'The Voting Wars' review: Timely examination of our botched balloting

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By Special to The Oregonian

THE VOTING WARS
Richard L. Hasen
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The presidential election of 2000 should have been a wake-up call. The contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore in Florida laid bare major flaws in our electoral system: antiquated voting technology (butterfly ballots, punch card machines, hanging chads); inconsistent methods of counting and recounting (especially of provisional, absentee, and military ballots); and ambiguous policies, procedures, and laws that invite court challenges.

Twelve years later, according to Richard Hasen, a professor of law and political science at the University of California-Irvine, only the chads are gone. In "The Voting Wars: From Florida 2000 to the Next Election Meltdown," Hasen makes a microscopic examination of close, high-profile state-wide elections in Alaska, Minnesota, and Washington, several local races, and the activities of ACORN, "The New Black Panthers," phone-jammers in New Hampshire, the bogus American Center for Voting Rights, and some "tinfoil hat" conspiracy theorists, in an eye-opening expose of a system that is teetering on the brink of another meltdown.

The core problems of conducting elections, Hasen reveals, are the political party allegiances of election officials and
inadequate training and lack of uniformity at the local level. Partisan motives are responsible for baseless allegations of fraud and voter identification laws designed to suppress turnout. Although about a quarter of Americans believe that election fraud is "very common," Hasen demonstrates that they are wrong: Out of hundreds of millions of votes cast between 2002 and 2005, 35 individuals were convicted for "election crimes," some of which did not involve casting a ballot.

Although he acknowledges that voter identification laws will not have a large impact, Hasen makes a compelling case that they disenfranchise voters for no good reason -- and may undermine public confidence in elections. He worries as well that existing laws do not cover "dirty tricks" (spreading misinformation, for example, about the location and hours of polling places), which could soon proliferate on the Internet. Most importantly, he predicts that the 24/7 "ideological echo chamber" of Twitter, the blogosphere and social media will make "the next Florida" even hotter.

Hasen recommends that the United States follow the path of other democracies and appoint nonpartisan officials to administer elections. He thinks that the government should mandate a uniform registration process and prescribe -- and pay for -- a voter identification card, using biometric information like a fingerprint.

Given the opposition of Democrats and Republicans, Hasen doubts that these reforms or "election law audits" will occur during our lifetimes. Convinced that we are not even planning for "the last disaster," let alone the one that is likely to come, he leaves us with little more to rely on than the Election Administrator's Prayer: "Lord, let this election not be close. Amen."

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