” (2008), The United States Election Assistance Commission. Accessed 2 Feb. 2008. <<http://www.eac.gov/clearinghouse>>.
- Tobias, Sarah (Spring 2005). HAVA or Havoc? *National Civic Review*, Political Reform.